

Most people are aware that every crisis can be an opportunity to elaborate constructive proposals and spark social development and growth. However, we often abuse this awareness; conventional wisdom runs the risk of becoming sterile, unless we assess the origins of a decline which has revealed all Italy's weak points, and not just our economic woes: delegitimisation of the *élite*, disintegration of social ties, loss of ideal and cultural reference points, and the eclipse of collective identity...

To what extent are these phenomena part of a short-term cycle, the end product of an albeit exceptionally severe recession? Or, on the contrary, should we associate them with more long-term trends?

Our conversation with Prof. De Rita on these issues is very stimulating; although he has absolutely no qualms about painting a very uncompassionate picture of Italy's woes, his optimism about hope for a rebirth remains intact. De Rita believes that diseased ethics is the root cause of our economic debacle

and the deterioration of society; the disease has debilitated people's ability to aspire to something less narrow-minded than just individualist, material fulfilment. However, we believe that the ethical element in De Rita's analysis is constantly combined with a historical and anthropological element.

Society in Italy has very few antibodies with which to fight this model of individual success and brazen consumerism; the fact Italians tend to be very individualistic is perhaps something ingrained and pre-existent in their make-up, so much so that it has hampered the creation of a ruling class worthy of this name, an *enlightened aristocracy* ready to take responsibility and lead the country. Please note: a ruling class in all fields, not just a political ruling class. The fact politicians have not provided the answers we need to solve our problems reflects the historical failure of other *élites*, such as entrepreneurs and intellectuals.

This point of view helps sheltering us from the hypocritically consolatory idea which contrast

inefficient politics with the a-historic ideal of a virtuous civil society. Weakened desire, better still the fact that desire is gradually shrinking into a trite self-referential attitude appears to be the telltale sign of the final stages of this disease. But it could also herald a *radical change in our way of thinking*, one which, built on the ruins of sterile adolescent impulses, will give us back our dignity as human beings and reaffirm the central role of the community. This decline can be defeated if we reconstruct centres of aggregation, starting with the family, re-establish a solid link between enterprises and the territory they are embedded in, and experiment with new forms of representation. A *good life* doesn't fall like rain from heaven; it can only be built by a newborn, healthy society.

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DE RITA

NO LIFE WITHOUT DESIRE

“*Desire is a truly powerful tool, perhaps the most powerful. Desire is what makes us get up and move forward in life.*”

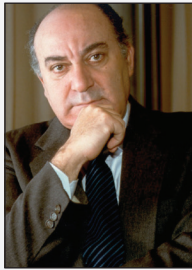
Telos: If we tried to assemble the patchwork pieces of the current crisis in Italy, the downsizing of the middle class would probably be one of its most symbolic features. What are the long-term causes of this decline? Is a polarised society poorer and more unstable, or does it mask the seeds of a new kind of rebirth?

Giuseppe De Rita: The optimism of reason, and as a Catholic, the optimism of hope, are always a good starting point. But this should not blind us to reality: the Italian crisis, and the crisis of the middle class, that sparked social growth in the Eighties, brought to light a shortcoming which actually existed, but was considered less dramatic during the good times: the fact Italy did not really have a ruling class. I mean a bourgeoisie imbued with a healthy streak of enlightened aristocracy. We have never had this kind of ruling class, or at least it has never really assumed a leadership role. And so the time has come to settle the accounts: when faced with this international crisis, political parties *do what they can*, entrepreneurs (luckily not all of them) get nervous, and in short *courageous captains* disappear into thin air. Others, for example intellectuals, seem unable to propose tough recipes or influential ideas. The systems chugs along with very little energy and dynamism are nowhere to be seen.

That said, the optimism of reason and hope I mentioned earlier can help us catch a glimpse of the sun peeking out from behind the clouds: for example, the nihilist wave of consumerism has lost its momentum, so we have repositioned ourselves and taken advantage of the situation to criticise the system. New cultural models or new alchemistries could emerge.

Amongst other things, the demise of the middle class has sparked a revision of the consumption model. You maintain that the crisis of the present model doesn't only depend on the economy, but also on the death of desire. Is it possible to teach or re-teach people to feel desire?

Yes, desire is a truly powerful tool, perhaps the most powerful. Let me be clear: without desire life would not exist; without desire, art, music and science would not exist. Without desire no-one would start a business or become rich. Without desire, there would be no voluntary work, no-one would help others in need, doctors would not go to Africa. In these circumstances, Pope Francis is almost a symbol: “*walk, build, confess*”; the path he has given us is the synthesis of *desire in action*.



