

Meloni's Cultural Revolution

di Rachel Donadio

What changes has Italy's far-right prime minister wrought?

For months now an enormous excavating machine has been drilling deep into central Rome beneath Piazza Venezia, at the foot of the looming Victor Emmanuel II National Monument—a white marble pile of steps and columns that is probably the closest we will ever get to experiencing the grandeur of ancient Rome. Also known as the Altar of the Fatherland, and with an eternal flame for the unknown soldier flanked by a solemn honor guard, the monument is nicknamed “The Typewriter.” Romans have been deflating pomposity for millennia. On another side of the piazza is Palazzo Venezia, where Mussolini had his headquarters and from whose balcony he delivered speeches to adoring throngs.

Piazza Venezia is one of Rome's busiest traffic circles—a whirl of cars, buses, taxis, and mopeds with no stoplights or discernible lanes. The excavating machine is working on a third line for the Rome metro, which is expected to take years and is causing endless maddening traffic delays. The drillers constantly encounter the remnants of the ancient city, and the new metro station under the piazza will include a museum with objects unearthed in its construction, which will no doubt rival some of the world's best archaeological collections.

How can Rome—or Italy for that matter—possibly move forward or adapt to the exigencies of the contemporary world when at every turn the sheer enormity of the past hits with full force? How can one build or do anything new here without being encumbered by the literal and metaphorical weight of history, empire, tradition? It is no wonder that the Futurists wanted a radical break with everything that came before in order to forge something new. The more one engages with Italy, the more one

understands why so many political innovations here have been right-wing: Futurism, fascism, Silvio Berlusconi's postideological, personality-driven politics, the technopopulism and online rage that in the past decade brought antiestablishment and right-wing parties to power. Italy may share political weather patterns with the rest of the West, but what sets it apart is the utter inescapability of these layers of history.

I had come to Rome to try to understand the new cultural priorities of the government of Giorgia Meloni. When she became prime minister in the fall of 2022—the first woman to govern Italy and the first far-right leader to govern in the heart of the European Union—there was widespread international concern. Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) party, which she cofounded in 2012, is a grandchild of the neofascist Italian Social Movement, a party formed in 1946 by supporters of Mussolini nursing their defeat. Was fascism back? Was Italy drifting away from France and Germany and closer to Poland and Hungary? Was Meloni's us-versus-them rhetoric hot air or did it have a real impact? Was Italy a harbinger of the future or a throwback to the past? How worried should we be?

Responses, especially in world-weary Rome, tended to range from *boh*—the verbal equivalent of shrugging one's shoulders—to *insomma*, which loosely translates as “Are you kidding? Nothing changes here.” Giuliano Ferrara, the founder of the erudite and witty conservative daily *Il Foglio* and one of Italy's sharpest political commentators, told me over lunch, “The only thing we can fear is to become a serious country.” But if we burn through the fog of Italian cynicism and the mixed messages of the government, a clearer picture begins to emerge. It is of a scrappy opposition party in power for the first time, eager to exact some comeuppance and hungry to put its loyalists in important positions yet lacking a deep bench of experienced officials and presentable right-wing intellectuals. It is a picture of the mainstreaming of a postfascist right seeking changes in Italian historical memory—what is emphasized, what is downplayed—and attempting, often ham-handedly and with a dearth of fresh ideas, to forge a modern right in a country that lacks a conservative tradition (comparable to, for example, the UK's Tories) apart from fascism. Above all, it is an

image of an aging country worried about its future and holding on to an idea of its past.

That idea does not reflect the reality of an economically precarious and increasingly multiethnic polity, but it was an electorate driven by fear and resignation, not hope, that brought Meloni to power. This does mark a shift from the past. For decades Berlusconi—eternal optimist, free marketeer, and consummate salesman—promised Italians a bright future. It didn't happen. Economically the country stagnated. Populism bloomed, feeding on discontent. After a series of strange and often angry coalitions between 2018 and 2021 that scrambled the traditional lines between government and opposition, and a brief technocratic government led by Mario Draghi, a former European Central Bank president who deftly steered the country out of the pandemic, Meloni's Brothers of Italy appealed to middle-class anxieties. She campaigned on protecting borders, cracking down on immigration, eliminating a "citizen's income" subsidy for the poor, and upholding traditional family values. With the support of Italy's public school teachers, public sector workers, factory workers, and shopkeepers, disillusioned constituencies that had once voted left and now drifted rightward, her party won 26 percent of the vote, not a majority, in a national election with the lowest turnout in Italian history.

