

Book Review: Good Italy, Bad Italy: Why Italy Must Conquer its Demons to Face the Future

by Blog Admin

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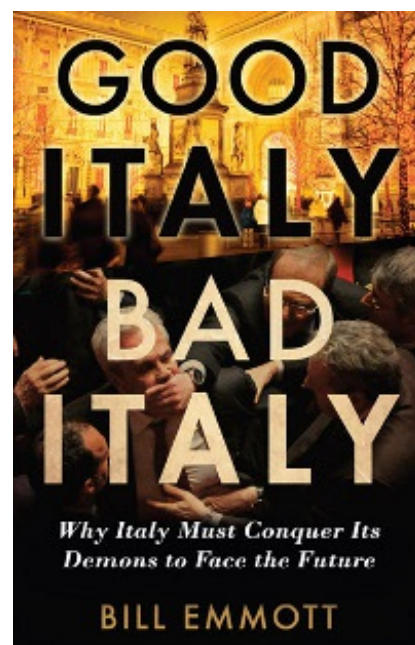
Bill Emmott sidesteps the clichés of Italian life to assess both Italy's political problems, and how the country can move forward to a better future. **Marco Valbruzzi** finds the book a compelling analysis of the many nuances which comprise Italian society, but disagrees with the notion that a new Italian renaissance is achievable in the short-term.



Good Italy, Bad Italy: Why Italy Must Conquer its Demons to Face the Future. Bill Emmott. Yale University Press. June 2012.

Bill Emmott, an international journalist, writer and former editor-in-chief of *The Economist*, begins his new book with an honest confession. I will not unveil the mystery, preferring to leave it to the readers' curiosity, but I follow his example by beginning this review with a personal confession: I always approach a book about my country, Italy, written by a foreign scholar or pundit with a certain amount of trepidation. The reason is very simple. Too many journalists and intellectuals who analyse and observe Italy from abroad have a rather distorted idea of this Mediterranean country.

A 'Banana Republic' is the recurrent image that those alleged country-experts have in mind when they talk and think about Italy. Their descriptions are often cliché-ridden, rife with outlandish expressions that would fit perfectly into a corny joke, but which are absolutely useless for understanding what actually happens in a complex country such as Italy. Briefly put, if you think that Italy is just the sum of some funny triptych ('*mafia, spaghetti e mandolino*' or '*pizza, amore e fantasia*'), to which you could add a bit of *tarantella* and *vita bella*, the book of Emmott is the wrong book for you because it demolishes your deep-rooted beliefs and prejudices.



Nevertheless, *Good Italy, bad Italy* is also the wrong book for those innumerable Italians who think they live in either the best or the worst country in the world. For them, reading this book is almost like drinking a truth serum. Bill Emmott is a purely liberal thinker and, accordingly, is a realist who knows that reality is not black-and-white photography, but a full colour movie with many grey nuances. Manichean ideas do not go hand in hand with liberal ideas. Just the opposite. Indeed, this is why the title of the book may be somewhat misleading: the author does not think even for a moment that Italy is a country divided in two halves like an apple, with the *goodies* well placed in the North of Italy and the *baddies* harvesting in the Southern regions (especially, Campania, Calabria, Basilicata, Puglia, and Sicily).

Emmott's perspective is completely different because, during his Italian journey, pieces of 'good Italy' appear from time to time, and often unexpectedly, in the far South and, vice versa, exemplars of 'bad Italy' (diffuse corruption, rent-seeking behavior, and so on) emerge in the highly developed regions of the North. In this sense, *lo Stivale* is a country of nuances, with many lights and shadows, and the political cleavage – as Emmott aptly writes in the first chapter – does not follow a simplistic geographical line, but 'is a divide between selfish, closed, unmeritocratic and often criminal ways of doing things, and more open, community-minded and progressive ways' (p. 15). Consequently, as long as we continue thinking that the

solution to our problems lies in the separation (that is more than a smooth devolution of powers and functions) of the North from the South, then all the vices and misdeeds will remain alive and kicking. Besides, there is always a South in every North...

Yet, this 'moral or philosophical' interpretation of Italian contemporary history is not the only element which might raise more than a few eyebrows among the Italian public. First of all, it should be recalled that Emmott is especially well-known in Italy because he was the editor-in-chief of *The Economist* when that weekly dedicated its cover to the financial scandals and conflict of interest question surrounding Silvio Berlusconi. The headline of that cover, as many Italians still discuss and remember, was neat: 'Why Berlusconi is unfit to lead Italy'. For (too) many Italians, in particular for those journalists who worked for the newspapers owned, directly or indirectly, by Berlusconi's family, Emmott became a sort of caricature and, worse, 'a public enemy of the prime minister' (p. 21): *The E-Communist*. Referring to Emmott, this description is simply ridiculous but, for Italian political culture, it is also extremely revealing. And it reveals, as Emmott claims with admirable outspokenness, that Italy 'is a country that has never fully embraced liberal economic or political ideas, a country that had one time prospered despite not being liberal' (p. 11). Berlusconi's conflict of interest, namely, the merging of corporate and governmental power, would be plainly unacceptable in any Western liberal-democracy. Not in Italy, because in this country defenders and promoters of liberal ideas/ideals, both among political parties and civic associations, have always been a silent minority.

Emmott depicts his journey in Italy following the steps of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, passing through '*L'inferno politico*' (chapter 2), dedicated in particular to all the misdeeds of an 'unfit' political class, and '*Il purgatorio economico*' (chapter 3), devoted to all the conditions that constrain and weigh down the Italian economy (huge public debt, the extreme rigidity and unfair dualism of the labour market, overregulation in many sectors, inefficient social welfare, impressive levels of unproductive taxation, inadequate public administration, etc.) The other four chapters deal with a promised *Paradise* that Italy and Italians can reach if, and only if, they are able 'to admit their sins, to face up to them, and thus to rid themselves of many of the self-imposed burdens and constraints that have fostered those sins'.

The result of this climbing toward Paradise could be, in Emmott's words, 'a new *Risorgimento*, or revival, even a *Rinascimento*, a renaissance'. Well, if so, who will be, politically speaking, the architect of this new endeavor, the modern Cavour, the king-maker of such a political *Rinascimento*? Emmott has no doubt: Mario Monti's 'technical government' (I would prefer the expression 'technocratic government' because it has taken profoundly political, not technical, decisions), with its liberal and liberalising agenda, may be the trigger of that peaceful revolution. But, as everybody knows, technocratic governments are, by definition, governments *pro tempore*, whereas Italy needs a serious programme for long-term change. Unfortunately, the same old, personalised, oligarchic political parties and their immovable representatives now seem eager to come back to the helm of a country that they have transformed into a *Titanic*... So far in Italy, *Rinascimento* is no more than a pretty word with little behind it other than wishful thinking.

Marco Valbruzzi is a Ph.D. Researcher at the European University Institute where he studies political parties and party systems, political competition and participation. He is the author of *Primarie. Partecipazione e leadership* (Bononia University Press, 2005). In 2011 he has edited, with G. Pasquino, *Il potere dell'alternanza. Teorie e ricerche sui cambi di governo* (BUP) and, in 2012, with A. Seddone, *Primarie per il sindaco. Partiti, candidati, elettori* (Egea). [Read more reviews by Marco](#).

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