Giuseppe De Rita is one of the most important Italian sociologists. He founded the Study Centre for Social Investments (CENSIS) in 1964 and has been its President since 2007. For the past fifty years, CENSIS has carried out research on evolutionary dynamics involving society, the economy, and local. Since 1967, CENSIS has published an annual [report on the social situation in Italy](#); this is a landmark document providing an analytical picture of socio-economic issues, social values and mindset. De Rita is a tireless observer of life in Italy and his studies have followed the rise and fall of the middle class, as well as its myths and achievements: small and medium sized enterprises, industrial districts, *made in Italy*, house ownership, and consumption. His passion and expertise have earned him the epithet of “*Carthusian monk of facts*” (as monks’ research was painstaking). His publications include: *Le professioni del sociale* (1991); *Intervista sulla borghesia in Italia* (1997); *Il regno inerme: società e crisi delle Istituzioni* (2002); *Leclissi della borghesia* (2011, together with A. Galdo). The relationship between the élite and citizens is one of his favourite topics. Amongst other things, he maintains: “*I am not aware that any Italian élite, except perhaps for the Risorgimento period, has shown itself to be courageous, efficient, and endowed with a clear mind*”. A liberal Catholic, he says he learnt “*determination from the Jesuits, open-mindedness from the Rosminians, and minimalism from the Quakers*”.

De Rita graduated in Law. Before founding CENSIS he worked for the Association for Development of Industry in the South (SVIMEZ) where he was in charge of the sociology department. From 1989 to 2000 he was President of the National Council for Economics and Labour (CNEL). Born in Rome 81 years ago, he has eight children and fourteen grandchildren and likes to call himself a “*Roman sociologist*.” He feeds his soul by reading Romanesque sonnets by Belli in which he finds “*plebeian wisdom: attention to things which come from the people*.”

But desire seems to have waned in society, either due to too many disappointments or to self-referential satisfaction, to an inward-looking attitude which does not generate further desire. The fact is we have to drag desire out using an elentic method; we need to cultivate it and make it grow. We have to teach people to learn how to desire: not just a holiday in the Maldives, but something more and something better. Better than the Maldives? *Better, better*.

The discontent running through society is increasingly *impolitic*; it feeds on frustration and often fails to put forward positive proposals or constructive criticism. But the crisis has made Italians realise that politicians make decisions which have an enormous effect on their lives. If it is at all possible, is there any way we can revive engagement?

I do not think anything new will come from our politicians or institutions. Instead, I think that there will be a horizontal drive in the subsystems of community life. For example, new entrepreneurs, a new focus on transversal issues such as the reform of the welfare state or digital growth; or new forms of representation (employer associations, professional networks). Or innovative business networks (such as business coordination units) or new links between businesses and the territory they are embedded in. All this will tend to increase and implement connectivity and recreate a healthy skin around the wounds of the economic and moral crisis we, and obviously others, are experiencing today. This proves that if society is left to *breathe freely*, then it knows how to produce good results.

Censis recently carried out a survey on “*The values of the Italians*”. Results show that the Italians have rediscovered the family and religious traditions. What should we make of these results: is it a temporary retreat, a symptom of our uncertainty about the future, an indication of a structural inversion compared to the pursuit of individual success, or another chapter in the autobiography of a population for which there is no alternative to *amoral familism*? Another topic of research is the aspirations and values of young people. Do you think they will be able to impose their own generational identity?

I think we should bear in mind several important changes when we interpret these data. To begin with, the first signs that people have begun to abandon the myth of omnipotent individualism should not be considered a feeble retreat, but the predominance of a rational ego compared to the chaotic and adolescent-style drive towards economic and financial egoism. The fact that riches no longer seem easy to achieve might be the spark which will ignite a change in our mindset: you never know what will produce something good. And we should not forget the magnetic appeal of the new Pope and his values, an appeal that is seducing not only the faithful, but also agnostics and declared atheists. A craving for a good life which is not the sugar-caked image of many slick adverts, but the search for a form of mental hygiene; in short, a way to recreate balance. I’m less optimistic about the second issue, the affirmation of the identity of the young generation. They have been brought up and taught to be individualistic, so it’s very difficult for them to detect and adopt a collective vision of life. That does not mean they do not share a certain set of values: amusement as an essential, the fact that the quality of life is more important than a career (interestingly enough, a value shared by both girls and boys), the pursuit of a healthy natural environment, even through nutrition; and the omnipresent media technology (in actual fact one way to stay connected). It is possible that they will impose themselves, but I think that if they do they will use the usual channels of consumption rather than wage a generational battle. But I would really like to be proved wrong.