The far right has been more normalized than defanged, a tendency well underway across the West, but fascism has not returned to Italy. In spite of her party's postfascist roots—and a small but notable core of supporters with a penchant for Roman salutes—Meloni's coalition government falls solidly within the mainstream European right. She shares power with Forza Italia, the center-right party founded by Berlusconi, and with the right-wing League party, formerly the Northern League, whose excitable leader, Matteo Salvini, she has kept in check. Her government is probably to the left of the US Republican Party in its belief in a social welfare state. Although she made noises to the contrary before coming to power, she supports the euro (crucial for an economy based on exports), the European Union (whose infusion of more than €100 billion in Covid-19 recovery funds—including for the new Rome metro line—it desperately needs), and NATO. Italy has eight US military bases, and

Meloni has been a staunch ally of the United States in its support for Ukraine. Though she does not have a college degree, she is savvy and capable and seeks respect on the world stage. With a solid majority in Parliament, this spring she announced she wanted to change the constitution so that prime ministers would effectively be directly elected. This would weaken the institution of the presidency, which is supposed to stand above partisan politics. It is unclear if she will win this battle—or whether such a change would lead to political stability or autocracy. For now, Meloni has far more room to maneuver in the cultural realm.

Changes to Cultural Institutions

In many ways the cultural dynamics of Italy under Meloni are not greatly changed from those under previous governments. The state still struggles to contend with an enormous patrimony that it does not always have the resources to manage. Tourists come in droves, more than 445 million last year alone. Meloni has appointed her people to important cultural positions. All are men and solidly of the right.

As the new general manager of RAI, the state broadcaster—a position with great power in shaping the national conversation—Meloni chose Giampaolo Rossi, a longtime member of far-right parties who on his personal blog has expressed great admiration for Putin and disdain for George Soros. Since he began, viewership numbers have dropped and RAI has faced accusations of censorship for canceling a monologue by a prominent novelist critical of Meloni.

As culture minister, Meloni appointed Gennaro Sangiuliano, a journalist who has also written books on Putin, Xi Jinping, and Hillary Clinton. When he was the director of the TG2 news channel from 2018 to 2022, it offered a stream of images of dark-skinned people arriving on boats, which created the perception of an immigration crisis that helped keep the populists in power. Since taking office Sangiuliano has repeatedly expressed bold plans to overturn the “cultural hegemony of the left.” In the postwar era the Christian Democrats governed, and the Communist Party, once the largest in the West, eventually had influence over one channel of RAI, while the heads of most cultural institutions, as well as intellectuals, writers, artists, and filmmakers—then and now—leaned left. When I asked Sangiuliano what overturning

that “cultural hegemony” meant, he said, “The radical-chic spirit of certain Roman *salons* tried to transform culture in Italy into something that spoke only to a small circle.” In response, he wanted to give “the national cultural panorama a wider horizon,” and also the international one, where “Anglo-Saxon cancel culture and a dictatorship of wokeness dominate.” In practice, the government is mostly replacing people installed by previous center-left governments.

Sangiuliano notably championed an exhibition at Rome’s National Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art dedicated to J.R.R. Tolkien: “Tolkien: Man, Professor, Author.” Meloni attended the opening last fall, and the exhibition has now moved to the Palazzo Reale in Sangiuliano’s native Naples. Meloni’s postfascist right has often looked to fantasy literature for heroes. For years she hosted an annual far-right festival called Atreju, after the warrior-boy hero of the *The Neverending Story*, who fights a dark force. The Tolkien exhibition’s run in Rome coincided with an exhibition for the centenary of the birth of Italo Calvino, who represents the left-wing cultural elite that Meloni’s government is so eager to supersede. Sangiuliano’s intellectual hero is Giuseppe Prezzolini, who died at the age of one hundred in 1982 and once directed Columbia University’s Italian Academy. Sangiuliano just published a biography of him and has said he admires Prezzolini as a conservative and antifascist. He often cites a favorite Prezzolini saying: “The progressive is the person of tomorrow. The conservative is the person of the day after tomorrow.” Italy’s satirists keep a running tab on Sangiuliano’s gaffes. He recently said that Times Square is in London. In 2014 a center-left culture minister, Dario Franceschini, opened up the directorships of Italy’s top museums to non-Italians in a reform that also gave these museums more autonomy over their budgets. Sangiuliano told me one of his priorities was to extend that autonomy to more museums, for a total of sixty. This also puts more pressure on them to be financially self-sustaining. And while the posts remain open to non-Italians, all the directors appointed under Sangiuliano have been Italian.

