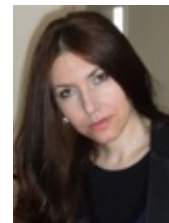


The people of Southern Italy are once again feeling dominated by the Italian, European, and Global North.

by Blog Admin

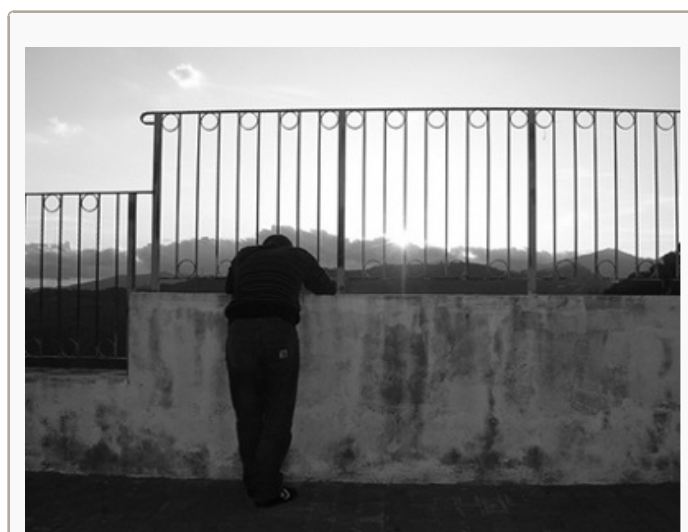
*Italy's recent elections have refocused attention on the county's economy and widespread dissatisfaction with austerity policies. From her research on the Italian region of Calabria, **Stavroula Pipyrrou** writes that the economic crisis has been especially harsh on Southern Italy. Those in the country's south increasingly feel that they live in the shadow of Northern Italy. They also see little chance of respite from their increasingly precarious economy.*



The global financial crisis of 2008 shrank the Italian economy by more than 6 per cent. Any small indicators of growth visible in 2010 were soon evaporated the following year by the rising debt crisis. By December 2012 Italy's national debt had risen to over €2 trillion, with a debt-to-GDP ratio of 126.4 per cent, second only to Greece in the Eurozone. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) forecast that this ratio would continue to rise to 132.2 per cent in 2014. Unemployment rose from 11.7 per cent in the first quarter of 2009 to over 15 per cent in the third quarter of 2011 and now stands at around 12 per cent. Reuters reports that a recent poll suggests Italian consumer confidence is at its lowest level for over 15 years.

Competition from emerging economies in Asia has severely disrupted the Italian export market during the Eurozone crisis. The lead-up to the recent elections showed a strong climate of anti-European Union, anti-austerity, and anti-euro rhetoric, something especially capitalised on by Silvio Berlusconi. Tangible suffering in neighbouring Greece is convincing Italians that the European Union is perhaps not the only path to financial, social, and political prosperity. In the South, where I have conducted ethnographic research since 2006, once again emigration is deemed the only viable economic option by a considerable amount of people. Historically speaking, internal migration flows have been associated with urban sophistication and social mobility, whilst migration to Europe and the Americas is seen as a matter of survival: a fundamental necessity to escape the moral and financial *miseria* that plagued the region in the early 1900s (1.4 million people emigrated from Calabria, between 1871 and 1971). In 2013 *miseria* is back with a vengeance.

Prior to the election, Italy had largely been out of the limelight as international media focused attention on the economic death spiral ensuing in Greece and Spain. However, the elections meant that increasing attention was turned to how Italians are experiencing the Eurozone crisis in their everyday lives. The current economic turmoil highlights the precariousness of the Italian political system and a fundamental need for all-encompassing reform. Phenomena such as the rise, and electoral success, of comedian Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement suggest that a fundamental reappraisal of 'doing politics' should be based on an alternative language of representation. Despite their flamboyant, over-rhetorical and inflated manifestos, and excessive populism, Five Star Movement has managed to capture popular imagination by employing irony and satire as communicative systems.



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Neither economic affluence nor fiscal austerity comprises a sufficient platform for political reform; instead political accountability requires more holistic attention. In epochs of abundant prosperity such as the

1950s, special legislation targeting political and economic development in underdeveloped Italian regions, such as Calabria, were ultimately unsuccessful. Money alone was not enough to stimulate sustainable development due to localised mismanagement, over-inflation of the tertiary sector, and a lack of national and international investment interest. Recent austerity has shrunk local markets further, forcing potential consumers to stay at home and businesses to falter, whilst the little circulating capital gets siphoned off within the halls of government. Instead, special attention should be placed on reforming the judicial system, social solidarity and equality policy, and civil society, before any attempt at purely economic reform.

It is upon such historic failures that the experience of the current economic crisis is based. In South Italy people are accustomed to living in an *economia precaria* (precarious economy) imbued with organised crime, corruption, political power games, and *miseria*. New coping strategies have to be established to satisfy the competing values of finance and consumption. One such mechanism is the rise of the *mercatini dell'usato* (used clothes markets). Used clothes markets have only ever briefly appeared once before in the form of aid from the US and Italian North to counter post-war poverty. In 2010 used clothes markets reappeared in South Italy. Tents of cheap second-hand clothes shipped from northern Europe allow locals to maintain the social need to keep up appearance, but on renegotiated financial terms. As personal status and value are firmly located in notions of display, people run a substantial risk of being seen purchasing used clothes, thus being stigmatised and obliterating personal status. However, as austerity bites, the need to buy cheap clothes outweighs potential harm inflicted upon reputation. Unavoidably, people engage in a precarious game of concealment and display.

This has led southern Italians to critically reflect on political and economic relationships between the Italian, European, and Global 'North' and 'South'. The perception of a South – Italian, European, Global – colonised by the North is a common topic of discussion in Calabria. New opportunistic business ventures, such as the clothes markets, are tangible reminders of northern domination that holds significantly different forms of moral value. Calabrians argue that southern Italy is being treated in a similar fashion to how the West treats Africa: as a colony for a paradoxical mixture of charity and exploitation. This categorisation has deep historical roots stretching back to Mussolini's empire-building occupation of North and East Africa, whilst the North/South divide is perpetuated by contemporary Italian thinkers. Critical locals see coping mechanisms such as sourcing their clothes in the *mercatini dell'usato* as another way for global investors, as well as local criminal syndicates, to capitalise on economic and moral destitution. At the same time, the industrious Italian North gets praised for its tenacious rebuttal of the Eurozone crisis.

Italians are constantly bombarded with a variety of abstract macro-studies demonstrating the ineptitude of financial planning, the depth of political corruption, the need for austere fiscal policy and immediate economic reform. These macro-studies fail to consider the depth of the rabbit hole facing everyday people in the South. Southern Italians feel they are once again living in the shadow of the North: a South within the North, the forgotten victims required to challenge their deep-rooted social values. This highlights ever widening national, continental, and global divides in the flow of investment. As in Greece, excessive populism has driven Italian politics for decades, glazing over structural weaknesses and meaning sustainable political reform, if any, will have to be a long-term process. In Rome, knee-jerk impulses for extravagant spending or crippling austerity will have to be tempered or southerners will continue to live by the all-or-nothing rules of a very precarious economy.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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