

Mezzogiorno without the mafia: Modern-day meridionalisti and the making of a 'space of backwardness' in eastern Germany

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Abstract:

Practices of spatial representation can be revealing indicators of particular brands of nationalized discourse. In this article, the prevalent use of a comparison between eastern Germany and the Italian Mezzogiorno by a specific set of German elites is examined. Anxieties about Germany's place in the European and global economies are accompanied by a spatial vocabulary that uploads these anxieties onto the ongoing project of German unification. Eastern Germany, painted as a homogenized 'space of backwardness,' is thereby made out as a key factor inhibiting competitiveness and modernization of the economy.

Keywords: Germany | unification | critical geopolitics | Mezzogiorno | nationalism

Article:

Introduction

'Italy will be that which the Mezzogiorno will be.'

(Italian patriot Giuseppe Mazzini, cited in Agnew, 2002, p. 65)

Will Germany be that which eastern Germany will be?

In the case of Italy, the Mezzogiorno's divergent development path has been a fixture of popular and academic geographical imaginations. There are terms both for the concept of attempting to understand the region's idiosyncrasies (meridionalismo) as well as the people engaging in such studies (meridionalisti) (Lumley & Morris, 1997). Writers such as Villari, Fortunato, Sonnino, and Putnam have been continually trying to understand why the Mezzogiorno has been left behind. The political scientist and anthropologist Edward Banfield, for example, came up with moral basis for backward societies ('amoral familism') using southern Italy as his example (cited in Gribaudi, 1997, p. 106). This paper is concerned with modern-day meridionalisti in Germany, who are involved in a project of spatial representation with certain parallels to the Italian case. 'Elites' is an admittedly broad category (Jones & Fowler, 2007). For the purposes of

this article, I am referring to the commentators on contemporary affairs, whose own analyses of the situation in eastern Germany appear in the media and whose viewpoints are frequently reproduced by other journalists. Special attention is paid to a prominent former politician, an economist, and a journalist-author, whose powers to shape discourse come from their affiliation with popular media. These elites use Italy and the Mezzogiorno as direct comparisons to Germany's eastern part. The paper argues that the shifting policies in 'building up the East' (Aufbau Ost) seen since roughly 2000 are accompanied by a politics of spatial representation in the German media and by a number of prominent political figures and public intellectuals.

Even a cursory overview of current state of affairs in Germany makes clear that unification is still prominent in public discussions more than 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Yet overcoming the post-1989 urge towards solidarity among Germans seems to require more than grave macroeconomic analyses, dry depictions of red ink on budget tables, or even political unrest over the sustained monetary sacrifice by western Germans who support financial solidarity through the unloved Soli (Solidaritätszuschlag: unity tax). Otherwise, these policies would long since have been abandoned. By appealing to a peculiar economic nationalism, particularly in western Germany, which developed after World War II, the elites cited here have sought to construct the reunification project as botched, and part of the German nation-state as a ward of the other, inhibiting the progress of the nation as a whole towards the goal of global competitiveness. This form of internal othering (cf. Jansson, 2010) helps to shape a nationalized narrative that, while certainly not universally accepted, nevertheless has certain normative consequences that are examined later in the paper.

By the statements examined of a number of prominent public intellectuals (mainly economists), former and current politicians, and media elites, an overwhelming consensus is revealed that only aggressive interventions (some of which have already occurred) will ensure that the fate of the Mezzogiorno is avoided in eastern Germany. As a way of grabbing attention, the comparison is a shrewd one, for, as chronic laggards go, Mezzogiorno is a textbook example in Europe. As a means of shaking the country of pre-1990 beliefs that they can master any challenge and afford any luxury— such as a trillion-plus euro unification – its effect resonates because of its unsavoriness: if we don't change, we'll end up like them, with all that being like Italy might entail.

There are both theoretical and empirical goals in this piece. Building on work in political geography on nation-building (Herb, 2004; Mac Laughlin, 2001), politics and modernization (Agnew, 2002; Agnew & Corbridge, 1995), and critical, constructivist geography (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Sharp, 1993; Werlen, 1993), this piece seeks to contribute to our understanding of how narrative (with particular emphasis on the media as vehicle) frames territorial understandings within a national state. It specifically documents highly unfavorable comparisons between eastern Germany and Italy's Mezzogiorno that were drawn by public intellectuals, former politicians, and media elites since the early 1990s. In an era of global competition between places, where favorable comparisons are often made by elites between their place and another,

even more flourishing, one (e.g. Silicon Valley), this is an example of a comparison at the other end of the spectrum and is directed towards a domestic audience. The problems in eastern Germany are an embarrassment to the successful areas of Germany, such as Bavaria and Hamburg. They are at least partly to blame for those areas not enjoying more economic success than they already do. But it is about more than simply uneven economic success; it also relates to a painstakingly reconstructed sense of national pride during the post-war era – pride in bootstrap economic recovery, the *Wirtschaftswunder*, and social solidarity – perceived as being tarnished by the costs of German unity.

Conceptual backdrop: national identity construction

As Mac Laughlin (2001, p. 27) points out in his historical-geographical study of identity construction in Britain and Ireland, academics and other intellectuals, as well as what he calls ‘newspapermen’ (which in contemporary times can be broadened to include purveyors of all sorts of mass media, as well as women), play significant roles in building the ‘big nation.’ While not easy to measure how big a role (or even what a big nation is), there seems to be broad agreement that the circulation of particular national ideals and their acquisition by average citizens is facilitated by national elites (see generally, Anderson, 1983; Brubaker, 1996).

