

Arrivederci, Italia : Why Young Italians Are Leaving

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It's not the type of advice you would usually expect from the head of an elite university. In an open letter to his son published last November, Pier Luigi Celli, director general of Rome's LUISS University, wrote, "This country, your country, is no longer a place where it's possible to stay with pride ... That's why, with my heart suffering more than ever, my advice is that you, having finished your studies, take the road abroad. Choose to go where they still value loyalty, respect and the recognition of merit and results."

The letter, published in Italy's *La Repubblica* newspaper, sparked a session of national hand-wringing. Celli, many agreed, had articulated a growing sense in his son's generation that the best hopes for success lie abroad. Commentators point to an accelerating flight of young Italians and worry that the country is losing its most valuable resource. And with reforms made all but impossible by Italy's deep-rooted interests and topsy-turvy politics — a schism in the ruling coalition seemed this summer to threaten Silvio Berlusconi's government once again — many are starting to wonder if the trend can be reversed. "We have a flow outward and almost no flow inward," says Sergio Nava, host of the radio show *Young Talent* and author of the book and blog *The Flight of Talent*, which covers the exodus.

The motives of those leaving haven't changed much since the last wave of economic migrants struck out to make their fortunes a century ago. But this time, instead of peasant farmers and manual laborers packing themselves onto steamships bound for New York City, Italy is losing its best and brightest to a decade of economic stagnation, a frozen labor market and an entrenched system of patronage and nepotism. For many of the country's most talented and educated, the land of opportunity is anywhere but home.

Take Luca Vigliero, a 31-year-old architect. After graduating from the University of Genoa in 2006 and failing to find satisfying work at home, he moved abroad, working first for a year at Rem Koolhaas' Office for Metropolitan Architecture in Rotterdam and then accepting a job in Dubai in 2007. In Italy, his résumé had drawn no interest. At Dubai's X Architects, he was quickly promoted. He now supervises a team of seven people. "I'm working on projects for museums, villas, cultural centers, master plans," he says. "I have a career." Escape from Italy has also allowed Vigliero to fast-track his life plans. He and his wife had a son in September; had they remained in Italy, he says they would not have been able to afford children this soon. "All my friends in Italy are not married, they have really basic work, they live with their [parents]," he says. "Here, there's a future. Every year, something happens: new plans, new projects. In Italy, there's no wind. Everything is stopped."

Italy doesn't keep track of how many of its young professionals are seeking their fortunes abroad, but there's plenty of anecdotal evidence that the number is rising. The number of Italians ages 25 to 39 with college degrees registering with the national government as living abroad every year has risen steadily, from 2,540 in 1999 to about 4,000 in 2008. The research-institute Censis estimates that 11,700 college graduates found work abroad in 2006 — that's one out of every 25 Italians who graduated that year. According to a poll by Bachelor, a Milanese recruitment agency, 33.6% of new graduates feel they need to leave the country to take advantage of their education. A year later, 61.5% feel that they should have done so.

It's not hard to see why. Italy's economic woes have fallen hard on the shoulders of the country's youth. According to figures published in May by the National Institute of Statistics, 30% of Italians ages 30 to 34 still live with their parents, three times as many as in 1983. One in 5 young people ages 15 to 29 has basically dropped out: not studying, not training, not working. "We're condemning an entire generation into a black hole," says Celli.

Jobs for the (Old) Boys

Italians without college education often get by working in the black economy, doing all sorts of jobs, but university graduates — or more generally, those with higher aspirations — have a tougher time finding work that fits their qualifications. The unemployment rate among Italian college graduates ages 25 to 29 is 14%, more than double the rate in the rest of Europe and much higher than that of their less-educated peers.

Italians have a word for the problem: *gerontocracy*, or rule by the elderly. Too much of the economy is geared toward looking after older Italians. While the country spends relatively little on housing, unemployment and child care — expenditures the young depend upon to launch their careers — it has maintained some of the highest pensions in Europe, in part by ramping up borrowing. This imbalance extends into the private sector, where national guilds and an entrenched culture of seniority have put the better jobs out of reach for the country's young.

Italy has always suffered under a hierarchical system, with the young deferring to authority until it's their time to take the reins. "You are not considered experienced based on your CV, on your ability or according to your skills, but just based on your age," says Federico Soldani, 37, an epidemiologist who left Pisa in 2000 and now works in Washington, D.C., for the Food and Drug Administration. "When you are under 40, you are considered young."

The system worked — to a certain extent — as long as the economy was growing. Patience paid off as jobs opened to whoever was next in line. But with the extended slump, the labor market has seized up. "The queue is not moving forward anymore," says Soldani. Entry to some professions — like the lucrative position of public notary — is so limited that the job has become all but hereditary. In a country where success is

built on relationships and seniority, only the friends and children of the elite have a chance to cut the line.

