Title: The Italian Family in Times of Crisis
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Abstract: The global economic crisis of 2008 destabilized many nations and their peoples across the world including Italy. Already in possession of a struggling economy, the European debt crisis catalyzed Italy’s downward spiral into its most severe recession since World War II. With rampant tax evasion, high levels of unemployment, and weak governmental support, Italians must develop new coping methods to deal with the uncertainty that accompanies their daily lives in the aftermath of the fiscal collapse. In this paper I draw upon scholarly articles and ethnographic research to explore the plight of Italy’s socially and economically displaced middle-class. Forced to delay the transition into adulthood, young Italians emigrate to find better work opportunities, and parents employ thrift and sacrifice to provide for their families. This paper contributes to our understanding of how families adapt to unanticipated fiscal disasters, and how economic downturn changes society and culture.
The global economic crisis of 2008 negatively impacted many nations and their peoples across the world. One such nation thrown into squalor was Italy. Already in possession of a struggling economy, the Eurozone crisis catalyzed the nation-state’s downward spiral into the “most severe recession [it had] experienced … since the Second World War” (Brandolini et al. 2013:130). The drop in demand for Italian goods, rampant tax evasion, weak social safety nets, and a lack of government funding for bailouts contributed to Italians’ reactions to these global economic events. Many individuals lost their jobs, and by 2009 Italy’s unemployment rate was at 13.2%, a staggering number considering that it does not take into account “discouraged workers” who stopped seeking employment (Vassari 2014). Due to its sizable public debt, the Italian government was unable to intervene with an adequate stimulus package, which made the loss of incomes in family units much worse than in other, more prepared countries (Brandolini et al. 2013:143). In the years following the collapse, family members of all ages have created many coping methods to deal with the uncertainty that accompanies their daily lives.

One of these methods has been deemed the “delay syndrome,” characterized by a postponed transition into adulthood. As a result of the recent crisis, young job-losers have moved back home with their families, and adolescents are putting off their exodus into the real-world; this phenomenon is illustrated by the fact that the “mean age at which young [Italian] people leave home to live independently is 29.5 for females and 31 for males” (Crocetti et al. 2012:88). Thus, due to this change in family relationships, young Italians’ “transition to adulthood occurs within the family context.” The living arrangements seem ideal for these young people—“not only do parents not expect their children to contribute to household expenses, but [they also provide] the main source of economic security for Italian emerging
adults” (Crocetti et al. 2012:88). This setup allows Italian adolescents the freedom to further explore their education, job prospects, and identities.

As a sign of the times, these young people—sensitive and aware of their nation’s current situation—tend to procrastinate commitments, avoid choices related to future planning, and postpone consolidating a sense of self and identity independently of their parents. They “recognize that the final outcome of their own plans for the future no longer depends exclusively on personal ability and commitment,” and thus are more inclined “to make decisions on the basis of external factors (steady job, income, career) and not to assume personal responsibility for the consequences of their choices” (Crocetti et al. 2012:92,97). By allowing their children the freedom to cope with the ramifications of the collapse without having to be concerned about their own survival, and through providing them with extended time to transition into adulthood, Italian families have created a way of life that would be impossible without their intrinsically tight-knit nature. In fact, family structure in Italy is actually credited with helping Italy’s failing economy, as, with support from their parents, young Italians were still able to be active contributors (although less so than previously) to their economy (Brandolini et al. 2013:131).

Many Italians who have found a way out of their family homes have left Italy altogether in search of greener pastures. In a recent survey conducted by A. Triandafyllidou and R. Gropas of the Global Governance Programme, over 900 Italians were interviewed about factors underlying their decisions to emigrate, most participants of whom are highly skilled men under the age of 45 (Triandafyllidou and Gropas 2014:1618-1619). This work provides us with an insightful view into how young adults are coping with the crisis on their own terms. These individuals resoundingly spoke of the same problems in their native country: “1. Political disruptions 2. No meritocracy 3. ‘Mafia’ behaviour in all fields 4. Salary level too low (only if
you do not have a “protector”), and 5. Poor opportunities in general;” they perceive these characteristics as “deeply engrained … and responsible for the way in which the current crisis developed” (Triandafyllidou and Gropas 2014:1624,1631). As for their decisions to leave Italy, young respondents listed four main reasons: “I saw no future for me in the country; to improve my academic and professional training; I could find better business opportunities; and to try a new adventure and live a new experience.” Many argued that emigration “was not a choice but a necessity,” and that they would “very much prefer” to live in Italy—“I love my country of origin, and I would love to contribute to its development. Unfortunately, I can’t find any job matching my professional profile” (Triandafyllidou and Gropas 2014:1629).