Another idea worth highlighting is the role that ‘othering’ or the creation of an ‘us–them’ dynamic plays in national identity construction (e.g. Herb, 2004; Jansson, 2003, 2010). Such processes are most often documented in the establishment of national identity of the whole nation; far less work, by contrast, has been done on the internal othering within the borders of a single state and among the same ‘nation,’ in this case Germans (as problematic as such categories may be). Such a process is central to the contribution of this piece. While the impacts on national identities in polyethnic enclaves and places of large-scale immigration have been frequent subjects of inquiry in Europe and North America (Crang, Dwyer, & Jackson, 2003; Western, 2007), this case does not fit well with literature on migration, since the East Germans who stayed are neither immigrants nor expatriates. Perhaps the best parallel, ironically, is Italy, where a much longer history of post-unification internal strife offers insights into the politics of spatial representation. These will be explored later in the paper.

Couching the arguments of this paper in terms of identity politics and nationalism presents a methodological dilemma, as these topics carry with them considerable baggage in the German context. Plenty of evidence suggests not only that levels of identity with the German nation are particularly weak, but that they are becoming weaker as the society becomes more European and global in orientation. Surveys of German university students – a category of elites not examined in this paper – have found a high degree of ambivalence in terms of markers of national identity (46% refused to answer the question asking for an appropriate representative symbol for Germany) (Ezell, Seeleib-Kaiser, & Tiryakian, 2003, p. 293). The authors of this particular survey conclude that German university students are “[...] moving beyond the categorization of the nation-state and almost treating ideas of anything particularly national such as symbols or

geographic borders as inconsequential.” They optimistically interpret the results of their survey to mean that students view the nation-state as the inappropriate scale for addressing the real problems of the world (poverty, inequality, and injustice) (p. 296). The project of German unification, however, has been since its beginnings a thoroughly nationalized project (albeit in a bifurcated nation), where the German state has been largely content in going it alone and where the discussions of integration have been largely oblivious of goings-on in the EU or elsewhere.¹ The discursive practices regarding unification, therefore, involve assessments directed primarily towards a domestic audience, including certain ideals being held up as desirable. For external presentation, in the context of a global community, those types of representations have little relevance as reflected in the polls cited above.

The relevance of this discussion comes in how the nation relates to questions of economic development and spatial inequality, and post-communist European spaces are key sites in which to examine this (see, generally, Horschelmann, 2002). As sociologists Ezell et al. (2003, p. 281) have noted, studies of development issues too often neglect how questions of national identity and discourse profoundly influence approaches to development in a given place. Classical understandings of how humans identify with a particular chunk of the Earth's surface are being challenged by the multi-track pace of development happening in many advanced industrial economies as a consequence of globalization, and there is a geography to this (e.g. Massey & Jess, 1995). While global interconnections speed up development in some places, simultaneously other places' inability to link in and compete becomes more acute (Slater, 2003). The active involvement of governments in addressing uneven spatial development is diminishing (Amin & Thrift, 1994). The vast number of entryways into the overarching question 'What does globalization mean for national identity?' certainly also includes the question of how different development tracks within a nation-state challenge an extant unified sense of identity or inhibit its further development. Germany, in spite of its collective national identity being retarded by the horrors of the twentieth century, still provides lessons in this regard.

The role of communication in making places

Communication practices, such as written and spoken media as well as academic writings, serve to establish the commonplace, everyday spatial vocabulary of place (i.e. East Germany), which is frequently accepted *prima facie* as reference points so that the discussion can move on to 'real' issues/prejudices/solutions (Schlottmann, 2003). In the case of Germany, particularly, the tension is quite evident between the territory of the unified nation and the political culture projected thereon. In his work at the intersection of place and politics in Italy, John Agnew is particularly concerned with moving us beyond the rather limited scope of many political studies, which he argues treat national political space as homogeneous canvases for the study of 'rational actors, political culture, and multicultural models of political action' (Agnew, 2002, p. 217). As in Italy, another country where contemporary politics is profoundly affected by a past unification, Germany's domestic political discourse cannot be separated from its politics of place, and, since 1990, that politics has largely centered on differences between East and West.

Following on the previous discussion, a key assumption underlying this paper is that internal differentiation within a state is an important avenue towards understanding nationalism. Unlike traditional 'state nationalism,' whereby the whole territorial home of the nation is exalted, what is at play in elite discourse in Germany involves particular characteristics drawn from the post-war past. These characteristics are primarily associated with West Germany. Nationalist discourse associated with internal othering also differs significantly from substate nationalism, which usually manifests itself in irredentist and separatist movements (definition of 'nationalism' in Johnston, Gregory, Pratt, & Watts, 2000).

Germany is neither the site of unusually high levels of national pride in a conventional sense (Blank, 2003), nor of strong substate separatist movements of the sort one associates with Spain (Basques) or the United Kingdom (Scottish, Welsh). What is present is a palpable tension between, on the one hand, a painstakingly cultivated image primarily associated with West Germany (social market economy, 'Made in Germany,' etc.) and, on the other, post-unification malaise. The relevant question in this paper is not whether the complex problems associated with rebuilding eastern Germany are to blame for whatever difficulties face the country as a whole, but how the perception of such a causality is shaped.

Gaining access to National identity construction

So how do we know any of this? The great challenge in any analysis of identity and nationalism is assessing where certain constructions of the national originate, how they are transferred, and how and why they are picked up. As the field of critical geopolitics has argued, the use of language is an important point of departure. Yet constructing place, as Guntram Herb reminds us, is not merely about abstract linguistic formulations floating around in space; these formulations are directed towards concretely bounded spaces. It involves dialectic between the narrative and the material (Herb, 2004). My highly condensed discussion of these issues can be prefaced by a couple of guideposts: first, investigating human agency should be central to work on nations/nationalism. Second, the mechanisms and strategies that make possible the 'social process of reification' of a nation are fundamental to understanding nationalism (Thompson, 2001, p. 20). This is by no means easy; such narratives of the nation are most often 'subliminal' to the daily lives of those living in the place in question and frequently go unnoticed (Thompson, 2001, p. 28).

