

A New Census Takes Stock of Italy

Judith Harris (December 22, 2011)



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ROME - It's been a year of misery for many, with only the dimmest of lights at the end of the tunnel. The Organization for European Cooperation and Development (OECD) is forecasting that Italy, together with Greece, Portugal and Hungary, is plunging into a recession. Statistics broadcast gloom: the GDP growth rate in the third quarter of 2011 was of only 0.1%, and the OECD predicts that the rate will remain flat in 2012, rising to 0.5% in 2013.

The dire economic forecasts, together with the political collision course that sent the Silvio



Berlusconi government into hibernation (if not extinction), have been so tumultuous that much of the rest has been overwhelmed. Yet behind the raucous political debates and the economic angst lie the larger social forces and trends that underlie the turmoil, and condition the political and economic future. To test these, this October Italy launched a new national census on the family, the 15th such census in history, and by November, over 16 million families - 60% of the total - had already replied. Full results will be released in the Spring of 2012.

The earliest such census took place in 1861, when Italy was first unified, and showed a nation composed of 26 million inhabitants, with more men than women (49%). Children under five made up a large (13%) of the population, and by contrast only 1% of the people survived to 75 years of age or more. The median number of family members was around 4.7, and there were 87 inhabitants per square kilometer.

In the last census taken in 2001, the Italian population stood at 57 million. In 2010, however, it had risen to 60,045,000, or 24.6 million families. Italy is thus the fourth largest country in the EU, or 12% of the entire EU population of 500 million. There are now more women (51%) than men (48%), and children under five are only 4.6% of the whole. Those over age 75 are 8.4% of the population, and the median family has 2.4% members. Population density stands at 199 inhabitants per square kilometer.

Today ISTAT, the official statistics-gathering agency, says that the median density per square kilometer has risen in a year to 200 inhabitants. This makes Italy one of the most densely inhabited countries in the European Union (EU), whose median density is almost half of Italy's with only 114 inhabits per square kilometer. Furthermore, the Italian territory is over 53% mountainous, so that most Italians today (84%) live crowded in the plains. The mountain towns continue to be abandoned, with only 266 left. A slow-down in new home construction means that, as the population grows, individuals are jammed into more limited spaces. To extrapolate from this, Italy is therefore ever more urban, a land of cities and towns—of vibrant piazzas and of people talking, but also of problems of rubbish removal and city management, including policing.

In addition, today's Italian society appears as older, solitary, and secular. Again citing new ISTAT findings, the median life of the Italians is over 84 years for women and almost 79 for men, giving Italians greater longevity in Europe than most. The new mothers are older than ever before, averaging 31.2 years for a first birth, while only 1.41 children are born per family. The continuing decline in the number of births was generalized in the territory save for four regions: Molise in the South, Lazio and the Abruzzo in Central Italy and the autonomous province of Bolzano in the North. More couples marry in the South than in the Northern regions, in which almost half the weddings are celebrated in the town hall instead of in church.

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The political implications of such a transformation in Italian life are serious. One of the saddest events of 2011 came in Turin in December, when a 16-year-old girl told her ultra-conservative parents that she had lost her virginity because she was attacked by a Roma (Gypsy) man.irate locals, armed with brickbats and a rage for vendetta, broke into a Roma camp and burned it down. When firefighters moved in to try to put out the fire, a mob of fifty fought them off. The next day the



girl admitted that she had been frightened to tell her parents the truth—that she had had sex with her Italian boyfriend.

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