After two terms as director of the Uffizi, Eike Schmidt, a German who recently became an Italian citizen, was named director of the Capodimonte Museum in Naples, where he succeeded Sylvain Bellenger, who is French. When I went to see him at the

Capodimonte, high on a hill overlooking the spectacular Bay of Naples, Schmidt told me his plans for the museum, but he seemed more animated at the prospect of running for mayor of Florence, a step he took soon after we met. In Florence, a city overrun by tourists, Schmidt had been hailed for cracking down on ticket scalpers. (This, too, plays into Meloni's emphasis on law and order.) Schmidt is running as an independent with the support of the Brothers of Italy and other center and right-wing parties.

Opera directorships have also been caught up in a game of musical chairs and national sentiment. Stéphane Lissner, who is French, sued to keep his post as director of Naples's San Carlo after the government passed a law saying directors of opera theaters could not serve beyond the age of seventy. In April Sangiuliano named Fortunato Ortombina, the director of Venice's La Fenice, as the new head of Milan's La Scala, trumpeting that "after three foreign general directors"—Lissner, Alexander Pereira, and Dominique Meyer—"an Italian" had returned to the position.

An important test case of how Meloni is putting her stamp on culture is the Venice Biennale, one of Italy's most prominent international stages. As its new president, she picked her friend Pietrangelo Buttafuoco, an erudite novelist, journalist, and intellectual who is a former member of the Italian Social Movement. Buttafuoco has not given any interviews about his vision for the Biennale. He is expected to name the next curator of the Art Biennale and a new artistic director of the Venice Film Festival to succeed Alberto Barbera, an appointee of the left who is widely respected for having made the festival more competitive with the Cannes Film Festival.

Buttafuoco, a Sicilian, is nondoctrinaire and unpredictable. He is a convert to Islam and now a practicing Muslim. One of his novels recounts the Allied liberation of Sicily in 1943 from the sympathetic perspective of the Germans. He has been a regular guest on mainstream television talk shows and has written an affectionate introduction to an autobiographical novel by Paolo Signorelli, a militant in the hard-right Ordine Nuovo group who served a prison sentence for his involvement in the 1980 bombing of the Bologna train station, in which eighty-five people were killed, but who was later acquitted. Buttafuoco has also been artistic director of several

theaters and has a perch at the Leonardo Foundation in Rome, a nonpartisan think tank funded by Leonardo, Italy's largest aerospace and defense company.

He seems to see himself in the mold of Gabriele D'Annunzio—a man of intellect, a man of action. The poet, journalist, and politician is something of a hero for the new Meloni right. Buttafuoco has addressed friendly audiences at CasaPound, the radical neofascist social center in Rome. In one speech there in 2012, he defended the idea of a deeper right-wing “tradition” and was critical of “the global right”—presumably the Atlanticist world order—which he called the opposite of the right as espoused by Ezra Pound, D'Annunzio, and the Futurist poet Filippo Marinetti. “I love CasaPound because it operates outside a logic in which souls and existences are turned into a market, in which youth are instrumentalized and deluded. Instead, it offers a laboratory,” Buttafuoco told the audience. He also urged it to “throw out the racists” and “kick them in the ass.”

This year's Art Biennale, which opened in April, was curated by Adriano Pedrosa, a Brazilian appointed under the previous president, Roberto Cicutto. The theme is “Foreigners Everywhere,” an on-the-nose response to nationalism, with a focus on queer, folk, indigenous, and outsider artists. Pedrosa has said the title has several valences:

First of all, that wherever you go and wherever you are you will always encounter foreigners—they/we are everywhere. Secondly, that no matter where you find yourself, you are always truly, and deep down inside, a foreigner.

