

Where's Rudy?

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A cliché that went around New York City in the late 90's was that New Yorkers prefer their state and national governments liberal but their city government a little fascistic. These days the local preference seems to have shifted slightly towards plutocracy, but there was some truth in the old dictum. I never had much enthusiasm for Rudy Giuliani, finding repugnant his tolerance for police brutality. His revitalization of the city was largely due to the dot.com bubble during the Clinton years when New York's economy was awash with cash. His post-mayoral self-aggrandizement has only gotten worse, but he did get one thing right. He understood that the tolerance of petty crime leads to the abandonment of the streets by a majority of the people, which in turn makes the streets less safe and leads to more serious crime.

The message never made it to Perugia, or perhaps to anywhere else in Italy. When living in Rome decades ago, I was always amazed by the routine trashing of trains, buses and cars by soccer hooligans. When some of the worst offenders were caught, they would be "punished" by being forbidden from attending matches for a few weeks. It never dawned on anyone to hold the hooligans responsible for the damage they caused. Perugia is an old city. Its Etruscan walls still have five huge arched portals, most of them with their upper portions rebuilt in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century. Old places have always fascinated me. I went to the sixth oldest college in the United States and loved walking over the hollowed stone steps, worn down over centuries by the footsteps of students before me. When I first encountered Rome, the experience of walking past two thousand-year-old buildings in the heart of a modern city created a sensation difficult to describe but which has never left me.

It has to do with a connection to history and a sense of continuity. That feeling runs strong in all Umbrian towns and cities. It also intensifies my distaste for the disastrous sprawl on the outskirts of these cities, but seeing the growing abuse of a physical environment that records two thousand years of human history, the reaction goes beyond distaste. There is a serious drug problem in Perugia. The authorities say nothing can be done. Many drug dealers are arrested but 95% are back on the street within a few days. Syringes are freely sold in all pharmacies, with the undoubted advantage of limiting the spread of HIV and hepatitis among drug addicts, but what does it mean for the children playing, and the sanitation workers cleaning up, in the



The Arch of the Lilies, one of the five Etruscan portals in Perugia.

city's parks, where thousands of syringes are discarded? As students and residents all know, the steps of the Cathedral, about 50 meters from the central police station, and the front of the church next to the entrance to the old hospital in Monte Luce are among the most trafficked drug dispensing venues in Perugia. It seems that the police don't see it or don't want to be bothered. The plagues of graffiti and discarded syringes may not be causally related but they seem to live in symbiosis.

A current scandal in Perugia is referred to as T-red. In part of the ongoing drive toward the glories of privatization, the city contracted for the installation and administration of equipment that would photograph cars passing through red lights at selected intersections. The contractor then sent out summonses and collected fines totaling millions of Euros. Points were also applied to the car owners' drivers' licenses. After a flood of protests, an inquiry discovered that many of the traffic lights had been speeded up to go from green through orange to red in considerably less than the legally mandated time. Judges have thrown out the procedure, at least until the abuses are corrected, and while the politicians run for cover, restitution of the fines awaits the outcome of class action suits.



Vandals inside the walls

Instead of employing all those cameras to entrap and defraud motorists, the city fathers and mothers might have deployed those cameras in historic parts of the city to capture the artistry of the local vandals. The cost of such surveillance could probably be recaptured by assessing fines equal to, and in addition to, the not insignificant costs of repairing the vandals' handiwork. If the costs of maintaining the cameras prove excessive, the Comune could simply offer to pay a reward to anyone providing a photo of vandals in action leading to a conviction.

With the current proliferation of digital cameras and even cell phones that take pictures, the economic crisis could be turned to the advantage of the urban environment as bands of unemployed bounty hunters patrol the streets at night. No doubt there would be some public outcry. "Boys will be boys" is a common theme in a country where boys are boys until eligible for pension, and TV "intellectuals" will plead that youth without hope need to express themselves. Self-expression is wonderful and many people have learned to write and to paint in all sorts of environments, even while in prison. Let's just not confuse self-expression with the devastation of the shared public environment.