

Italy and Germany need new political narratives

by Florian Mussgnug and Andreas Jacobs

The political myth of Europe is more than a historical narrative. Europe, like any other supranational polity, depends on a surplus of emotional attachment: it requires shared stories that have the power to provincialize national identities and to galvanise new forms of allegiance and political action.¹ The coronavirus pandemic has starkly highlighted the enormity of this task. A month ago, when European finance ministers approved emergency assistance in the form of loans, via the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), political reactions were violent, especially in Italy. Similarly, Italian demands for debt mutualisation were met with hostility by many Germans. These affects have profound cultural roots.

In April, readers of Germany's bestselling tabloid, *BILD*, woke up to a striking headline: "Ciao, Italia! We will see each other again soon. For an espresso or a glass of red. On holiday, or in the local pizzeria". Espresso, vino, pizza: this alleged "declaration of solidarity" had little to say about Italy and much about German perspectives. Italian commentators reacted promptly, with a mixture of outrage and hurt. Political scientist [Gian Enrico Rusconi](#) accused *BILD* of condescending benevolence. [Corriere della Sera](#) called the article a hypocritical attempt to conceal Germany's political responsibilities and moral obligations. All interlocutors followed a predictable script.

German fascination with Italy is older than Goethe's *Italian Journey* (1816/17) and has progressively solidified in canonical cultural form. Similarly, many Italians have looked to Germany for a necessary counterpart to their own sense of national identity. Colour, passion and transience on one side of the Alps, competence, productivity and tedium on the other: such mirroring identities have played a crucial role since the Nineteenth Century. Ippolito Nievo, the famed literary voice of Italy's *Risorgimento*, confessed to a complex tangle of conflicting emotions. In his programmatic masterpiece, *Le confessioni d'un Italiano* (1858), he compared his homeland to the ephemeral beauty of a long summer evening. Italy, Nievo remarks, can only be understood by an Italian, but can only be loved by a foreigner, and particularly by those Northerners, who also appreciate the sombre charm of a cloudy moorland. The human mind, according to Nievo, can learn to admire the great achievements of the North, but the human heart will always long for the South.²

Readers of German literature may recognise such juxtapositions from Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1913), or may be reminded of Heinrich Böll's "Anekdote zur Senkung der Arbeitsmoral" (1963): a popular post-war satire of German efficiency.³ Italian writers have used the same stereotypes to hold up a mirror to their own nation. In 1958, the satirist Ennio Flaiano – best known outside Italy as Federico Fellini's screenwriter – visited Amsterdam and

¹ Chiara Bottici and Benoît Challand, *Imagining Europe: Myth, Memory, and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 20.

² Ippolito Nievo, *Le confessioni d'un italiano* [1867], ed. by Paolo Ruffili (Milan: Garzanti, 2005), chapter 6.

³ Heinrich Böll, "Anecdote Concerning the Lowering of Productivity" in *The Stories of Heinrich Böll*, transl. by Leila Vennewitz (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995), pp. 628-630.

noted that Italy, to the Dutch, meant nothing but textiles and whipped cream.⁴ Flaiano's contemporary, the novelist Guido Morselli, preferred Germanic first-person narrators, who could give voice to his scathing, (self-)critical views about the supposedly unteachable "children's republic" Italy ("bambino-crazia").⁵

Stereotypical identities and clichés have not lost their appeal in the Twenty-First Century. Even today, a post-apocalyptic novel set in Turin would struggle to convince German reader, just like a love-and-food story from Cologne might not appeal to many Southern Europeans. When it comes to Germany, Italians watch *The Lives of Others* (2006) or Edgar Reitz's *Heimat* trilogy (1981-2006), read Robert Menasse's political satire *The Capital* (2017) and are shocked by Jenny Erpenbeck's dark refugee novel, *Go, Went, Gone* (2015). The average German reader, on the other hand, views Italy through the prism of Andrea Camilleri's detective fiction or through the eyes of North American crime writer Donna Leon, whose Venetian Commissario Brunetti remains unknown in Italy. Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* (2011-14) topped bestseller lists in Germany, as did Roberto Saviano's *Gomorra* (2006). Both writers have given us contemporary masterpieces, of course, but also "typically Italian" tales of family, love and organised crime.

The Greek debt crisis should have taught Europeans that international collaboration requires understanding and mutual respect, not fictional mirrors. The coronavirus crisis shows that we still have not learned our lesson. Nobody wants to cure the Germans of their love for pizza, passion and prosecco. And nobody should talk Italians out of their fascination with *disciplina tedesca*. But let us be clear: the effectiveness of these century-old narratives, on either side of the Alps, stands in the way of meaningful collaboration, especially when they are manipulated by populists of all stripes. It is no coincidence that Germans won't trust Italians with money and that Italians don't trust Germans to be capable of compassion. As long as each country treats the other as a projection of its own desires and flaws, there will be no shared narrative. Europe deserves better.

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⁴ Ennio Flaiano, *Diario degli errori* (Milan: Adelphi, 1995), p. 93.

⁵ Guido Morselli, *Roma senza Papa: cronache romane di fine secolo ventesimo* (Milan: Adelphi, 1974), p. 17.