

Room for More Creative Destruction

Reflections on Sicily

Some time ago, I spent some time in Syracuse, on the south-eastern coast of Sicily. A friend of mine convinced me that an excursion to the medieval centre of Noto was a must for all visitors to the region. He's a trusted friend so I ignored my usual suspicion against musts and caught a bus up in the hills. It didn't take long before I understood I'd made a cardinal mistake.

Fair enough, Noto is beautiful. The baroque architecture is largely intact and immediately sets you a couple of centuries back in time. When the sun gets low and yellow in the afternoon these buildings glow like a handful of gold carved into the barren hillside. It's just that Noto has no real life. Or if it does, they've hid it well. There's no smells of lunch cooking, no sounds of loud TVs or heated discussions about this or that. Nobody running late for work or coming back. Noto is an outdoor museum that survives only on the mercy on those who comes to fill their eyes and camera rolls with the splendours of life in Sicily the way it was, once upon a time, not what it is today – that's a much sadder vision.

I like life, so I shun places like Noto. By lunchtime, I had seen those sights I could handle and there was only the gastronomic section of the outing left. Almost anywhere you go in Sicily, that's bound to be a feast – a celebration of tastes, of olives, wine, pistachios and ripe tomatoes, and nearness to the soil that provided it all. But the thought of celebrating this at a red-and-white tablecloth with Germans at the table behind and Japanese at that in front, served by waiters that almost certainly, and understandably, would see me as passing trade, was so dismal that I was considering skipping the adventure and have an early dinner in Syracuse instead.

Lunch in a cave

I looked around me and spotted a newspaper-seller. I decided to give Noto a last chance so I walked up to him. He must have seen something resembling desperation on my face, because he carefully guided me down a set of stairs and around a couple of corners and pointed at the arched glass doors of what resembled the entrance to a cave.

Not quite sure what to expect, I stepped inside. It was indeed a cave – probably the basement of a house – or several houses judging by the size of it. The bar was in the middle of the room while the tables were set for lunch in a separate corner. The back of the cave housed a bookstore. When I had a closer look at the books, I was surprised to find an impressive selection of Scandinavian titles. I asked the staff, a young and trendy looking gentleman, what was behind their literary choices and the guy gave me the 'are you a bit stupid' look and pointed to how Scandinavian literature was the latest fashion.

I chose to have my lunch at the bar rather than at a lonely table, and was happy to discover that

the food was in tune with the ambience – use of local ingredients and (cooking) know-how, but in new combinations. It was what Joseph Schumpeter would have called creative destruction par excellence.

Let the numbers speak

'Creative destruction', or the transformation of an existing value into new, profitable product, is an essential part of entrepreneurship. Italy should have great potential in that sense. Existing values are plentiful, something Noto is but one example of, and there is a lot of creative talent around to do the work. In spite of that, Italy treats its potential recklessly. The Italian economy is in tatters and the outlook for recovery is grim. To make matters worse, the young and talented are leaving the country in increasing numbers each year, taking the hope for speedy recovery with them.

Why are they leaving, when their home country seethes riches and their National Bank could do with an extra hand? The World Bank/IFC Report 'Doing Business in Italy 2013 hints at an answer. The report places Italy on the 73rd spot (out of 185 countries) when it comes to 'ease of doing business'. In the category 'ease of starting a business' Italy is ranked as number 84. There are great differences within the country and, contrary to popular belief; the south does not always fare worse than the north. Starting a business is fastest in cities like Rome and Milan, where you're likely to spend some six days getting through all the procedures. That puts these cities at the level of Denmark and better than the European average (which is 14). ~~Yet in Naples, prepare for spending sixteen days on the same paperwork.~~ Milan and Rome might be faster, but they are wildly expensive. The cheapest place to start a business is in the southern port of Bari, but costs there are still far higher than the European average. The overall easiest place on the peninsula to start a business is in Catanzaro in the southern region of Calabria.

The discouraging scores influence the potential entrepreneurs' belief in the possibility of success. 42 percent of Italians responded that they thought they would have the necessary skills to start a successful business, but only 25 percent believed the conditions were opportune for a start-up.

I don't know what the young owners of the restaurant-cum-bookstore paid to open their cave, or how much time and energy they wasted in getting the paperwork done. I do know that they changed my impression of Noto already at the antipasto, and that it was an undivided pleasure to sit there and eat, chat and read while my fellow daytrippers lined up in front of the Cathedral.

I would have liked to spend more time (and money) in my new favourite place before heading down to the coast again, but I had to leave to catch the bus back. I drank out my wine, put my newly acquired books in a bag and advised them that Knausgaard's latest novel would supplement their Scandinavian collection, before I ran to the bus stop. Running was the word, the last bus left surprisingly early and deprived me not only of a last walk around town, but also of the chance to enjoy an aperitivo before heading down to the city.

The recipe

I doubt Matteo Renzi, the recently appointed Italian PM, will revise bus schedules in Sicily, but he may want to encourage local administrators to revise the costs and number of procedures needed for a business start-up. Above all, he needs to bring back the dormant Italian entrepreneurs' belief in the possibility of success, otherwise the southern European peninsula might just stop developing altogether and become like Noto: an outdoor museum that, with few, though notable exceptions, gave up real life to please the eyes of the visitor. Italy, frankly, deserves better.