

# ***The Italian - German Relationship: The Role of Cultural Diplomacy in Europe***

By Dario Deserri

## **Premise**

“Bernard of Chartres used to say that we are like dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, so that we can see more than they, and things at a greater distance, not by virtue of any sharpness of sight on our part, or any physical distinction, but because we are carried high and rose up by their giant size.” (John of Salisbury)

John of Salisbury quotes here one of his masters and uses this anecdote in his “Metalogicon” (lit.: “to defend the logic”, 1159 AD), a strong defence of culture in its entirety and comment on the importance of tradition and history for modern man. Salisbury wrote these words in a phase of civil and cultural rediscovery of “ancient times”; an era that we might describe as a slow rebirth. Although Europe has changed in many ways, the relevance and reasoning behind the words of the writer and philosopher have not.

Indeed, we might see contemporary Europe as experiencing a “Middle Age” of modernity. Europe is culturally divided about what constitutes true European unity, on the effects of globalization, on the conservation of the “traditional” identities of its member states, and, not least, in the ongoing rivalry between East and West civilizations, for whom the central battlefield seems once again to be the old continent. Resources and energy are monopolized, forcing people to come to terms with a continued increase in the cost of living. The fate of the population depends upon the North American market, currently experiencing a deep crisis, and upon often distant, hermetic and complex international relations. The effects of excessive industrialization of the planet, exploitation of non-renewable energy, low dynamism within the energy sector

and shortage of research funding has made the environment a priority for the whole of humanity.

The questions thus arise: how are we to cope with all this? What are the potential solutions for Europe? What are the goals of the oldest and historical countries at a point of discussion about the position of the European Union? Will the individual member states concur within this unification? These matters are currently strongly debated. After the initial period of euphoria following the revolutionary advent of the single currency - a main premise for the unification - people started, so to speak, "coming to terms with reality".

Forming a European Union based on a simple copy of the "American model", one widely considered the most dynamic, modern and somehow winning against the rest of the world, would be impossible. Due to its long history, European civilization is continually faced with the task of bringing its numerous social models that stem from ancient civilization and its intellectual forms into the twenty-first century. This heritage is a burden at times, but also unique and unrepeatable; a delicate balance has been reached. This should never be forgotten.

"The lightning fixtures should be firmly in the ground. Even the most abstract ideas and speculation must be rooted in reality, in the field of things".

George Steiner, *The Idea of Europe*, Nexus Institute, 2005

## **Introduction**

These decisions will fall upon the members of this new entity and will depend on their close political, economic, and even cultural, ties; that is, on Europe's citizens. Without basic conviction and mutual understanding between nations and those living in Europe, the union is unthinkable, unpredictable and will be left to seal its own fate. We might try an approach on a smaller and more comprehensive scale that involves two countries that are crucial partners and supporters of the future EU: Italy and Germany. The two nations share a

history of recent division and unification that more ancient “state entities” like France, England or even Spain do not. Consequently, both have faced major difficulties identifying a unique model of national identity that encompasses the individual and the numerous ethnic groups gathered in “their” own nation (at both ends of the nineteenth century). This is clearly evident in Italy with her unsteady political actions and extremely fragmented and quarrelsome political horizon (hidden by the more stable governments of “Berlusconism”, but existing nonetheless). In Germany, differences and stereotypes about “Germans of West” and “German of East”, for example, are still consistent (Berliners often underline the “East roots” of Chancellor Angela Merkel). The mass media are not helping the situation. Even if it was useful at first to spread a common language in a national movement, the media will often convey stereotyped images that fuel conflict and cultural misunderstandings rather than detecting real differences of position.