In remarks at the Biennale opening, Buttafuoco was fairly respectful of Pedrosa's vision. He said that for Venice, “diversity has stood from the outset as a basic condition of normality. A process of mirroring and confrontation with the Other, never perceived in terms of denial or rejection.” It's hard to know how Buttafuoco will handle his new position's complex institutional and diplomatic demands. This year Sangiuliano defended Israel's right to have a national pavilion at the Biennale in the face of opposition; ultimately, the artist representing Israel, Ruth Patir, said she would not open the pavilion until there was a cease-fire in Gaza and release of the Israeli hostages.

Alessandro Giuli, a journalist and author, was appointed the new head of MAXXI, the contemporary art and architecture museum in Rome designed by Zaha Hadid. Giuli hired two well-respected figures: as head of the artistic program Francesco Stocchi, previously a curator at the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam, and as head of the architecture and design program Lorenza Baroncelli, a former artistic director of the Triennale in Milan. “Ambienti 1956–2010: Environments by Women Artists II,” organized by the Haus der Kunst in Munich, just opened. Upcoming exhibitions include one curated by the American architecture firm Diller Scofidio + Renfro and a retrospective of the Arte Povera artist Giovanni Anselmo, organized with the Guggenheim Bilbao.

Giuli, who is close to Meloni, has given considerable thought to how the postfascist right can and should evolve. His book *Il passo delle oche* (The Goose Step, 2007) criticized the National Alliance party, which was created in 1994 after the neofascist Italian Social Movement disbanded, for not having fully broken with its fascist past. Meloni rose through the ranks of the National Alliance and represented it as youth minister in a Berlusconi government. Giuli’s book was published by Einaudi, a historic left-wing publisher. I met Giuli in his office at MAXXI, and above his desk there was a work of art by the Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar based on the front page of the antifascist newspaper *Giustizia e libertà* announcing the death of Antonio Gramsci in 1937. Giuli said Meloni marked a new chapter, and that after some years of rabid populism Italy had returned to “the normal dialectic between conservatives and progressives” and had moved beyond “the dialectic of the people versus the establishment.”

He said MAXXI would fit into the government’s larger geopolitical strategies, including its Mattei Plan for Africa, a €5.5 billion commercial agreement largely focused on energy and preventing immigration. There is already a MAXXI in L’Aquila, the Abruzzo city devastated by an earthquake in 2009, and now there are plans for a MAXXI Med in Messina, which will provide exhibition space and museum-studies training, including for people from the Maghreb. I suggested it sounded like a neocolonial project. Giuli said it was “the exact opposite.” He spoke of the Etruscan kings who turned ancient Rome into a colony and said the African countries that Italy had

brutally colonized in the twentieth century later made use of fascist-era architecture. “We realize that Italy committed tragic and violent errors and also that the African world is capable of using, even reappropriating, whatever remains of the colonial presence,” he added.

Buttafuoco and Giuli, along with Annalena Benini, whom Meloni named as the new head of the Turin International Book Fair, are all journalists and contributors to *// Foglio*, a center-right daily with sophisticated culture coverage and stylish writing. It is philo-American, Atlanticist, Zionist, pro-Ukraine, anti-Trump, anti-abortion, and critical of what it sees as the overreach of the Italian justice system. Before Meloni was elected, the paper’s editor-in-chief, Claudio Cerasa, told me he saw her as Trump-like and inclined to conspiracy theories, but now he sees a normalization. “It’s not fascism—on the contrary, there’s a great spirit of freedom here,” he told me. As evidence, he said Woody Allen was still popular in Italy, and Roman Polanski, too. I asked if that was a good thing. Of course, Cerasa said. The Meloni-era vibe is anti-cancel culture, even though no one has been canceled in Italy, as far as I can tell. For the most part, Italy seems to have skipped the backlash and gone straight to the backlash to the backlash.