A conventional reading of national identity in contemporary Germany might assume a relatively uniform understanding of what being German in fact means – that when the two Germanys became one, a latent sense of oneness was simply reactivated. It would be incorrect to discount completely such an account, but the reality is much more complex. The two Germanys developed distinct senses of national belonging, which in practice overlapped very little as the two states had completely separate educational curricula, administrative structures, media, and literatures. This is in part reflected in the fact that nearly two decades since the Berlin Wall fell, unique senses of identity have not completely faded away. In the German Democratic Republic

(GDR), beginning in earnest in the 1970s, the country's status as a completely separate socialist state was constructed in textbooks, maps, and other media (Herb, 2004; see also Hörschelmann, 2001). The shared identity associated with common experience, shared values and traditions persists in the eastern part of the country, and on top of this is a continued sense of not feeling comfortable in the dominant culture coming from the west (Ezell et al., 2003, p. 288). The phenomenon of Ostalgie (nostalgia for the East) is illustrative here (Boyer, 2006). Commonly cited examples of Ostalgie include the film *Goodbye Lenin!* and the seemingly banal debate over which figurine (Ampelmännchen) should appear on crosswalk signals in places with eastern pasts such as Berlin and Dresden: the whimsically plump, and arguably more effective, GDR version, or the sterner, slimmer, purposeful-looking western variant.

In the West, meanwhile, pride in the nation, to the extent that it did exist during the post-World War II era, was rooted largely in economic factors (or cultural traits associated with industry): 'hard work,' 'prosperity attained,' 'diligence,' and perhaps above all the key symbol of the German economic miracle, the Deutschmark (Kaelberer, 2005). The euro, introduced in 2002, is widely viewed as the low-inflation, strong currency, carrying on the baton of the old D-Mark. As suggested by the Historikerstreit in the 1980s, West German intellectuals and average citizens alike were conflicted over what – if anything – was worth salvaging as a symbol of the nation. From this debate arose Jürgen Habermas' provocative discussions of 'D(eutsche)-M(ark) nationalism' and 'constitutional patriotism.' He suggested that universal Western values could be embodied by the tangible Grundgesetz, and this, rather than some elusive cultural trait, might form the gel that held the Germans together as a nation. However one might assess all of this, of primary interest here is how identity differs between the western and eastern parts of the country. Findings in political psychology suggest that individuals in western Germany have a stronger collective (national) identity than in the East based in part on pride in the welfare state and other post-war accomplishments, and, importantly, that their 'status' is threatened somewhat by unification with the economically weaker East Germany (Blank, 2003).

Media as purveyors of national identity

The analysis I have undertaken focuses on pronouncements by elites. Media such as newspapers and popular books are the primary vehicles for such statements. Much work has been done in geography during the last decade-and-a-half that examines the role of the media in constructing particular geographical understandings. The mass media is implicated in shaping and disseminating understandings of the world (Dalby, 1991; McFarlane & Hay, 2003; Sharp, 1993). Jason Dittmer's examination of newspaper portrayals of NATO and EU enlargements and their relationship to the symbolic shape of 'Central Europe' calls into question territorially static conceptualizations of macro-regions. These studies hold in common the view that objective positivist social science is inherently problematic and space isn't to be viewed as simply a set of Cartesian coordinates filled with stuff.

Critical geopolitics studies strive to theorize without giving in to the temptation to create universal theories (Ó Tuathail, 1996). Drawing on this body of literature, a compelling metaphor for the role that textual or spoken descriptions of geography frame how people understand the world is that of ‘geographs.’ The word alludes to the fact that ‘geo-graphing’ originally meant the active writing of space in the function of imperial projects (Ó Tuathail, 1996, p. 2). A critical geopolitics pays especial attention to the ways in which particular spatial scripts make reality, and how elites’ geographs (such as maps or quotes carried in a newspaper) contribute fundamentally to the ways people understand geography. Therefore, elites are able to exert a certain amount of influence through such narrative devices (Herb, 2004, p. 143). At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that recent scholarship has contested an ‘agency-centric’ privileging of elites in framing discourse (M. Müller, 2008), and indeed the extent to which consumers of such textual narratives accept their arguments (Dittmer & Dodds, 2008).² The purpose of this paper is not to quantify the actual impact of these narratives, and how they trickled down to the public, but rather suggest how this particular brand of ‘internal othering’ (cf. Jansson, 2010) shapes a certain oppositional binary in what, at least in aspiration, is a ‘national’ identity. Other studies have documented the myriad ways in which particular geopolitical understandings can influence policy decisions. The next section will examine how this is relevant for the case of eastern Germany.

Background on German unification

German unification is one of the more thoroughly documented world events of the late twentieth century. Perhaps inevitably, the interpretation of events is highly contested. The nature of the controversy is multifaceted, but one important element involves whether this event represented a revolution from below (in East Germany) that resulted in a merger of two, more-or-less equal states into a ‘natural’ single one, or whether it was in fact an overthrow by the West. Grabher (1994, p. 177), for example, has written that only ‘half a revolution’ took place, because East Germans played no role in creating the new institutions, and that the ‘mere cloning’ of West Germany led to a ‘subject-less society’ (quoting Häussermann, 1992).