Over 25% of respondents expressed that they did not specifically choose their destination, but that, simply, “They were seeking a chance to emigrate abroad,” and the countries they chose—countries like the UK, Germany, Belgium, and Switzerland—seemed to be acceptable locations. (Triandafyllidou and Gropas 2014:1624-1625). Those who did choose a specific country were enticed by the prospects of better career opportunities, income, or quality of life (Triandafyllidou and Gropas 2014:1625-1626). The main factor guiding all of these emigrants was agency: “The individual’s capacity as a rational actor to make a cost-benefit calculation, make a decision, make a plan, and implement it with a view to improving her or his life” (Triandafyllidou and Gropas 2014:1630). In stark contrast to the adolescents back home, a “strong notion of agency” dominated the high-skilled emigrants’ discourse, as they constructed their self-image as people who are rational, willful, strong, organized, and motivated (Triandafyllidou and Gropas 2014:1630). The magnification of the aforementioned issues in their home countries “triggered more determination to accept the costs associated” with
emigrating and created “an even stronger desire to demonstrate resilience and success” (Triandafyllidou and Gropas 2014:1631).

And what about the parents coping with a sudden household budget cut, yet increased household demand? In their article, “The hidden work of coping: gender and the micro-politics of household consumption in times of austerity,” B. Cappellini, A. Marilli, and E. Parsons explore “both the symbolic and material dimensions of household coping in times of recession” (Cappellini et al. 2014:1602). Symbolically, they discuss how recessionary times “impact women’s roles and identities in the wider context of family life,” and materially, how they “manage constricted resources in the service of their wider goal of doing family and maintaining pre-recession living standards” (Cappellini et al. 2014:1602). The main coping methods discussed in this article are thrift and sacrifice. Thrift, it is explained, is not a matter of “mere frugality” or “consuming less” but is concerned with “the art of doing more with less,” not just with the consumption of tangible goods but also with “the spending of time and effort.” Sacrifice is an ultimate element of thrift, as “some family members have to go without, or dismiss, their own needs in favour of others” (Cappellini et al. 2014:1602). Sacrifice does have a reciprocal element, though, in that “while this behaviour is the material expression of care and love from the parent to the child, [they,] in turn, are ‘upholding their honour as parents’” (Cappellini et al. 2014:1602).

Thrift and sacrifice are employed in many ways by Italians in the domestic sphere, as is evidenced by the many changes in coping strategies the women interviewed reported. Thrift-wise, for example, between the years 2011 and 2012, the percentage of households who indicated that they had “reduced the quantity and/or quality of foodstuffs they purchase”

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1 For the purpose of my paper, I have chosen to focus less on the specifically gendered roles highlighted by this article, and more on the overall influences of the recession on domestic life.
increased by almost 10 percent. These families also report dietary changes, “reducing spending on luxury items such as fish, cold cuts and dairy products,” and replacing them with “more affordable carbohydrates such as pasta, sales of which have increased” (Cappellini et al. 2014:1603). Parents are also redirecting and redistributing resources between family members, hence, “once the fixed outgoings had been met” (mortgage, insurance, nursery, etc.), “the children were prioritized over most other considerations” (Cappellini et al. 2014:1614). This redirection of resources has been described as “artificial affluence,” as “it merely results from the careful redirection of existing resources within the home” (Cappellini et al. 2014:1615). Such redirection is a prime example of the many ways in which Italian women employ thrift in order to maintain a certain level of comfort for their families.

Daily, these individuals make sacrifices for the betterment of their family that may involve giving up a haircut, good wine, a vacation, or even their sanity. One woman reports, “I have a constant anxiety, like a fire alarm telling me ‘be careful, don’t buy this, don’t overdo it, do this, do that’ ... it is a real crisis, you can feel it. I don’t know the causes of the crisis, but I can see how our way of buying things, of enjoying them, has changed” (Cappellini et al. 2014:1608). Another informant stated that “she and her husband have stopped dreaming – they no longer look to consumption as offering possibilities for the accomplishment of their middle-class dreams in terms of travelling and moving to a bigger home” (Cappellini et al. 2014:1606). For all participants, employing thrift involves “a significant amount of self-sacrifice of their individual desires and previous habits” (Cappellini et al. 2014:1615). The “visceral and keenly felt experience” of the women interviewed in response to “facing a financial crisis” are characterized by the feelings of “stress, worry and anxiety over the need to continually monitor spending and resource use,” and, although a painful experience, “coping and its associated work are
undoubtedly means by which [the] participants made sense of themselves and, as such, form a central strand of their identity work as caring mothers and partners.” The authors, thus, choose to see these women not as “poverty managers” but as “austerity managers,” using the term “austerity” to highlight their belief that the coping strategies employed by the participants were about “regaining control over the flow and direction of resources both within the household and flowing from the household into the marketplace” (Cappellini et al. 2014:1617). These women, constantly calculating and self-sacrificing, are the true heroes of the crisis.

To illustrate the concepts that I have explored so far in this paper, I will now present the story of my good friend Arturo Aldente (23) and his father Gualtiero Aldente (56), both natives of Faenza, Italy, as relayed to me via online correspondence. Arturo first realized that something very bad had happened to the Italian economy around 2009 when his dad, Gualtiero, was let go from his job building house foundations with his brother’s company (he holds no grudge, “it’s not his brother’s fault if there aren’t enough/any jobs”). A single father of two high school boys at the time, Gualtiero found a job metalworking for a low wage, not at all enough to scrape by.