Italianità and Its Critics

Beyond the government’s rush to fill positions, there is a battle of ideas underway about nationhood, about what it means to be Italian. Meloni and her government talk frequently about *patria*, or fatherland. More tellingly, the fascist-era term *Italianità*—Italianness—has reentered political discourse. Sangiuliano wants to develop a Museum of Italianità in the Emilia-Romagna region. When I asked him to define *Italianità*, he told me, rather enigmatically, that it was “that special condition unique to our people in which being accustomed to beauty creates an almost innate propensity for the well made.” Giuli, too, used the word. The right, he said, should “recover what it is intellectually” by looking to the Italian constitution, “which introduced themes of social protection, and even by taking pride in *Italianità* without falling into aggressive chauvinism.”

But the government often pushes exclusion over inclusion. Meloni has a fierce penchant for singling out perceived enemies—migrants, same-sex parents, intellectuals who have criticized her—as a way of building consensus. For years in her campaigns she said that a family should have a mother and a father, not “parent one and parent two.” Italy legalized same-sex civil unions in 2016 under a center-left government, and Meloni is trying to make it illegal for children born to gay couples via surrogacy abroad to have their birth certificates registered in Italy. Surrogacy is illegal in Italy and across most of Western Europe, a position shared by Catholic traditionalists and leftists opposed to what they see as the commodification of women’s bodies, but this push has spooked gay couples and supporters of gay rights in Italy. Meloni has said she will not overturn Italy’s 1978 abortion law, but she just passed a law allowing nonprofits into public clinics to dissuade women from having them. (A majority of Italian doctors are conscientious objectors who won’t perform the procedure.) Meanwhile she has been encouraging Italians to have more babies and has appeared with Pope Francis to deliver that message. The country just reported its lowest birth rate since the state was founded in 1861.

Beyond simple demographics, there is also a question of culture. “When Giorgia Meloni says, ‘Have kids,’ she is not talking to me,” Djarah Kan, an Italian writer and journalist whose parents are from Ghana, told me. We were sitting in a café in San Lorenzo, a formerly working-class neighborhood that like so much of Rome has been increasingly gentrified. If she had a baby with another black Italian, she continued, “it would not be considered a real Italian by the Italian state.” This feeling of exclusion in her own country infuriated her.

I feel offended, I feel mocked... They are trying to invent out of whole cloth a model of *Italianità* that doesn’t match the reality of the country. They want to impose their idea of society on a society that is changing, however slowly. Because Italian society is changing and there are so many people in their thirties like me, of Chinese origin or African origin or Indian origin, who reside and live in this country. And every time we hear talk of *Italianità* or “Made in Italy” and of who has the right to be considered Italian or not, we laugh, but it also makes us sick to our stomachs.

Kan was born and grew up in Castel Volturno, outside Naples. We talked about how hard it is for immigrants to get a foothold in Italy. Many Italians inherit family real estate; without that inheritance, the social order would collapse. In a sign of the spirit of the times, Italy's leading daily, *Corriere della Sera*, has a new podcast about the last wills of famous Italians, all men. "It's all so stagnant," Kan said. She said many of her high school classmates, also children of African immigrants, were sent abroad for better opportunities after graduating. It's the same at Italy's poshest private schools, many of which are Anglophone. Italy is unique among core EU countries in that its ruling class now prepares its children to leave. The brain drain has gotten worse over the years. Meloni reduced a tax incentive designed to lure Italians back home. It is against this backdrop of resignation that she came to power.

Meloni's government is fighting rearguard wars over the past. It approved the creation of a memorial museum in Rome dedicated to victims of the Foibe massacres—reprisal killings in Italian territories in what are now Croatia and Slovenia during the immediate postwar period when Tito's Communists murdered fascists and civilians. Sangiuliano and the government have been promoting the initiative, saying the murders had been downplayed by past center-left governments.