During the course of the 1990s, as the post-unification hangover wore off, recriminations came from both sides. The ‘colonization’ by the West as viewed from the East is typified by the oft-heard *Besserwessis* (‘know-it-all westerners’), while from the West (and in much of the West-controlled media) there was a sense of disbelief at ungratefulness of the *Jammerossis* (‘whiners from the East’). More seriously, the topic of Germany’s competitiveness began to assume a central position in the public discourse, symbolized by the so-called ‘Standortdebatten’ (translated inelegantly as the ‘location debates’) (Brenner, 2000; see also Hickel, 1998; Jeffery, 1999; Miggelbrink & Redepenning, 2004). Foremost on the minds of those involved in exchanges on the subject was whether Germany, with its generous social welfare model and concomitant high wages and taxes, could remain both the world champion of exporters (*Exportweltmeister*) and a competitive site for attracting highly mobile global capital. Along these lines, Miggelbrink and Redepenning (2004) have documented media references to the

Standort Deutschland during the late 1990s as a window into spatial schemes which furthered neoliberal reforms being promoted by the state during that period.

A bevy of supply-side reforms (cutting corporate taxes, relaxing labor markets, etc.) under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder of the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) in the late 1990s and early 2000s were arguably an outgrowth of this debate; they were consistently sold to the public as responses to Germany's lack of competitiveness and the need to rouse the lumbering German economy (symbolized by the billboard featuring former Federal President Roman Herzog exhorting: 'A jolt must be sent through Germany! "What are we waiting for"?') (Miggelbrink & Redepenning, 2004, p. 575). Yet there remained unification, about which plenty of venom was being exchanged in various election campaigns and on the editorial pages of newspapers, but for which few concrete policy solutions had been offered. Perhaps inevitably under the circumstances facing the German economy in the mid- to late-1990s, the East began to be portrayed as a drag on the future chances of post-war West Germany's Wirtschaftswunder, and had some asking why the east had not yet become a 'tiger region' in the EU comparable to Ireland (Harding, Jakš, van Paridon, & Szomburg, 2002; U. Müller, 2005). This was before the global recession tamed economic tigers in Europe and elsewhere and substantially slowed Germany's export economy.

Solidarity called into question

The previous description hints at cracks in the nation-political ideals of a unification project rooted in solidarity of Germans. Policies pursued in the initial phase of unification under then-Chancellor Helmut Kohl were rooted in this sense of solidarity and the belief that the eastern half of the country should be lifted up based on a common past and shared characteristics ('we are one people'). Under the mantra of one Volk, eastern Germany became the site of the largest project of regional wealth transfers in history over such a short period of time, with over 1.5 trillion euros in public funds spent since reunification in 1990. This was occurring during a period when the luxury of flush public coffers provided by export-fueled growth since the 1950s was being challenged by the realities of an increasingly competitive, deregulated global economy.

The first 15 years of unification were characterized by a combination of (1) supply-side upgrading of a generic nature (cf. Amin, 1999), (2) extending western German social safety structures to the East, and (3) funding perquisites to individuals and companies wishing to invest capital in the East. In terms of the first, monies were expended according to priorities such as upgrading the transportation infrastructure, bringing educational facilities up to Western standards, funding renovations of the large, dilapidated, pre-war housing stocks, and subsidizing businesses' capital investments. Most important in the context of this paper, the funds were expended fairly evenly across the territory of the former East Germany, which partly explains why the project has cost so much. The legacy of West Germany's spatial Keynesianism, a tradition of promoting the establishment of 'equivalent living conditions' (gleichwertige

Lebensbedingungen) throughout the Bundesrepublik, was extended to the east in 1990. Spatial Keynesianism was enshrined not only in law (Raumordnungsgesetz – ROG of 1965) but also in the Basic Law (Grundgesetz), Germany's provisional constitution (Brenner, 2004, p. 142). That this tradition was coming under intense scrutiny is perhaps best illustrated by former Federal President Horst Köhler in a magazine interview:

Question: Shouldn't we 15 years after unification muster up the courage to tell people in places like Mecklenburg-Vorpommern [relatively poor, sparsely populated state in eastern Germany] that no industry is going to locate there?

President Köhler: You can't seriously make such a prognosis. But independent of that, there were and are currently large differences in living conditions throughout the Republic. [They exist] from north to south and from west to east. When you want to even them out, you cement in place a state based on subsidies [zementiert den Subventionsstaat] and leave the young generation with an untenable debt load. We must move away from the subsidy state in order to give people freedom to realize their ideas and initiatives (“‘Einmischen statt abwenden” Interview with Federal President Horst Köhler,’ 2004, my translation)

Given Germany's tradition of spatial development policy, these words cemented in place a fundamental shift in the social market economy as it had evolved post-1945.

‘Mezzogiorno ohne mafia’

Amid an environment of neoliberal restructuring in much of Europe and the West, spatial Keynesianism was increasingly unpopular among key subsets of political, business, academic and media elites in Germany in the late 1990s and 2000s. One can identify four recurring types of representation, which are summarized here.

First, there is what could be referred to as the ‘chronic dependency’ narrative. Under this category, the region is painted as being perpetually dependent on western Germany and the European Union for transfers, without which the local economies would allegedly be devastated. There are many variations of this, but they typically revolve around the lack of prospects for transfers to end, such as ‘Eastern Germany will remain for many years a transfer- and dependency economy’ (Hickel, 1998), or an engrained mentality of dependency: [Subventionsmentalität] (e.g. Müller, 2005).

