



Poor But... Poor

The famous film by Dino Risi, *Poveri ma belli*, was made in 1956. Two more followed, composing a trilogy¹ in which poverty was explicitly mentioned in the titles but associated - unlike neorealist cinema - with the comedy genre. Italy in the 1950s was a poor country that had just emerged from the material devastation and destruction of World War II. The parliamentary inquiry of 1953 had indicated that “on average, the number of families in a state of poverty is 1,357,000, equal to 11.8 percent of the total; and those in disadvantaged conditions 1,345,000, equal to 11.6 percent. Thus, about a quarter of the Italian population appears to live in poverty.” These were dramatic data, but we were faced with a country that was in full reconstruction and on its way towards the boom and the economic miracle that will soon follow. A country that was still poor, but optimistic about its future.

The latest ISTAT survey (2021), shows that in Italy, there are 1,960,000 families in absolute poverty, equal to 7.5 percent of the total, and 2,895,000 families in relative poverty, equal to 11.1 percent of the total. Therefore, about one-fifth of Italian families live in poverty. Seventy years later, de-

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spite Italy being a developed and wealthy country, poverty remains a serious problem that affects many families and individuals, compromising their quality of life and putting their dignity at risk, with percentages not very different from those of the 1950s. The worrying fact is that in the last fifteen years, families in absolute poverty have steadily increased, to the point of doubling (there were 819,000 in 2005).

Poverty in Italy continues to be a complex problem that affects millions of people in different contexts and is concentrated in some of the most vulnerable social groups, such as youth, women, elderly, immigrants, and persons with disabilities. Moreover, these data do not represent the full extent of the problem, as there are other forms of deprivation and social exclusion that are not captured by official statistics. For instance, energy poverty, or the inability to pay for public utilities such as electricity and gas, is a widespread problem. Unlike seventy years ago, there is no economic boom on the horizon comparable to that of the 1960s. The dream and hope of moving up and improving have been replaced by the nightmare and fear of slipping down and worsening. Therefore, we can no longer speak of “poor but beautiful,” but rather of poor without any “but.”

Comprehending the causes of poverty is essential for developing solutions. Currently, millions of Italians live in poverty or are at risk of falling into poverty due to factors such as unemployment, low wages, job insecurity, and limited access to public services. Another factor that contributes to poverty in Italy is low education levels. People with low levels of education have fewer job and income opportunities, and are more vulnerable to unemployment and job insecurity. Additionally, a lack of education limits access to services and opportunities, preventing people from escaping economic hardship. If the causes of poverty are as described above, then the solutions, although not simple, should be equally clear: increase employment, increase wages, make jobs more stable, and increase education and access to public services. However, if the factors are many and inter-related, then the risk is like in Agatha Christie’s novel “And Then There Were None,” where in the end, there seems to be no culprit.

When the causes of poverty are analyzed or highlighted, it becomes a delicate and controversial issue. The causes not only indicate a set of factors but also highlight responsibilities on the part of certain individuals. As Brazilian Archbishop Hélder Câmara emphasized half a century ago, “when I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. But when I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.” The real problem is indeed to understand who is responsible for poverty and whether the proposed solutions are compatible with the current economic and social model, or



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whether it is precisely this model that creates growing and widespread levels of poverty. In this latter case, poverty would represent a structural characteristic of our society that can only be alleviated, but not definitively solved.

Oscar Wilde, however, provided us with an interesting argument against the

logic of charity. In “The Soul of Man Under Socialism”, the writer argues that charity degrades and demoralizes, does not eliminate the cause of poverty, but rather temporarily masks it: “They find themselves surrounded by hideous poverty, by hideous ugliness, by hideous starvation. It is inevitable that they should be strongly moved by all this... Accordingly, with admirable, though misdirected intentions, they very seriously and very sentimentally set themselves to the task of remedying the evils that they see. But their remedies do not cure the disease: they merely prolong it. Indeed, their remedies are part of the disease... The proper aim is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible. And the altruistic virtues have really prevented the carrying out of this aim. Just as the worst slave-owners were those who were kind to their slaves, and so prevented the horror of the system being realised by those who suffered from it.”²

As the writer and political activist Barbara Ehrenreich has pointed out, it is the poor who are the true benefactors of society: “When someone works for less pay than she can live on — when, for example, she goes hungry so that you can eat more cheaply and conveniently — then she has made a great sacrifice for you, she has made you a gift of some part of her abilities, her health, and her life. The ‘working poor,’ as they are approvingly termed, are in fact the major philanthropists of our society. They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for; they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be

shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high. To be a member of the working poor is to be an anonymous donor, a nameless benefactor, to everyone else.”³

The dossier of this issue is dedicated to poverty and, rather than focusing on its causes, factors, and solutions, it seeks to show us the different faces of people living in this dramatic condition. They are among us, we live with them every day, often without realizing how close they are to us. However, it is from this awareness that we must start to look for a possible solution. This is especially true for businesses, which are important actors in our economic and social model. Businesses must not only have the social responsibility to care for others, but also the courage to reflect on themselves and understand if, in addition to producing wealth, they also generate poverty.

In addition to the dossier on poverty, this issue deals with two topics of great interest in its two focuses: the first is dedicated to the PNRR, its objectives, its state of progress, and its critical issues; the second is dedicated to corporate governance. Enjoy reading!



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¹ Belle ma povere (1957) and Poveri milionari (1959).

² O. Wilde (1891), The Soul of Man Under Socialism, Italian translation: Il critico come artista. L'anima dell'uomo sotto il socialismo, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2015.

³ B. Ehrenreich (2001), Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By In America, Metropolitan Books, Italian translation: Una paga da fame: come (non) si arriva a fine mese nel paese più ricco del mondo, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2002.