

HOME IS WHEREVER YOU CAN FIND ONE

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Abruzzo used to be a growing Italian region that occupied a welcome but contrastive place in a previous world order. It was the home of manufacturing and high-tech industries that energized the Mezzogiorno economy. Development was significantly aided by the completion of a sophisticated series of highway and transportation links that connected mountains and valleys to developed urban areas. At the same time, Abruzzo managed to retain a lingering sense of a once more insulated landscape, a tourist haven whose main city, L'Aquila, came replete with winding medieval lanes, ancient buildings, and picturesque festivals that celebrated historic personages, saints, and an array of lasting local traditions. (1)

In memory as well were the area's episodic history of earthquakes and aftershocks, one series in 1915, another in 1980, after which efforts at rebuilding were undertaken. The earthquake of early April, 2009 appears to have brought similar efforts to today's devastation, helped along by the fact that concerned contributors are now able to participate in both mourning and recovery by the interconnected visual and textual nature of the cyber community.

These often personal contributions may be closely felt. The recent earthquake represents to many a lightning-speed, parallel microcosm of broader economic and social trends that include the sudden fragmentation of the global financial system and the decline of a central focus of identity. Specialists survey the extent of the human loss, and of infrastructural and architectural remains. Others, located far from the ancient hill top settlements of Mezzogiorno Italy, contemplate the ways in which cross-border considerations can be reconciled with local and national aspirations. Despair, unemployment, and homelessness. shine bleakly through both systems, though at an unequal tempo. The coming of a new world order has been pronounced during the course of economic summitry. At the local level, L'Aquila has been promised the advent of a "new town."

Historians remind us that both the human-inspired or natural decline of any given order should not be viewed as a solitary extinction event, but rather as a complex, elongated process that prompts the eventual emergence of new organizations and realignments. The late 19th and early 20th century shift from relatively isolated agrarian communities to factory towns and burgeoning urban agglomerations was a critical accompaniment to the rise of industrial inventiveness. So, too, was the spread of the telegraph, telephone lines, and transportation routes. which served to provide a sense of interconnectedness in a time of an otherwise agonizing change in social and political ties. (2)

Unlike today's sharp declines and shifts, those of an earlier day were played out against a backdrop of a heightened definition of national bureaucracy and identity. Analysts have noted that the current lack of a similar structuring on the global scene only serves to emphasize the difficulties of social realignments themselves.

Contrasts and conflicts abound: East and West, free trade and protectionist tensions, Wall Street and Main Street, old and young, all subjects and conditions that compete

for the attention of inquiry as well as for the availability of increasingly scarce economic resources. Perhaps as a still cautious outcome, a type of "back to the farm" movement has begun to appear just as has happened in previously unsettled periods. This seems a growing tendency among many who feel rootless in an era of disquietude, and who have gone on to retain, or to seek out, a special, local place with home-grown qualities.

The White House, now inhabited by a younger household, has decided to create its own vegetable garden, some of it organic, part of it not organic—without a trace of beets due to the fact that the President doesn't particularly care for them, but with the aim of providing neighbors, including children, with an education about the benefits of locally-grown produce (3) Thomas Jefferson was another political leader who delighted in bringing the past a bit closer to home as well. He reactivated ancient architectural designs and frequently enjoyed the comforts of his country estate with its classical columns and dome. For his last ten years, the president was inclined to use his garden at Monticello, the "little mountain" as a metaphor for the life of the mind, and for his own and his grandchildren's education. Here, Jefferson's flexible, adventurous intellect was tamed by more rigidified boundaries: two acres were precisely divided into 24 square yards, each yard with different plants attended to, including a variety of vegetables and herbs believed to contain medicinal properties. Balance and symmetry were sought after commodities, especially in the midst of the President's continuing struggle with the constraints of applying Enlightenment goals of freedom and independence to the realities of his own era's consistent evidence of human bondage. (4)

Jefferson delighted in his garden's fresh spinach and peas, apparently as strenuously as he seemed devoted to the idea that the agrarian way of life was the backbone of the country and should remain so for many years to come. He would probably have been devastated by the tumultuous urban and industrial age he never lived to see, though he might have welcomed the contemporary trend towards reconnecting countryside to city, largely through internet links that stress farming and food issues, exchanges, and interests. (5) Nevertheless, Jefferson, along with the many of his day who possessed an affective disposition to the rural, might have been confounded by our other contemporary attempts at seeking solace from turmoil on what many still perceive as the agrarian fringe.

Reminiscences of the Great Depression have brought back survival strategies of American families who, trapped in crowded areas, coped with hunger by traveling to the exurbs to pick seasonal berries, and who started their own chicken farm on any small, available urban space rather than visit the butcher they could no longer afford to pay. (6) In contrast, in today's recessionary climate, it is often the rural areas of Europe that require links to urban services amidst a growing poverty that has encroached on generations of farm to local market successes. Not only a link but also a lifeline is now provided by lone caregivers—medicine, help with transportation over unpaved roads and with antiquated household plumbing, a system of service delivery to those with already shrinking plots of land who have been joined by once urban-located residents and friends seeking a less expensive life. (7)

A less likely retreat from contemporary economic strains is now found in rural villages beyond the EU's border. In neighboring Central Asia a legacy of power plants and nuclear waste materials leeches steadily into soil and water, leaving agricultural residents with severe challenges to farming and health. Their social exposure to the

outside world, however, comes mainly in the form of a few atomic energy specialists from distant cities that are still somewhat dependent on the prospect of future agricultural clean-up and hoped for produce. (8)

Only a dream in the very north of Europe, where the ability to live off the farm fades rapidly in the face of the onset of steppe, tundra, and then snow and ice, can visitors find some semblance of refuge. (9) But it is visitors that trek that far north, not those in search of a seemingly unchanging, past experience. They come to view the reindeer herds and ranches, and a glimpse of an unfamiliar sun that appears infrequently in an icy arctic world. Before the tourists retreat to the warmer suburbs and cities of the south, they briefly get to meet the 250 strong population that was resettled there after a portion of Finland's northern regions was ceded to the Soviets. Here is an old "new town" that remains relatively isolated from the stresses of an unraveling civilization during a time before another, it is predicted, will come into being. According to the locals, reindeer are very wonderful, if not functional companions. In the midst of confusing woods, forest paths, and the pervasive cold, they know where their home is, and how to find it.

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- (1) Hankins, Nick. "Italy As It Used To Be." *The Guardian*, 4/15/2005. (2) Wiebe, Robert. *The Search For Order, 1877-1920*. New York, Hill and Wang (1966). Burros, Marian. "Obamas To Plant Vegetable Garden At White House." *New York Times Online*, 3/20/2009. (4) Crawford, Alan Pell. *Twilight At Monticello*. New York, Random House (2008). (5) Stone, Brad and Matt Richtel, "Forging A Hot Link To The Farmer Who Grows The Food." *New York Times Online*, 3/29/2009. (6) Wadler, Joyce. "Making Ends Meet In The Great Depression," *New York Times Online*, 4/2/2009. (7) Komuves, Anita, "Hungary: Lifeline To A Lost World." *Transitions Online*, 4/9/2009. (8) Najibullah, Farangis, "Tajikistan's Former Soviet Nuclear Sites Pose Threat To Nearby Villages." *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Online*, 4/8/2009. (9) Moring, Kirsikka, "Sapmi—A Pale Blue Winter's Dream In The Far North," *Helsingen Sanomat*, 1/17/2009.

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