Italy and Germany supported the idea of Europe as a unique entity before other nations, evidence of which is found in past scripts of Friedrich Nietzsche or Giuseppe Mazzini. As engaged political actors, Italians and Germans have both witnessed the first steps of European Community since its initial conception in the 1950s. Recent history illustrates that the two countries share a kind of common political passage: a process of unification at the end of the nineteenth century, allies during World War II, the fall of a Monarchy and the birth of a Republic, a strong presence of Soviet Communism, the founding of the German Democratic Republic (1949) in Germany and the powerful “Partito Comunista Italiano” in Italy (1921), which was deeply and directly linked to Stalinist Russia. On the other side of World War II, both countries saw a so-called “capitalistic” economic acceleration after the forced and necessary period of reconstruction under the control of the allies. The economic boom allowed them to flourish for almost two decades, and facilitated a period in which Italy and Germany again returned to an important and strategic position within the continent. To an extent, the reforming and restructuring of Europe during these decades was primarily focussed on these territories to prevent the re-emergence of the nationalistic movements that fuelled the Second World War with all its painful consequences. Accordingly there was also a call

for more close and compact relations between members, evident in Italy and Germany where there was a more open attitude towards the imminent establishment of the EU project than in other Europe countries that are traditionally more sceptical of a successful merge and unification of the continent.

Italian - German differences, however, remain plentiful. The first barrier is language. Then, the two nations share different positions on politics, economics, structures, social models and culture, sometimes opposing even when solid ties and tasks are formed together. Entrepreneurial tradition is strong and highly developed: on one side we have a giant economic network present all over the world, primarily rooted in the heavy manufacturing sector, on the other a small, but smart and flexible economy in moments of crisis. The latter is traditionally successful with exclusive and quality products and less so on the globalized business market. Though outwardly very different, I would not describe these two models as “rival” for the simple reason that the German and Italian industry models and internationally successful products are usually different and therefore not in direct competition.

### **The State of Political Relations**

The state of political relations between Italy and Germany from 1950 onwards could certainly be described as intense. Programmes of events, institutions, their structures and partners have established different activities, diplomatic visits and direct contacts to national policy which are ongoing and traditional. “The cultural bonds joining Italy and Germany are extraordinarily intense and have ancient roots. In this country (Germany), the ‘Istituti Italiani di Cultura’ network is comparatively the widest in the world, and its German counterpart, the Goethe Institute is equally as developed in Italy which serves as confirmation of good and strategic relations” (Antonio Puri Purini Il Sole 24 Ore 03/07/2008, see bibliog.).

Some have commented on the state of mutual contact and situation over the past few years. Journalists and intellectuals from both countries have expressed concern about the possible consequences of certain moments of tension. Gian Franco Rusconi, Director of the “Centro per gli Studi Italo-Germanici” of the Kessler Foundation, comments, “for a long time I have been telling my close friends, colleagues and researchers that relations between Italy and Germany are on the decline. The current situation is apparently reciprocal and not particularly notable. Yet close analysis of bilateral policy between the usual diplomatic contacts, amongst the economic sectors and indeed the images and models between our two countries imply a sort of uneasy alienation”. Stefan Ulrich, correspondent of the South German newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung in Italy explains, “First we have to separate policy and society. Actually the relationships between Italy and Germany are fewer than in the past if we consider political contacts. The Democratic Christians of CDU would correspond to the Christian Democracy of DC, whilst the communist party PCI regarded the SPD as its counterpart. There were traditional contacts due to the common experiences of dictatorships of Fascism and Nazism, and the same democratic answer after war”. Nowadays something has changed. Ulrich continues, “in Germany there is nothing comparable to Forza Italia, nor to a politician like Berlusconi. The Lega Nord party is not equal to the Bavarian CSU. Two political classes have lost their common point of view. This does not mean that Italian or German culture has significantly changed, but it is necessary to take this into account and not underestimate political tensions”.

These changes began in the 1990s: the end of “first republic” in Italy due to the political-financial impeachments of several parties, the revolution that sparked the fall of the iron curtain in Berlin and the consequent unification with East Germany, the birth of so-called “Berlusconism” in Italy and regained diplomatic access to the Middle East market, which directly involved Germany.