Second, there is what could be referred to as the ‘wasteful’ narrative, which documents and criticizes public spending on infrastructure projects with no real lasting benefits and is furthermore wasteful, lavish, and haphazard. While eastern Germany enjoys highly subsidized granite rail platforms, swimming pools, golf courses, and thatched-roof toilets at the beach (Berg et al., 2004), western German infrastructures languish. Few put finer a point on this argument than the editor-in-chief of Financial Times Deutschland, Christoph Keese, in 2002:

‘East Germany is for the West as expensive as the military is for Americans—with the difference that weapons expenditures are investments’, whereas a majority of the German east-west transfers are consumed and thus wasted. (Keese, 2002)

Third, the problems with eastern Germany are presented as being a ‘drag’ on the whole of the country. In the mid-2000s, transfers were commonly painted as threatening Germany's position as an economic powerhouse (e.g. Berg, 2004)

Fourth, there is an ‘undifferentiated’ narrative, which is intended to call attention to the geographically indiscriminate nature of policies and the need for concentrating resources in favored places. False notions of a ‘level-playing field’ should give way to a more realistic vision of ‘growth poles and economic lighthouses,’ according to Michael Rogowski, president of the Federation of German Industries (BDI) (Scheidges, 2003). The ‘watering-can principle’ [Giesskannprinzip] of subsidies should give way to strengthening strengths, according to many politicians during this time period (Gillmann, 2001).

The significance of these ways of portraying eastern Germany is that they serve to paint the area as a spoiled child or a hapless addict, as in this characterization by the journalist Uwe Müller:

In spite of many billions [of euros], which has long since grown to a sum over a trillion, the East is still not able to sustain itself – half of a country is dependent on constant infusions of money ‘just like a junkie depends on the needle.’ (U. Müller, 2005, p. 16, my translation and emphasis)

Personifications such as these, so the intended effect, should be seen as little deserving even of sympathy, much less solidarity.

This is where the comparison with the southern part of Italy is instructive. Such a comparison is intended to suggest that if drastic action is not taken, Germans will have a sub-performing region on their hands for a century or more, like the Italians with their Mezzogiorno. Given the frequency with which the Mezzogiorno allusion has been made by a particular set of elites, such usage seems to resonate with the contemporary political logic among nearly all mainstream political parties and across geographical space within Germany. An important question, difficult to answer, is to what extent such narratives contribute to the political impulse eroding the solidarity shown towards eastern Germany since 1989.

The Mezzogiorno metaphor

With the Mezzogiorno diagnosis, east Germany is classified as a secular development laggard, whose economic, societal and political dispositions and structures effectively rule out its catching up with west Germany. Instead, [the region] can be assumed to show not just an absolute disparity in terms of income and employment, but also a relative gap [that will continue to grow larger] and a long-term dependence on subsidies. (Heilemann, 2005, p. 505, my translation)³

The Mezzogiorno encompasses roughly the southern half of Italy, below Rome and including the island of Sicily. Despite massive transfers of wealth from northern Italy, the region has not been transformed into an economic miracle region. My primary purpose here is not to dispute the existence of parallels in economic structures or levels of ‘dysfunctionalism’ between these two areas, but rather to understand better what purpose such a comparison serves to those making it. Here I briefly cover some of the characteristics of both places that give rise to such frequent comparison. In Italy, the ‘Southern Question’

Evokes a powerful image of the provinces south of Rome as different from the rest of the peninsula, above all for their historic poverty and economic underdevelopment, their engagement in a clientelistic style of politics, and their cultural support for patriarchal gender relations and for various manifestations of organized crime. (Schneider, 1998, p. 1)

The similarities to eastern Germany extend back to similar beginnings: in both cases, as unification was pursued, the norms, regulatory system and currency of the more advanced region were applied to the ‘less developed’ region, including redistributive mechanisms (Heilemann, 2005, p. 508). In both cases, the wealthier ‘half’ was instrumental in pushing for unification at the outset, and was later where voices expressing regret for the decision to do so were loudest. Italy in its post-unification, industrializing heyday serves only limited utility in comparison with Germany post-1990, although as Tarrow (1996, p. 394) has pointed out:

Like the merger of West and East Germany 130 years later, [in Italy] a stronger, richer, more legitimate regime conquered a weaker, poorer, more marginal one, inducting its residents into political life through the tools of patronage, paternalism, and the power of money-and rubbing it in by sending in commissions of experts to shake their heads over their backwardness.

Moreover, both countries are haunted to some degree (Germany arguably more so) by legacies of fascism, which causes them to ‘lack confidence in a national mission’ and take a ‘subordinate position within international politics’ (Agnew, 2002, p. 4). Unlike Italy, there has not been the emergence in Germany of a powerful political party comparable to Lega Nord (Northern League) that is premised on stark opposition towards underwriting continued transfers. Lega Nord is generally seen as a reaction by northerners against the persistent transfers to the south; it promotes instead northern exceptionalism as manifest through values (entrepreneurship, hard work), which are supposedly lacking in the South (Agnew, 1997). Also, the culture of clientelistic politics – prevalent in many parts of Mezzogiorno – is not evident in eastern Germany. Another important difference – a fact conveniently ignored by proponents of this comparison – is temporal: the unification of the north and south of Italy occurred in 1861 (with the entire political process completed by 1871). Yet even this fact, which could be used as convincing evidence that what Germany has accomplished in less than two decades of Aufbau Ost should offer great hope while cautioning for continued patience, is instead used as a sign of the intractability of the East German problem in the medium to long term (Agnew, 1997, p. 510).

Critics ask why there is no east German ‘tiger region,’ such as Ireland, in place of the Mezzogiorno-like sponger (e.g. von Dohnanyi & Most, 2004).

