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Paul Ginsborg. *Italy and its Discontents: Family, Civil Society, State, 1980-2001.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. xv + 520 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4039-6152-5.

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New Old Europe

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When Paul Ginsborg's *History of Contemporary Italy, 1943-1988* first appeared more than a decade ago, scholars of Italian history recognized it as the best work of its kind. They were struck by its breadth and humane vision. Yet the book left its readers with a profound sadness. Ginsborg seemed to catalog a whole series of possible turning points in postwar Italy where the country had failed to turn.

Now Ginsborg, a professor of contemporary European history at the University of Florence, has completed the long-awaited sequel. It is, if anything, even more detailed and comprehensive but no more optimistic than the earlier work. *Italy and Its Discontents* will dishearten those who cherish the ideals of civic society first evoked by republican Rome.

The last two decades, Ginsborg argues, have effected as radical a transformation of Italy as the "economic miracle" of the late 1950s and '60s. Anyone who has spent an extended period of time there can attest to this transformation. Italy now has the lowest birth rate in the world and–north of Rome–one of the highest standards of living. What is most remarkable is its transition from a country of poor, agrarian communities to a wealthy, urban, industrial–and now postindustrial–society. As the subtitle indicates, Ginsborg portrays this transformation through a wide-ranging study of the institutions of family, civil society, and the state, often presenting surprising conclusions.

To his credit, Ginsborg shuns easy interpretations. The defects of Italian society–its rampant consumerism; its bureaucratic inefficiency; its stunted and atrophied public institutions; the persistent poverty of the Mezzogiorno; the collusion between a corrupt and complacent political class and organized crime–all these he sees as the result of a complex relationship between the individual and the state, with the family acting as intermediary.

Ginsborg's two main focuses are the family and television. Although Italy may have the lowest birth rate in the world, it is still "the family which provides metaphors and role models for society and the state." And if the family has been changing, with parents becoming more indulgent, consumption has been radically altered by the advent of television–which, in turn, affects the family. Ginsborg arrives at the inescapable conclusion that the insatiable desire to consume that is at the heart of commercial television has wreaked havoc on Italian society. Add to this the fact that most commercial television in Italy is in the hands of a private individual who also happens to be the prime minister, and the repercussions for the country have been dismal indeed.

Ginsborg traces the fundamental problems confronting Italians today through the prism of the family: immigration and a rising tide of racism; the transformation of class and gender roles; political favoritism and corruption. In this bleak landscape there are only a few bright spots, like the anti-Mafia fervor that followed the assassinations of the magistrates Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino in 1992.

Still, the reality may be worse than even Ginsborg allows. While he only briefly examines the kickback scandals of the 1990s and the murky relationship between Giulio Andreotti, seven times Italy's prime minister, and the Mafia, knowledgeable Italians will insist that these are not aberrations but business as usual.

Ginsborg does the Italians a service by refusing to lay the myriad problems of postwar society on a corrupt and incompetent political class. Instead, by arguing that the citizens, both as individuals and as members of families, must bear responsibility for constructing a decent society, he grants them an autonomy and responsibility that have too often been denied them. Complex and fertile with "thick description," *Italy and Its Discontents* radiates the paradoxes and ironies that abound in a troubled country.

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