“Italy and Germany”, Ulrich believes, “are like an old married couple: they do not have any particular problems, but lack great passion. Europe has unified

Italians and Germans on the same level for decades alongside other kinds of partnerships. For this reason it is time to give new impetus to these ties, accepting recent proposals for different criteria of entry into the EU as the first step for realising this unification”.

## **The Economic Relationship**

"Germany and Italy have often been considered as those setting economic and social benchmarks with remarkable trade relations. Unfortunately these two countries do not know each other as well as their economic relations would suggest." It was with these words that assistant director of "La Stampa" Carlo Bastasin, launched the convention "Italy-Germany: A special relationship" (Rome, February 2000).

Since the 1990s, the profitable economic formula between Italy and Germany was able to cope with change and the consequences of national policy transformations, along with worldwide changes to financial and political matters. With the exception of the stagnation period in the mid 1990s, relations between Italy and Germany have always been a top priority. If we refer to the last ten years of statistical data concerning import-export activity, Italy and Germany were important mutual marketplaces in several sectors and products.

According to this analysis, Italy was the fourth biggest importer of German products in 2007 (64bn Euro). In the same year, export activity from Germany grew by 8.5 % (58bn Euro). On the other side of the coin, Italian products constitute 6.6% of the German import market. The report concerning merchandise exchange between Germany and Italy correlates perfectly; in 2007 German exports into Italy consisted of the same products that Italy exported to Germany. Interestingly, the Federal Office of Statistics confirmed that 2007 saw a notable increase in the import of Italian goods to Germany for the first time in a decade, which will go some way in progressively countering what was lost in the export slump of the 1990s.

The respective economic turnover of Italy and Germany does not indicate any particular problem, although it remains affected by the world financial crisis. Business partnerships are numerous and again complementary. It is important to underline that few investments in innovation and new technology are launched in comparison with the United States, where investment is competitive for the size of the market, the scope of research, and continual innovation: “ultimately, I see many aspects and perspectives that would be mutually beneficial in the respective economies, but there is still not enough good will to move in this direction” (Tobias Piller, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung).

## **Cultural Relations**

In the interview published on *Il Sole 24 Ore* of 3rd of July 2008, Italian ambassador to Berlin Antonio Puri Purini expressed his opinions on the state of Italian-German cultural relationships: “It is important to speak of the deep cultural ties and the historical roots that unify Italy and Germany, and the fact that in this country the net of ‘Istituti Italiani di Cultura’ is comparatively the most extensive in the world. Incidentally, the number of Goethe Institutes in Italy is equally widespread, confirming the role and strategic relations of culture in bilateral development”. Cultural accord and approval thus appear to be the healthiest tie between the two countries.

To cite recent examples from 2008, events and dates in both countries regarding promotion of image and culture, professional exchanges for young students and graduates, discussion forums, research about recent common history facts, literary festivals and awards, and museum exhibitions of ancient and modern art are released every week. On the cultural horizon, tourism plays a central role. Spain is still favoured by German holidaymakers, but according to the 2007 ITB statistics for Berlin, there was a notable decrease of German tourists in Spain (-2,3 %) whereas Italy welcomed more Germans (+ 2,1 %), two figures that are undoubtedly related and perhaps indicate a

shift back to Italy as the favourite destination for Germans. In 2007, 10% of Germans chose Italy for their holiday destination, an impressive quota that Italy has not witnessed for thirty years. Tourism in Germany is particularly successful in historical and culture sites/cities such as Cologne or Berlin (traditional destinations for Italians) whilst in Italy, Florence, Venice and Rome remain popular. Vast numbers of Germans are now also visiting famous seaside sites and the shores of southern Italy.

## **Cultural Diplomacy**

How might Cultural Diplomacy aid the general notion of Europe and improve cohesion between those countries rich in tradition and history, such as Italy and Germany? What is Cultural Diplomacy in effect? Is twentieth century history for Germany and Italy still too recent, too painful, to look back with objectivity?