For the next five years, Arturo lived with his family, in typical Italian fashion, while attending three years of college in Italy. Arturo’s brother, after attempting multiple, repeated years of high school in a row, made the decision to drop out around the age of 19 and become a pizzaiolo (a professional pizza-maker). Now 21, Arturo’s brother lends his father the money to pay rent. Arturo goes into detail about the feelings his father has about this situation:

I think it’s quite hard on [my father] psychologically. Like, he has to borrow money from his son. He makes jokes about it sometimes—“Your brother is going to pay for this. Well, he’s paid for almost everything, why should he stop?” or “I think I’ll have to borrow money from him. He’s like a bank, only instead of interests he wants food”—but I think it’s a bit more serious for him. He looks a bit too serious when he jokes.

After completing all three years of college, but without passing all necessary exams, Arturo moved to Oxford, England on the suggestion of a friend, because he “just wanted to get out” and
“saw no future for [himself] in Italy.” Arturo worked as a dishwasher and expediter on average 60 hours a week, made the minimum wage (£6.31/hour), and received no overtime. In response to my shock he replied, “It’s still better than Italy, because (1) here they have a minimum wage (2) you can actually survive with it.” Arturo was still not making enough money to send home, and after months of exploitation, quit his job and is on the search for a new one.

Back in Italy Arturo’s father and brother have not been able to pay the rent in two or three months. Gualtiero said that this inability makes him feel “quite bad,” and continues, “When you start making debts, it's quite easy to fall into a vicious cycle (making debts to pay other debts).” Both Gualtiero and his son work over 40 hours a week, yet, due to unjustly high taxes, are unable to pool together enough money for their space—“Our governments care more about their own business than our country!” Arturo does not plan to go back to Italy anytime soon—he would never be able to find a job there, and even if he did, his job dishwashing in the UK paid him more than his friends make in their salary jobs. As it is, his family’s burden is lightened by not having to support him at home.

Arturo shows the typical lack of faith in Italy’s system as illustrated by the aforementioned emigrants, and when asked if there was anything that could be done, after sending a YouTube link to the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy scene in which the world is demolished, he coolly stated, “Italy's been a mess for a long time now, it would require a huge effort from everybody to get back in line. Come on, one of our prime ministers (back in the 70s/80s) probably made agreements with the mafia.” He went on to say that maybe there is not hope, but the hope for hope is there.

Gualtiero has not gone on a vacation in at least two years and only buys the absolute necessities—“no money/time for books, movies, holidays…”. When I asked how he copes, he
explained, “Italians are divided into two categories: the resigned and the ones who try to go on with their own strength, doing their best.” And when asked if he had hope, he chuckled and replied, “Hopes? Maybe our renown creativity will be enough!” In the tradition of the Davincis and Michel Angelos of the past, modern Italians will have to employ some world-class ingenuity and resourcefulness in order to remedy the structural and cultural collapse of their homeland.

In this paper I have explored many different ways in which Italian individuals, and in particular family members, are responding to and coping with the crisis in their nation, whether it be by prolonging the transition into adulthood, emigrating to find work, employing thrift and sacrifice to provide for their families, or all of the above. However, these phenomena are not at all specific to the people of Italy. Across Europe families and individuals are adapting similar coping strategies to manage their daily lives in the wake of the economic crisis. As Kathryn Kozaitis points out, in Greece young Thessalonikians have “found themselves in a state of double-liminality,” a concept she defines as “a continuum of dependence between youth and adulthood.” Like their Italian counterparts, these young people, “no longer able to afford independence, and with career plans shattered,” have had to return home to live with their parents (Kozaitis 2014). In Spain immigrant workers’ kinship networks are being torn apart by the rampant repossessions that brand the nation’s economic collapse (Narotzky 2012:635). Lack of trust in government institutions characterize the daily lives of all of the peoples already mentioned and more. The people of Spain, Greece, and Italy face social disintegration and cultural instabilities on a daily basis, and are constantly developing and utilizing coping methods and adaptation strategies to make sense of their new realities.

As is evidenced by my works cited, there is little to no published, anthropological material on Italian citizens and the crisis. Through pulling and analyzing these articles through
an anthropological lens, I have attempted to fill in at least some of the gaps missing from the anthropological repertoire. In analyzing the ramifications of the debt crisis, as Susana Narotzky suggests, “the time seems ripe for a new methodology and a different theoretical framework altogether.” Anthropologists, with “a strong tradition… of not taking things for granted, [and] of daring to ask obvious questions that are often responded [to] in surprising ways,” should fill this void in research (Narotzky 2012:636). Perhaps, through the aid of anthropological investigation, not only could we gain knowledge of the lived experience of Europeans, but also, through this knowledge, EU policy makers could begin to explore realistic and easily-implementable methods with which to aid the citizens of the supranational state.
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