

Paul Ginsborg. *L'Italia del tempo presente: famiglia, società civile, stato, 1980-1996.* Torino: Einaudi, 1998. XVIII + 627 pp. L. 36.000, cloth, ISBN 978-88-06-14595-8.



Reviewed by Roberto A. Ventresca

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The cover of Paul Ginsborg's latest book *L'Italia del tempo presente*, displays a picture that is worth the proverbial thousand words. The picture shows two army tanks on the autostrada to Palermo, at the off-ramp that leads to Capaci. It was near this spot that in May 1992 chief anti-mafia magistrate Giovanni Falcone fell victim to a bomb planted beneath the highway by elements of the Sicilian mafia. The "strage di Capaci" was followed in July by Palermo's "strage di via D'Amelio" in which Paolo Borsellino, Italy's second leading anti-mafia magistrate, was also assassinated. In a span of two months, Italy lost its most effective anti-mafia crusaders. For Italians and for much of the world, the killings symbolized all that was wrong with Italian society. More than one commentator could be heard to sigh that in Italy, alas, the more things changed, the more they stayed the same.

For the historian Paul Ginsborg, however, public reaction to the assassinations of Falcone and Borsellino—in which there was mixed anger, indignation and an ephemeral rebirth of civil society—proved that despite what the world thought,

"l'Italia, Sicilia compresa, possedeva molte risorse nascoste" (p. 494). Ginsborg's *L'Italia del tempo presente* tells the story of these "hidden resources." More to the point, it tells the story of how the combination of history, circumstance, institutional deficiencies, political will (or lack thereof), and popular disaffection have often conspired to keep these resources hidden, though rarely completely submerged, in contemporary Italian life.

Ginsborg's coverage of Italian history since the 1980s is encyclopaedic in its breadth and depth. He relies little on historical archives, drawing from contemporary sources such as newspapers, interviews, parliamentary reports, as well as sociological and anthropological studies. The result is not so much a work of history, that is to say of conventional history, as it is a window on Italy today. From the bulky first chapter on the dynamism of the modern Italian economy, to the stinging critique of the inequities of the same in the second chapter, to wide-ranging discussions of the social and cultural dimensions of Italian life in the past twenty years, there is little that escapes

Ginsborg's roving eye. Each of the book's eight, lengthy chapters is brimming with detail on everything from changing consumption patterns, to the love affair between Italians and their television, to the all-too familiar history of governmental instability, ineptitude and corruption. Here the reader will also find the underemployed university graduate, the disgruntled and indolent civil servant, and immigrants and refugees--the ubiquitous and marginalized "extracomunitari"--many of whom live in squalid, overcrowded urban ghettos, even shanty-towns, in the shadow of the country's majestic cupolas. The *dolce vita*, Ginsborg reveals, is not universal.

L'Italia del tempo presente is a timely look at contemporary Italy, refreshing for its balance and honesty. While Ginsborg does not shy away from chronicling the many Italian follies of the past twenty years, neither does he interpret the recent history of the Republic as an unmitigated disaster. At heart, *L'Italia del tempo presente* is about Italian democracy, how it works and why it sometimes does not. Most important, the book is about the social, cultural and economic fabric that, together, make Italy an imperfect but vibrant civil society. Ginsborg encourages the reader to think about the connections between social practices, cultural mores, and democratic governance. He insists that greater attention be paid to the role of the family as an agent of political socialization, an original and promising area for future research.

As a work of contemporary history, *L'Italia del tempo presente* is about Italy as it was and is at the close of the twentieth century, but the book is also about the way Italy can and ought to be in the twenty-first century. Indeed, *L'Italia del tempo presente* contains an important message. The book reminds us that in a democracy, people get the kind of government they deserve. Ginsborg's concluding sentence, like the picture on the cover, is worth a thousand words: "la forza della democrazia di un Paese non dipende solo dalla capacita' e dalla integrita' della sua classe politica,

ma anche dalla cultura delle sue famiglie, e dell'energia dei suoi cittadini" (p. 563). With this book, the call has gone out. Will the Italians heed it?

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