There have also been heated polemics over Liberation Day, a national holiday on April 25 when Italy celebrates its liberation from fascism by the Allies. In April RAI canceled a Liberation Day monologue by Antonio Scurati, the author of the global best-selling novel *M* (2018), about Italy under Mussolini, prompting cries of censorship. In his monologue, the text of which later appeared online, Scurati said, "After winning the elections in October 2022, the postfascist leadership had two possible paths: to repudiate its neofascist past or to try to rewrite history. It undoubtedly chose the second." Scurati has in the past criticized Meloni for not directly acknowledging the contribution of the Resistance to ending fascism, or that Italy's constitution was born of antifascism. In his monologue he said that she had denounced the Nazis "without repudiating the fascist experience in its entirety." Meloni said the cancellation was an economic choice, but a leak from RAI indicated it had been editorial. She then published his monologue on her own Facebook page, a move indicative of the

unpredictability and confusion fomented by the government, making it hard to pin down.

Italy, which began the war with the Axis and ended it with the Allies, never underwent a deep examination of conscience the way Germany did. Meloni's government could present an opportunity to do this. Instead she is attacking her critics and shifting the narrative to redress issues like the Foibe that have long been an obsession of the right. At the same time the government has been attentive to honoring Jewish victims of the Holocaust. In March Sangiuliano went with Germany's culture minister to commemorate one of the country's worst wartime massacres: the Nazis' execution of 335 Italian civilians in 1944 at the Ardeatine Caves outside Rome.

Meloni's government has found it harder to address contemporary violence. In January she turned a blind eye when a group of far-right militants made Roman salutes at a memorial gathering for one of their members killed in clashes with left-wing groups and police in the 1970s. The legacy of the Years of Lead, from the late 1960s to the late 1980s, when the battle between left and right moved beyond ideas to violence, is still palpable in Italy, and many consider it a civil war. Italy's Constitutional Court ruled that the Roman salute is a crime if done out of a desire to reconstruct the Fascist Party, but not if done as a commemorative act. In February videos circulated showing police in Pisa and Florence beating unarmed teenagers who were demonstrating in support of Palestine. President Sergio Mattarella, an institutional figure who normally does not weigh in on such matters, took the interior minister to task:

The authority of law enforcement is not measured by truncheons but by the capacity to safeguard security while at the same time guaranteeing the right to express one's opinion in public. The use of truncheons against youth is an expression of failure.

The police beatings drew widespread concern. "The thing that worries me, frankly, is the censoring of the youngest voices, of the voices of dissidents, of the voices of the counterculture," the writer Nadeesha Uyangoda told me at a book fair of independent presses on the foggy outskirts of Milan. Born in Sri Lanka and raised in Milan, she is

the author of *L'unica persona nera nella stanza* (The Only Black Person in the Room, 2021) and a columnist for the magazine *Internazionale*.

It is something intrinsic in Italian culture to go out into the piazza and demonstrate.... It's a cultural act because you occupy a public space with your body. And if the state prevents this by beating you, what is it? It means there isn't space for a different idea that doesn't conform to that of the government.

Uyangoda told me she found the government's talk of *Italianità* silly but troubling. Italy is, after all, a country of *campanilismo*, of people sticking to the traditions and dialect of their own towns beneath their local *campanile*, or church tower. "Only a group of far-right politicians could think they could bring back to life a concept of nationality, of *Italianità*, that doesn't exist in Italy anymore," she said. I asked if she took the government's fusty rhetoric seriously. She paused. "When I hear them say some things, I can't take them seriously," she said. "But then I think of how we didn't take them seriously six years ago, and look what happened. And so maybe it's worth taking them seriously this time because they evidently have an impact on the country."

Even before the Liberation Day polemics, Scurati was growing concerned. "I never thought that the potential victory of the far right would compromise democracy," he told me.

I was afraid that a victory by the far right could represent a threat for the quality of democratic life, not for the survival of democratic life. And it's getting worse. One of the signs of this worsening is in the world of culture. The few, the very few intellectuals who criticize the government become the object of violent and offensive attacks.

Indeed, Meloni has sued the historian and philologist Luciano Canfora for aggravated defamation, after he called her "a neo-Nazi in her soul."

(Italy lacks the equivalent of First Amendment protections for press coverage of public figures, and Italian politicians often sue for defamation.) Members of the government have lashed out at the writer Roberto Saviano, a vocal critic who has been under police protection for years for his writing about the Neapolitan Mafia.

