

Beyond Politics, Save the Heritage

Judith Harris (April 07, 2013)



President Giorgio Napolitano has asked ten "sages" to elaborate a list of crucial issues around which the politicians should rally. But whatever they decide, it is a safe bet that Italy's magnificent cultural heritage will not be on their list. UNESCO considers the Italian cultural heritage the world's greatest single assemblage. And yet, as a new Eurostat report shows, Italian expenditures on maintaining that heritage amount to a mere 1.1% of its GNP as compared with the 2.2 average for the rest of Europe. This places Italy at the very bottom of the list of those European states protecting, and investing in, their cultural heritage. Archaeologist Salvatore Settis is the foremost authority protesting this.

ROME - This week marks a political hiatus while the (one hopes) "wise men" appointed by President Giorgio Napolitano are trying to sort out a series of political goals upon which the squabbling Grillo, Renzi, Berlusconi, Bersani, Monti et alia can agree. But whatever they decide, it is a safe bet that one of Italy's most important issues will not be included in the agenda of the sages: Italy's magnificent



cultural heritage. This cultural heritage ranges from neolithic villages to Villanovan tombs, Roman cities like Ostia Antica and Pompeii, medieval archives on parchment, the Renaissance masterpieces of Michelangelo and Leonardo Da Vinci, the Baroque churches and fountains, cities at risk like Venice and more besides. UNESCO considers this the world's greatest single assemblage of any country. And yet, as Bloomberg, among others, points out this month, quoting an up-to-date Eurostat report, Italian expenditures on maintaining that heritage amount to a mere 1.1% of its GNP as compared with the 2.2 average for the rest of Europe. This places Italy at the very bottom of the list of those European states protecting, and investing in, their cultural heritage. Even the second worst at 1.2%, Greece, invests more. The Europeans spending most on culture are France (2.5%) and the UK (2.1%) while Germany spends 1.8% of its GNP.

The most outspoken to protest this is archaeologist, art historian and author Salvatore Settis, 71, who headed the prestigious Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa until three years ago. His opinions are of particular interest because he is considered a potential minister of culture if and when Italy gets a new government. Angry at policies, or lack thereof, some years ago Settis resigned as head of the higher council of advisors over the Cultural Affairs Ministry. More recently Settis published an open letter urging an hypothetical future premier to halt the continual erosion of Italian culture, which in fact is guaranteed under Article 9 of the Constitution, which calls for the "protection of the landscape and the historical and artistic heritage of the nation."

Despite this, what we are witnessing is nothing less than a "social slaughterhouse," he says. Neglected cultural treasures include university studies, protection of the heritage and the environment, of the theater and music and health services, thanks to "blind budget cuts." The "cynical" slashing of more than E1 billion from the Ministry budget under the then Premier Silvio Berlusconi in 2008 must be remedied, and qualified personnel added to Ministry ranks to compensate for the ongoing freeze on hiring. A new legislature, he continues, should first address the need for protection of the environment and the territory, "but also of the landscape, beginning with the countryside." To pay for all this, he calls for canceling the so-called "great projects" like the bridge over the Straits of Messina, big spending on defense and on such other money wasters as trying to salvage Alitalia.

Last week found Settis touring Pompeii, the site most widely considered at grave risk. Pompeii is a challenge to maintain admittedly; it was first excavated in the mid-18th century, and so a good portion of the two-thirds of the ancient city which has been restored to light has already been exposed for over two centuries to the elements. It was also bombed during World War Two and suffers miniscule earthquakes daily.

Settis was in Naples for a three-day city-sponsored conference to celebrate Italian culture. The idea came following the murder of Lino Romano, an innocent victim of the Camorra, whose tearful girlfriend made an appeal for "culture" following his funeral. No one is forgetting last year's looting of some 1,500 precious antiquarian books in the historic Oratoriana library in Naples. Investigations have shown that they were sold - thanks to a corrupt director - to private collectors, including to politician Marcello Dell'Utri, for decades a close collaborator of Berlusconi. Among the missing volumes: copies of St. Thomas More's Utopia of 1516 and Gian Battista Vico's De Rebus Gestis. Five hundred were seized by police at an auction house in Munich.

Funding is essential. Speaking to thunderous applause in the convent of San Domenico Maggiore, Settis protested that, after a year of the technical (non-political) babysitting government headed by Mario Monti, Italy has as many or more tax evaders than under past administrations. In France, despite their economic crisis, culture was not punished, but in Italy it is. "Are the markets to swallow culture? Do we really have to genuflect to the spread?"

Can culture triumph? Although Italy has an endless supply of deeply cultivated men and women eager to put their shoulders to the wheel, the future does not yet look rosy. The best recognize the problems; when Settis more or less stormed out of the oversight commission of the ministry in March 2009, his place was taken by another distinguished archaeologist, Andrea Carandini. Perhaps it is not surprising that Carandini too walked out in May last year, after little more than three years.



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