

**Ernesto Galli della Loggia.** *L'identità Italiana*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998. 171 pp. 18.000 Lire, cloth, ISBN 978-88-15-06612-1.



**Reviewed by** Kimber Quinney

**Published on** H-Italy (April, 1999)

Any historian would readily acknowledge the foreseen difficulties of writing a book with the theme "national identity." Moreover, to achieve such a summary in a mere 165 pages poses a formidable challenge indeed. Respect by this amateur historian is thus extended to Ernesto Galli della Loggia for his gallant attempt to capture the Italian character in *L'identità italiana*. The leading publication of a multiple series of already published or forthcoming monographs on Italian identity, Galli della Loggia's contribution is intended to launch the project by drawing large, overarching themes that provide the foundation for what it means to be Italian. The broad scope of *L'identità italiana* becomes clear when compared to titles of subsequent contributions in the series, which appear to delve more specifically into various aspects of Italian life: Mazzini, Leopardi and Cavour; I fascisti and I comunisti; and even La mamma, and La pasta e la pizza are but a few.

In comparison, Galli della Loggia's contribution speaks in much grander themes. While the reader recognizes the advantages to beginning such a series on Italian identity in broad strokes,

it is the vast number of generalizations drawn by the author that account for the weakest aspects of his analysis. Indeed, the reader finds it difficult to reconcile the author's admissions regarding the pitfalls of generalizing with his repeated tendency to do so. A clear example is his admission that it would be much too simplistic to generalize about the identity of the Italian people based on their relationship to the Madonna. Just when the reader is nodding her head in agreement, Galli della Loggia proceeds to do so anyway, in spite of his own misgivings (p. 48).

The author draws on various categories which he identifies as the basis of Italian-ness and which serve more or less to designate each chapter theme: Chapter One addresses Italy's extraordinary geographic location and physical attributes, which allow for both a central location within Europe and an openness to external influences. Chapter Two focuses on the importance of Italy's Roman and Catholic heritage, which the author identifies as the two most important origins of Italian identity. Chapter Three addresses Italy's relatively recent political unification and the

characteristics that help to hold Italy together in spite of the existence of centrifugal forces that often seem to be pulling Italy apart. Chapter Four emphasizes the unique relationship of the Italian individual to family and oligarchy. Chapter Five is an analysis of Italy's development into a nation-state, concluding that Italy did not fully experience an industrial revolution as did France and England which explains in large part the historical absence of a State. Finally, Chapter Six addresses Italy's struggle for modernity and the related problem of national identity. The author concludes that the first step toward a modern Italian national identity is to recognize then reconcile with Italy's past.

Galli della Loggia's categories of explanation leave the reader with unanswered questions. Which if any, among these foundations of Italian identity, is the most important and why? Do they contribute equally to Italy's identity? If so, can we assume that the power of the Catholic Church, for example, is more important than the relationship of the individual to the family or the differences between North and South?

To his credit, the author manages to speak of an Italian identity by insisting on the existence of various identities. He writes, "It shouldn't surprise us that especially to non-Italian eyes our country appears in reality as a country that doesn't exist, an identity that isn't there because in its place there are many, even infinite, identities" (p. 61). For example, the author is careful to distinguish Italy's national identity from its social and cultural identity, emphasizing the historical origins of *l'identità italiana* in contrast to the relatively recent unification of the State (p. 65). Political identity is yet another unique aspect of Italy's identity (the author credits the Italian Communist Party, for example, as the only point of exchange and mediation between the political sphere and that of the State (p. 80). The spiritual or Christian / Catholic identity is defined by the author as the only truly common feature to all Italians, the only

true unifying characteristic of the peninsula, and thus the only element that is really "Italian" (p. 44).

The author's recognition of these various identities is the strongest thread in Galli della Loggia's analysis. His admission of multiple identities serves to weave the apparently contradictory pieces of Italian life into a whole and, perhaps more important to the integrity of the book itself, to fasten the overarching canopy of his analysis to specific points in the ground. In this respect the author refrains from over-generalizing and manages to point out the unique way in which Italy (and Italians) have come to exist as a single entity given what he repeatedly refers to as "la straordinaria varietà dei quadri ambientali della penisola." This, it seems, is Galli della Loggia's most important conclusion and merits further consideration by any observer of Italy and things Italian. If nothing else, *l'identità italiana* reveals that the best answer to the question, 'What does being Italian stand for?' merits the response, 'That depends on where you stand.'

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**Citation:** Kimber Quinney. Review of della Loggia, Ernesto Galli. *L'identita Italiana*. H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. April, 1999.

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