For the rest, it means that jobs are scarce, underpaid and stripped of responsibility. When Filippo Scognamiglio, 29, secretary of the Italian MBA Association NOVA, compared net salaries for the same position at the same multinational in the U.S. and Italy, he found that an Italian with an M.B.A. who chose to stay home would earn just 58% of what they would abroad. “It’s easier to be successful in the United States if you have the talent and the desire to put in the effort than it is in my country,” he says. As a consequence, Scognamiglio, who graduated from Columbia Business School this year, chose to pay off the Italian company that had sponsored his degree in order to accept a job in the U.S. “It’s a 70,000-euro (\$90,000) vote [for the prospects of a career abroad],” he says.

But it’s not just better pay that attracts Italy’s young emigrants: it’s also the opportunity to escape dull jobs that involve mainly rote tasks and flattened career trajectories. “If you’re young in Italy, you’re a problem; in other countries, you’re seen as a resource,” says Simone Bartolini, 29, a creative copywriter in Sydney. He left Rome in 2007, following a change of management at his advertising firm, when his new boss told him, “We will put sticks in your spokes.” He was good to his word. “Every idea was turned down,” says Bartolini. “Everything was a no. As soon as I made a mistake, I was under the light.” In comparison to Australia, where Bartolini has launched a successful career, Italy simply had no use for his drive. “They need executors,” says Bartolini. “They don’t need thinkers.”

Old Problems, Old Solutions

Young Italians know better than to look to the state to solve their problems: the country’s politics is if anything even more stagnant. A long succession of ruling coalitions have been too busy wrestling among themselves to take on entrenched interests. The current regime is a case in point. Prime Minister Berlusconi came to power in 2008 after the previous left-wing government tried to institute a raft of reforms that would have passed without comment in just about any other country: deregulating the country’s taxicabs, allowing supermarkets to sell nonprescription drugs, permitting private companies into public transport. The reforms foundered on a series of strikes, setting the government on a path to failure a year and a half later.

Now Berlusconi’s government is facing a crisis of its own, a power struggle between the Prime Minister and his former ally, Gianfranco Fini, the speaker of Italy’s lower house. Fini, who commands a breakaway faction of parliamentarians, has been clashing with Berlusconi over a series of reforms. For now, the two men seem to have put aside their differences — Fini supported the government in a vote of no confidence last month — but tensions between the two are already rising over proposed changes to the criminal-justice system that would free Berlusconi from tax-fraud and corruption trials. In the meantime, Italians are stuck with a government that could collapse at any moment and leaders consumed with positioning themselves for the next election.

Italy's political culture is sclerotic. It has failed to produce young reform-minded leaders like Barack Obama, David Cameron or Nicolas Sarkozy. Berlusconi is 74 years old and serving his third term as Prime Minister, and the country's crop of political players hasn't been updated since the early 1990s, when a series of corruption and Mafia scandals upended the electoral landscape. No wonder young Italians want no part of it.

No Way Home

The Italian exodus wouldn't be so damaging if the departed could be persuaded to return with their foreign experience. And indeed, after years of ignoring the problem, the government has begun to try to do just that. "It's like judo: you transform a risk into a strength," says Guglielmo Vaccaro, a parliamentarian who has promoted a bill that would offer tax breaks to Italians who return after spending at least two years abroad. Vaccaro estimated that the state spends well over \$130,000 to provide a young person with a college education, money that can be recouped if its citizens can be persuaded to invest their skills at home.

It's not like the country's young want to stay away: Italians are famously attached to their homeland. Most of the people interviewed for this story said they would love dearly to go home. "Your DNA, your self, everything you breathe, everything you eat is very tied to the city where you're born," says Giovanni Chirichella, 34, a native Milanese who works as a human-resources manager at GE Energy in Houston. "Many Italians across the world, they're basically homesick for the rest of their lives."

But while Italy's young migrants usually set out with the intention of returning with a few years of foreign experience on their résumés, they often find the re-entry more difficult than they imagined. Over the past year, Elena Ianni, 32, a marketing manager at the Royal Bank of Scotland in London, has sent her résumé to the top 100 companies and recruitment agencies in Italy. She spent her Easter break knocking on doors in Milan. Every night, when she gets home from work, she checks the online job listings. In London, where she receives unsolicited calls from headhunters, Ianni has turned down two job offers during the same period. But her country doesn't seem to want her. "I've been told exactly these words," she says. "You're a young woman, and you won't be taken seriously here."

So the country is caught in a vicious circle. The economy will continue to fade as long as it stifles innovation by excluding its young. Meanwhile, every young person driven away is one less voice calling for reform. Silvia Sartori, 31, tried returning to Treviso after working in Asia for four years. After a fruitless year of job-hunting, she went back to China, where she now manages a \$3 million European Commission grant for green construction. "It's something in Italy I would never get, unless I was 45 and somebody's daughter or cousin or mistress," she says. "I gave Italy a second chance," she says. "They burned it." Italy may not have many more chances to preserve its most precious resource.