It was not until the early 2000s that the Mezzogiorno trope came to occupy public discussion through frequent popular media references, but even during the 1990s a number of economists had effectively presaged the discussion (Boltho, Carlin, & Scaramozzino, 1997; Hallett & Ma, 1993). It was the former West German politician Karl Schiller, federal economics minister and finance minister during the late 1960s and early 1970s, who first forcefully warned about what he saw happening with unification in a book published shortly before his death in 1994:

Following the union of currency, the economic system, and welfare state and the consummation of political unity of Germany, we now find ourselves deeply involved in a tedious, often hopeless-seeming, often very painful process of coalescence of both parts of the country. [...] One could be forgiven for thinking that the New Federal States were marching towards a structurally weak economic state of affairs resembling that of the Italian Mezzogiorno. (Schiller, 1994, p. 20, my translation)

Geographically, Schiller predicted there would be islands of productivity ‘surrounded by a large reserve army of unemployed’ (Schiller, 1994, p. 62), and this state of affairs

[...] would be the opposite of real integration – a social structure without any meaningful, vibrant, and expanding industrial life. The whole thing would be a modern German variant of the Mezzogiorno. (Schiller, 1994, pp. 85–86)

Clearly, in the view of those highlighted in the following subsections, Schiller's prediction came to pass by the early 2000s. For purposes of illustration, I have selected three prominent Germans – a politician, an economist, and a journalist – and analyzed texts from them relating to the process of rebuilding eastern Germany. The analysis then turns to the replication of this comparison in the media.

Helmut Schmidt

While not the originator of the comparison, former Federal Chancellor Helmut Schmidt has perhaps been its most frequent proponent. A one-time employee of Karl Schiller (the man quoted above) in the Hamburg city administration, Schmidt went on to be Chancellor from 1974–1982. He, like his former boss, is an economically liberal member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Even in his 90s he is still a prominent commentator on contemporary German affairs, using the post as co-editor of the influential, intellectual weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* as his main platform for commentary. Like other prominent Hamburgers such as Schiller and Klaus von Dohnanyi (former SPD mayor), the problems of unification are a frequent subject of his public speeches and written work. There is a fair number of consistencies in the tone and tenor among these three on unification, but Schmidt goes perhaps furthest in linking the potential for a permanent Mezzogiorno-like state of affairs in the East with the very viability of German

democracy in the future. Should the shortcomings of Aufbau Ost not be addressed, '[...] then we'll have a toned-down Mezzogiorno without the mafia in the former GDR. Economically, Germany can perhaps afford that, but politically? There I have my doubts' (quoted in U. Müller, 2005, p. 29, my translation and emphasis).

In a 2006 speech to fellow Social Democrats, he again laid out in strong terms the stakes of allowing eastern Germany being allowed to become a Mezzogiorno. Germany's welfare state, 'the greatest cultural accomplishment we [Germans have] brought into being in [the] disastrous 20th century,' will also be threatened:

We cannot allow it to collapse. But to [prevent this from happening], one needs the courage to take the necessary steps of adapting it [to current conditions]. If the welfare state were to collapse – and it would suffice if the people believe that it is collapsing – then democracy itself could be battered about too. (Schmidt, 2006, p. 9)

Allusions to the past are not uncommon in politicians' speeches in Germany, but alluding to the fragility of democracy and suggesting it stands to suffer with the chain of events he describes, beginning with the Mezzogiorno comparison, is particularly provocative coming from a socialist speaking to other party faithful.

Hans-Werner Sinn

Hans-Werner Sinn is one of Germany's most cited economists and president of the Ifo Institute in Munich. He is a public intellectual, with hundreds of newspaper articles written about and by him, and frequent guest appearances (200 +) on radio and television programs.⁴ His style of presentation is piquant and provocative, particularly on the necessity for neoliberal reforms in Germany (i.e. book titles such as *Can Germany be Saved?*). The think tank he leads, Ifo, has no real equal in terms of scholarly production in Germany: more than one-fourth of all journal articles coming from researchers in German research institutes appearing in international peer reviewed economics journals.⁵ In a country where intellectual roundtables are taken seriously and are well-attended, his is a familiar face in policy circles on all sorts of economic questions in Germany.

Sinn appears to have become enamored by the Mezzogiorno comparison in the early 2000s, when he began to promote the thesis with vigor both in the popular media and in academic journals. On the same day in 2000, he and a co-author published two different articles on the subject in two of the most widely read newspapers in Germany, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, consistently the second and third most read papers in the country (behind only the tabloid *Bild-Zeitung*). A few extended quotes help to illustrate the authors' belief in the Mezzogiorno as an appropriate geographical metaphor.

Along the Elbe [River] a second Mezzogiorno has emerged, because there, as in Italy, the wage negotiations were handled above the heads of local employees and employers by a third party.

And as in Italy, the solution is sought in the form of government transfers as compensation for economic disadvantages, instead of addressing the causes of the problem. Thus a skewed incentive system is created, to which the participants all too easily become accustomed and which is hardly correctable. (Giersch & Sinn, 2000b, my translation)

Meanwhile in the other article, slightly different text expressed the same overall message:

One can't help but make the comparison with Italy's Mezzogiorno problem. For years wages in southern Italy were dictated by unions and industry groups in the North, without attention to the different conditions from place to place. They were set at a level that overburdened the Mezzogiorno. The result was a 'wait-and-see' attitude by investors and a high level of unemployment, which required transfer payments by the state in order to compensate. The difference to the New Federal States [of eastern Germany] is evident: Here you don't have the sun making the unwanted vacation worthwhile. (Giersch & Sinn, 2000a, my translation)

The only difference then, according to these economists' estimation, is that the climate in the Italian Mezzogiorno is much nicer, although it is unclear whether they are suggesting that unemployment in Mezzogiorno is high because the nice climate causes people to want to stay home.