After Scurati was attacked by the right-wing, progovernment daily newspaper *Libero*, someone left dried feces in his building in Milan and the words *Scurati merda* appeared on the wall. He reported the incident. “When the police chief asked if I wanted police protection, I thought, ‘Now we have a problem,’” Scurati told me. “It’s very heavy for people who want to express their feelings,” he continued. “Almost none of my writer colleagues, most of whom are on the left, are speaking out. Most are just tending their own *orticello*,” or little garden.

The Orticello

While a few public figures express dissent, such as Saviano, or defend gay rights, such as the social media influencer Chiara Ferragni, most cultural figures, to say nothing of the establishment, seem to be keeping their heads down or finding ways to turn the new regime to their own advantage. Loredana Lipperini, a longtime host of *Fahrenheit*, a program about books on RAI Radio3, a station popular with the left wing, used the same term as Scurati—the *orticello*. “I see on the one hand a great turning inward, and with some notable exceptions, what strikes me is that the majority of novels coming out now are intimate novels, autofiction, inward-facing and focused on themselves,” she told me. “I’m worried about this tendency in which everyone, with some exceptions...tends his or her own *orticello*.” For Lipperini it’s a sign that cultural figures aren’t fully engaging with the issues of the day. Institutionally and culturally, the left has not offered a clear response to the far right, with its well-defined positions on immigration, borders, and national identity.

A hit film in Italy since it came out last year is *C’è ancora domani* (*There’s Still Tomorrow*), directed by and starring Paola Cortellesi. Filmed in black and white and set in 1946, it tells the story of a scrappy Roman matriarch who maintains her dignity in the face of an abusive husband and an ogre of a father-in-law. In Italy the film sold more tickets than *Barbie*. It clearly hit a nerve, not only because it appeared when a case of a woman murdered by her boyfriend was calling attention to Italy’s high rates of violence against women. Cortellesi’s performance was strong, but I found the film reductive. Did we really need to be reminded that women in Italy got the vote? And yet I was struck by how many women in Italy told me how much the film had meant

to them, had empowered them and given them a sense of solidarity. It showed the power of collective action—an alternative to the *orticello*.

In February 1948 *Partisan Review* published an essay by the antifascist and anti-Stalinist writer Nicola Chiaromonte, who captured the mood two months before the first national elections of the nascent Italian republic that the heroine of *C'è ancora domani* votes to create. “Italy has not changed,” Chiaromonte wrote of that tenuous transitional period, just two years after the 1946 plebiscite in which Italians chose to become a democratic republic, not a monarchy.

In the collapse of Fascism, only Fascism has been refuted. Fascist authority and state structure are not there any longer. But, if the façade has crumbled, everything that was behind the façade before is still there, very much the same. Except that everything looks like the scattered fragments of a scattered society. Everything is in a state of suspension: conservatism together with the need for change; authoritarian habits along with libertarian impulses; nationalism and the natural cosmopolitanism of the Italians. Political freedom, as it exists today in Italy, is a state of suspension. But it still makes a difference. The simple fact of free speech has given the country an animation which looks like a new life. Misfortune has made the Italians feel united as they never felt before. The country is far from inert. Yet the apparent immutability of Italian society weighs everybody down.

In trying to make sense of Italy today, I thought back to Chiaromonte’s essay, still so illuminating on the country’s infinite complexities. Just off Piazza Venezia I had sat for ages in traffic on Via del Plebiscito, named after the 1946 plebiscite. Italian society has indeed changed since then. Italy remains a free country. But its apparent immutability still weighs everybody down. I thought of Djarah Kan, her dynamism and energy like that of so many young Italians constantly running up against the *muro di gomma*—the rubber wall—of tradition, exclusion, and every power structure from the tax code to labor law to the Catholic Church, which are designed to preserve power and wealth in the hands of those who already have it and who are fearful of letting in newcomers. “Italians always have to go backward because they’re too afraid of going forward,” Kan told me. “They always like it in the places where they’re worse

off because at least those awful places are familiar—they already know that suffering.” We both laughed. What else could we do? Around us the Roman café was thrumming. Kan is working on a novel. “As soon I’m done with my book, I want to get out of here,” at least for a while, she told me. “This country is a badly run museum.” When the children of immigrants want to become emigrants, perhaps that means they, too, possess *Italianità*.