## **Case Study: Promoting a Positive National Image Abroad**

In Italy, several political and media voices have expressed concern about a lack of positive representation of Italy abroad in the foreign national mass media, and the fact that Italian ambassadors are seemingly unable to control this. Over the past few years, both Germany and Italy have experienced financial and industrial collapse (Siemens) due to corruption and questionable partnerships with managers or politicians, involving businesses worth millions of Euros (Parmalat), but Germany was successfully able to isolate the incident without tarnishing the image of the entire nation: the perception of Germany abroad remains the same. Germany maintains its reputation with information or policy institutions as a country of discipline, honesty and rigour, whilst Italy is unable to hinder the propagation of negative stereotypes abroad, which often rely on distorted versions of the truth. "Strong emotional facts that comment on extreme positions, such as the recent rubbish strike in Naples, are unhelpful. They do not resolve any problems and they slowly destroy a positive image of Italians abroad, and consequently make it difficult to predict

how the idea of “Made in Italy” will develop. The activities of ‘Istituti Italiani di Cultura’ are not as effective as those of its counterpart institutions the Goethe Institut, British Council or ‘Cervantes’” (Riccardo Viale, see bibliog.).

Indeed, the Ambassador in Berlin himself (Antonio Purini) envisages a restructuring of this system to revitalise what already exists and to promote more investments in the sensitive and essential sector of Cultural Diplomacy. “We need intellectuals, provided by a strong, humanistic culture, to realise a sort of “circle of worship” to preserve our traditions, not just business managers focussed on economic balance. It is all the more imperative in moments of financial crisis. We will enforce this idea of a European Union based on multicultural ideas with ease, transcending every boundary”. (Antonio Puri Purini, Il Sole 24 Ore, see bibliog.).

### **Case Study: Art and Cultural Diplomacy**

Artists are the face of their country and often successful ambassadors. “Cultural diplomats” of their national sensitivities, they often speak a more direct and clear language than those in politics, media, business or traditional diplomacy. In the European Union, its common market and cultural institutions facilitate the movement of artists, encourage connections and international dialogue at various levels, and translate the works by providing information that allows for a deeper understanding about a community. Berlin, for example, is a traditional destination not only for Italian fashion artists such as Valentino or Armani, but also for famous architects and designers like Renzo Piano or Pininfarina. Germany is a constant point of reference for Italy, offering paradigms for cultural structures, culture promotion and museum management systems which are the most modern in the world: the “Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz”, numerous projects financed within the past few years for the Museum Island, and the innovations of Berlin’s New National Gallery are always enriched by the presence of Italian artists. This kind of contact facilitates communication and is the optimum way for a nation to present itself.

## **Case Study: Academic Programmes, Cultural Exchange and Bilateral Research**

Academic programmes for students abroad and research institutes create productive partnerships between two countries. Examples are rich in both Germany and Italy. “Erasmus” and “Leonardo” programmes (financially supported by the EU common market) now extend beyond Anglophone countries. These kind of grants allow for an extended period abroad and intercultural experiences which are then brought back home.

Further examples are private institutes and foundations like the “ITC” (Istituto Trentino di Cultura) of the Kessler Foundation, or the “Centro Universitario per la Documentazione e lo Studio delle Relazioni Giuridiche fra Italia e Germania” of Ferrara University, which establish connections between Italian-German professionals, journalists, or even university students with the aim of fostering deep bilateral knowledge and promoting publications, articles, cyclopaedia and research projects.

## **Conclusions**

The first task of our society will be to show future generations how to negotiate the legacy of our traditions and idiosyncrasies. This is what cultural diplomacy can do. Italy and Germany are countries with strong economic, political and social ties, however the risk of potential conflict and changes to this relationship - positive or negative - should not be underestimated. From the 1950s onwards, relations between Italy and Germany have been intense and yielding, but as seen above, this does not mean that problems do not exist or that this status quo is permanent. An analysis of these facts and an assessment of where cultural diplomacy may be employed with regard to these issues is a possible means, if not to solve conflicts, then to prevent repetition. It is imperative that we build upon the existing ties with the aim of improving mutual understanding, especially where, as with Italy and Germany, these ties have a strong historical tradition.

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