A few months later, a more formalized version of the thesis entitled 'Two Mezzogiornos' appeared in an Italian public finance journal. The purpose of this co-written article was to make a serious case (using a modified neoclassical model) that there are now two Mezzogiornos: one in Italy and one in Germany.

The Italian Mezzogiorno is a veritable transfer economy, but it has found its master with its German counterpart. In the Italian Mezzogiorno every seventh Lira spent comes from the north, but in east Germany every third Deutschmark comes from the west. (Sinn & Westermann, 2001, p. 36)

Sinn and Westermann argued that transfers in Italy and Germany simply encourage laziness:

In the case of the two Mezzogiornos the various types of idleness – from retirement via sickness and unemployment to laziness – which are financed with the social transfers are similar to the occupation in the resource sector, and the appreciation shows up in the increase of the wage rate and the prices of land and non-traded commodities resulting therefrom. These effects may perpetuate the problems [...]. (Sinn & Westermann, 2001, p. 46)

By encouraging idleness through social security, the Germans (as the focus of the article) have unwittingly created their own Mezzogiorno. This line of reasoning is repeated in subsequent newspaper contributions and interviews. In an interview several years later, Sinn made the unsavory historical allusion to the Gleichschaltung, a word most commonly associated with the Nazis' forced-coordination of policies throughout the Reich, in order to describe the means by

which unification in the Italian and German cases attempted to integrate two vastly different economies by force, and why such policies will not bear fruit (Mussler, 2004).

Uwe Müller

In 2005, Uwe Müller, the New Federal States reporter for the conservative daily Die Welt, published the polemic *Supergau Deutsche Einheit*; the book's title translates as 'Absolute Worst Case Scenario German Unity,' referring to the technical term for the worst possible on a scale of nuclear accidents (i.e. the Chernobyl accident was 'Supergau'). His book briefly appeared on Der Spiegel's bestseller list during the lead-up to the 2005 Bundestag election race, a campaign which pitted Gerhard Schröder against Angela Merkel (herself a product of the East). In making his case for the complete failure of unification policies, the author makes frequent reference to the Mezzogiorno – and seems perplexed by those who would challenge such a comparison:

For more than 130 years [...] the Italian nation-state has been afflicted with a burdensome inheritance from history that doesn't want to get any better: the gap between the underdeveloped South and the prosperous North has remained constant since the unification of the country in 1870 [sic]. The smoldering 'Southern Question' often leads to an inner-Italian racism and has threatened to burst apart the national structures. So many subsidies couldn't dissolve the contrasts. [...] Yet here [in Germany] comparisons between Mezzogiorno and eastern Germany are often viewed as unacceptable. What arrogance: the Mezzogiorno has a higher proportion of employment in industry than eastern Germany. Between the economic strength of Sachsen-Anhalt and Sicily there is hardly any difference, and Sardinia is doing better than Saxony. [...] Germany could learn a lot from Italy. In spite of this, it is believed here that the disappointing development of the Mezzogiorno and the 'rebuilding of the East,' which is still in full swing, cannot be compared. (U. Müller, 2005, p. 71, my translation)

Referring to the breakdown of what others have described as Germany's tradition of 'cooperative federalism' (e.g. Jeffery, 1999), Müller warns that a political breakdown between East and West could easily happen as in Italy's regional divide:

In economically divided Germany, the ideal of harmonious 'cuddle federalism' [Kuschelföderalismus] is now a part of the past as well. What we can expect is best studied in Italy. [...] A German 'Lega West' – an unimaginable prospect? The troops stand at the ready. (Jeffery, 1999, pp. 223–224)

The voters of western Germany, in other words, could easily rebel against a perpetual state of transfers, as the northern Italians did in their support for the Lega Nord during the 1990s. The reason, as he explains to his readers, is not context-specific, but rather obvious and generalizable from other examples in Europe:

Rich regions don't want to be responsible for poor areas; that's true everywhere in Europe. In Spain, rich Catalonians were always accused of 'wealth separatism' [Wohlstandsseparatismus].

In Belgium, big payments by the Flemish for the poorer Walloons lead to constant tensions. Even in small Switzerland, normally a prime example of solidarity among and efficient co-existence of the regions, there are noticeable distribution conflicts between strong cantons such as Zug or Zürich and weak cantons such as Wallis or the Jura. (Jeffery, 1999, p. 223)

In sum, Müller's argument seems to be that solidarity of the sort that resulted in such generous transfers to eastern Germany is historically anomalous and unnatural. Moreover, as Mezzogiorno shows, it's destined for failure.

Implications of this spatial metaphor

One cannot from the three previous examples infer any sort of conspiracy, nor do the views of three elites necessarily reflect public opinion at large in Germany. A LexisNexis search reveals that three of the major German dailies (Süddeutsche Zeitung, Frankfurter Allgemeine, and Die Welt/Welt am Sonntag) each ran between 15 and 20 articles during the decade 1997–2007 that explicitly compared the situation in eastern Germany to the Mezzogiorno (see examples from article headlines in Table 1). It is next to impossible to know the sources used by print journalism outlets, thereby making it difficult to know where the Mezzogiorno comparison originates in most cases. In many cases, though, it is not difficult to trace how the use of such a spatial representation is repeated by others, and becomes a 'banal regionalization' (cf. Schlottmann, 2003).

Table 1 is omitted from this formatted document.

