Mayor Sala on Milan: Culture, Sustainability, And Above All Inclusivity

Roberta Cutillo (May 16, 2019)

During his brief visit to New York and Washington DC, Mayor of Milan Giuseppe Sala spoke at NYU Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimo about the initiatives carried out by the City in terms of development, sustainability, and dealing with immigration, often going against the line held by the central government.

Just as Milan is often described as a standout case amongst Italian cities, its Mayor Giuseppe (or "Beppe" to his friends and numerous Instagram followers [2]) Sala can be considered an unusual politician, who appears to be generally beloved at a time in which politicians are generally not so well regarded.

His intervention at NYU's Casa Italiana was introduced by a short video of the institution's founder and benefactor, the late Baroness Mariuccia Zerilli-Marimò, herself a proud Milanese. In the clip, she

talks about the reconstruction of Milan and particularly of La Scala [3], the famous Opera House, after World War II.

She underlines how, despite their poverty and lack of resources, citizens immediately got organized and began rebuilding the City and its symbols, actively contributing to its rebirth. Milan has more recently begun undergoing another rebirth, of which Mayor Sala is a major actor.

The City has in fact seen significant growth in various sectors in recent years, despite the difficult economic situation in Italy and across Europe. Up until a few years ago, Milan was seen exclusively as an industrial city. It has since then begun an intensive and very effective rebranding process. Sala explains that they are working for a mixed model, promoting three key aspects:

They wish to present Milan as a university city, not a stretch considering that of its 4 million inhabitants, 200,000 are university students. And the goal is to increase this number, particularly by attracting more international students. One major challenge that the Mayor recognizes in this is the lack of affordable housing, something on which both the municipality and certain universities are working on, by envisioning campuses, for example.

Another important aspect is of course creativity: Milan is already known for fashion and (mostly furniture) design. The idea is to reinforce this perception and to expand it to represent a more contemporary and cross-disciplinary understanding of these creative fields.

And finally, tourism. In the past years, investments in culture, museums, and events such as the 2015 Milan Expo, (of which Sala was the CEO and Chairman) regarded as the turning point for the City, the symbol of its cultural rebirth, put Milan on the map as a central tourist destination, which now sees around 9 Million tourists each year.

Sustainability is also a key issue that all mayors have to deal with and one in which Milan has taken significant measures, by expanding the almost incredibly efficient metro system, (Sala promises that they are working on the fifth line which will take citizens from the airport to the city center in just 15 minutes) beginning to replace all busses with electrical ones, installing car, scooter, and bike sharing services, and implementing congestion charges and limiting traffic in the city center.

“As Mayor, it’s not easy to tell people they can’t use their car,” comments Sala, “but you have to show them that it’s the way of the future, that these measures have been agreed on with 40 major municipalities across the world.”

His is quite a daring approach, many cities, including New York, are considering measures to reduce waste and pollution, such as implementing congestion charges, or eliminating plastic bags, but often these plans are halted if they are deemed too unpopular and could threaten future elections.

Also daring given the current political situation in Italy, is Mayor Sala's position on immigration. Along with other mayors, including Orlando (Palermo) and De Magistris (Naples) as well as others all over Europe and even here in the US, Sala goes against the anti-immigration approach sustained by the central government.

"Milan wants to promote solidarity," he comments, adding that "in Italy, immigrants constitute 9% of the population, in Milan they are 20% and it works." So the problem doesn't lie in the number of migrants, but in the organization, in the way the system works.

According to Sala, the "solution" to immigration is creating work for everyone. The Italian government, however, is not embracing this approach. When immigrants arrive and are registered, they are put on a waiting list for two years to find work. In some cases, municipalities can try to take what should be the government's role into their own hands. Sala cites an instance in which the CEO of Starbucks came to Milan to open a store there and he agreed on the condition that 5% of its employees be chosen amongst migrants waiting for their application to process.

Still on the theme of migration, the Mayor of Milan shares a story from his current US trip. "I went to visit the new museum on Liberty Island and asked how many 'Sala' were registered arriving through there," he says. "There were about 2000. Then I asked: and how many 'Salvini'? Over 250."

Though it's only a joke, this anecdote perfectly captures the absurdity and hypocrisy behind the nationalist and xenophobic approaches adopted by political leaders in Italy and across the world.

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