In numerous media articles on the subject, the logic of direct parallelism with the Mezzogiorno is repeated, and the authors of these articles often impart an air of legitimacy by citing indirectly authorities, such as 'social scientists,' 'economists,' or directly quoting a specific person, such as Hans-Werner Sinn. Others use it in order to historicize the missed opportunities, as if to say that allowing the East to become a Mezzogiorno would be tantamount to 'other betrayals' of a fair chance in eastern Germany, from Weimar economic crisis, to the subsequent dictatorships of Hitler and the Communists (Keese, 2002). It is the cure that causes unrest among many socially – and geographically – vulnerable populations, since the emergence of a Mezzogiorno calls for the courage to experiment with more neoliberal forms of governance (Rada, 2005). This sort of banal regionalization, with a comparison between two regions (Mezzogiorno and East Germany) neither of which exist in any de jure form, nevertheless has common-sensical appeal to a particular nationalism: let us not become like Italy.

The Eastern question and hegemony

Of course oppositions between imaginary geographical halves is nothing new, nor are they unique to Europe. But with the economic and political integration of European space, a 'popular cosmology' of north–south – and increasingly east–west – oppositions and othering takes on additional significance (Fernandez, 1997).

Political geographers seeking to understand how geographical difference becomes politicized and mobilized are well-served by analysis of spatial representations. This type of analysis can shed light on dominant tendencies in social science of projecting ‘historical experience of one place (England, the West, or the United States for Italy; northern Italy for the Italian South) onto terrestrial space’ (Agnew, 2002, pp. 60–61). Such practices tend to ‘essentialize’ and ‘exoticize’ traits and ‘totalize’ comparisons (Agnew, 2002, pp. 60–61).

Are there applications of this in terms of east–west binaries in Germany and indeed in Europe? Schlottmann and Werlen (2002, p. 235) remind us that the categories ‘East Germans’ and ‘West Germans’ are not common-sense categories, as they tend to trap us in the ‘container-space prison’ [Gefängnis des Container-Raumes – similar to Agnew's ‘territorial trap’]. Yet the Mezzogiorno discourse that I have highlighted here seems to exhibit the tendencies that Nelson Moe has identified (cited in Schneider, 1998, p. 8) in Italy, whereby elites from the more developed area (the North), ‘the core,’ engage in such spatial representations as a means of displacing anxieties about the country's place in European and global economies.

Conclusion

The quote at the outset of this paper from Mazzini – a nationalist, modernist decree that Italy will have difficulty rising above the backwardness of its south – is representative of the ‘vocabulary of backwardness and modernity’ in Italy (Agnew, 2002, p. 61). In the ‘moral geography’ of Italy, the Mezzogiorno is a ‘space of backwardness’ (Agnew, 2002, p. 61), where the blame for the ills of the nation as a whole are assigned their geographical origin. Increasingly, such a vocabulary is defining the contemporary discourse in Germany. In this article I have documented one particular element of this type of narrative, whereby elites have used the Italian case as a sort of paradigm to be avoided at all costs. Therefore this paper contributes to a large and growing body of literature in political geography that seeks to uncover and examine the tropes that shape our world-views.

There are lessons for political geographers from this case, which are perhaps best summed up by Robert Putnam in his landmark study of the Mezzogiorno that may offer insights for future developments in eastern Germany:

[...] only after the Unification of Italy did an image of the South as internally homogeneous and qualitatively ‘other’ become consolidated, displacing a picture of open-ended possibilities in which the region's particular or divergent institutions, laws, and customs were noted but not reified. (Putnam, 1993, p. 8)

By way of conclusion, it might be useful to point out that the ‘open-ended possibilities’ of eastern Germany are embodied by the ‘blooming landscapes’ (blühende Landschaften) of prosperity predicted by Helmut Kohl in the early 1990s, but they have been displaced by an almost dystopian space of backwardness. As any traveler through eastern Germany knows, however, the region is by no means a homogeneous space, and the visitor to Jena or Dresden is struck by the

buzz of economic activity and remarkable feeling of prosperity. These facts are typically ignored by those cited in this article.

The practices of spatial representation examined in this paper represent a belief widespread among the elites quoted here that widespread 'blooming landscapes' were never really a realistic goal. They lay the necessary groundwork for what is to come: a shift in focus away from compensating disadvantaged, peripheral regions, and towards encouraging conditions of agglomerative value-adding in preferred locations. As in Italy (Rossi, 2004), encouraging oases or lighthouses of economic activity is viewed as the only viable strategy in eastern Germany. Such an 'oasis politik' is remarkable because of its departure from the post-World War II norm. It is an explicit acknowledgment that Germany must create a geography of winners, for only by encouraging a geography of winners (privileged agglomerations) and accepting a resulting geography of losers, will Germany be able to compete globally. The government should act here as landscaper, or xeriscaper, of this figurative desert landscape, watering intensively in favored locales, and hoping some will trickle into the surrounding desolation. The Mezzogiorno discourse in Germany is an example of how practices of spatial representation can be revealing indicators of particular brands of nationalized discourse, and indeed set the political parameters for future development directions.

Notes

1. This may be related to lingering distaste over Margaret Thatcher's and Francois Mitterand's unambiguous opposition to Germany reunifying in the first place.
2. Thanks to a reviewer for this point.
3. Heilemann does not support the comparison without substantial qualification.
4. From his CV. Retrieved from http://www.cesifo-group.de/portal/page/portal/ifoHome/f-about/f3aboutifo/50ifostaff/_ifocv_sinn_h_lang
5. Dorit Heß and Olaf Storbeck, 'Ifo-Institut hängt alle ab,' Handelsblatt, July 9, 2007. Retrieved from http://www.handelsblatt.com/news/Default.aspx?_p=302030&_t=ft&_b=1291044

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