Feature Article 【專題論文】

The Visionary Memory of Literature: Collective Identity as an Imagined Community in Contemporary Italian Historical Fiction
文學的視覺記憶：
當代意大利歷史小説中作為想像社群的集體認同

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Abstract

This paper makes an inquiry into the ways in which various social, cultural and political groups in the present-day Italy create, express and recast their historical self-image in the medium of *belles-lettres*. In the conflict-ridden Italy of the last 30 years, historical fiction has been actively generating a complexly structured historical consciousness oscillating between nostalgic reconstructions of the collective past on the one hand, and its future-oriented retroception, on the other. The insights into the socio-political function of *belles-lettres* offered therein are discussed within a larger framework of the present-day sociopsychological and cultural theory with a particular focus on the respective roles of normative prescription and reconstructive postscription in the processes of identity construction and politics.

摘要

　　本文探討當代意大利各種社會、文化與政治團體以純文學為媒介，創造、表達與重新塑造其歷史自我形象的方式。在意大利陷於衝突的過去三十年當中，歷史小說持續積極釀造一種結構複雜的歷史意識，擺盪於共同過去的懷舊重建和以未來為導向的反推之間。本文在當代社會心理學與文化理論的大架構下，就純文學於其間所提供的社會政治功能提出見解，尤其聚焦於在認同建構的過程和策略中，規範性的先天因素與重建性的後天因素所分別扮演的角色。

We live in a world in which the processes of unification and diversification proceed apace, both of them faster than ever before. In some ways, large-scale groups communicate with each other more than ever, know about each other more than ever; and have become increasingly interdependent. At the same time, there is a powerful trend, to be seen virtually all over the world, aiming at the preservation or the achievement of diversity, of one's own special characteristics and "identity" [...]. The erosion, preservation or creation of differentials have been, in recent years, one of the fundamental features of some of the most acute social and industrial conflicts. It would be no less than ridiculous to assert that "objective" rewards (in terms of money, standards of living, consumption of goods and services, etc.) are not the most important determinants of those conflicts. Our point [...] is that, however important they undoubtedly are, they do not, by any means, represent the whole story. Differentiation between social groups (and the conflicts about differentials, which are a special instance of it) cannot be adequately understood in economic terms alone: other forms of analysis are needed for this too.

Henri Tajfel[1]

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1 Henri Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories. Studies in Social Psychology* (Cambridge, etc.: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 2.

Literary Remembrance and Prospectively-aspirational Historical Consciousness: A Pragmatically-political Topicality and Function of Historical Novels

The publication of Umberto Eco's *Il nome della rosa*[2] dropped a bombshell not only because the first novel of the author who had theretofore solely been known in scientific circles nearly immediately topped the international bestseller lists. The clamorous success of Eco's book also triggered a renewed public interest towards the *literary historical genre*. From that point on, the historical novel began a vertiginous career in Italy. Indeed, in the timespan between 1978 and 1981, more texts of historical fiction were published there than had been the case in the preceding period from 1945 until late 1970s (in fact, this genre nearly vanished from the literary arena between 1963 and 1968, especially).[3] Trying to explain the phenomenon of a renewed literary sensibility towards the historical past in general, and the Middle Ages in particular,[4] some critics spoke of an "Eco-effect."

In the following, this interest in the historical past will be placed within a larger conceptual context and analysed under the perspective of a discursive

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2   Umberto Eco, *Il nome della rosa* [The name of the rose] (Milano: Bompiani, 1980).

3   A more precise quantitative diagnosis can be found in Gala Rebane's PhD dissertation, *Of Celts and Other Ancestors: The Contemporary Italian Historical Novel as a Cultural Reflection of Processes of Collective Identity Building in the Context of European Integration and Globalisation* (Technical University of Chemnitz, 2010), to which we shall make references in the following. The author analysed a broad selection of about 250 novels published between 1980 and 2005 with a special focus on functions and achievements of the historical genre in the sphere of the differential and/or universalising identity politics of the Italian nation in the European and global context of the 20th and 21st centuries.

4   It should be noted that the Middle Ages represented in the contemporary historical novels are by no means homogeneous. Rebane (2010) distinguishes between "postmodern neo-medievalism," "Europhile medievalism," "otherworldly Middle Ages" of escapist fiction and, finally, a synthetical variety featuring themes and traits of at least two of these "neo-medievalisms." With regard to their popularity as a setting of historical novels, the Middle Ages and the Roman antiquity top the statistics, leaving, for instance, the Renaissance far behind (cf. statistical charts in Rebane, 2010). Historical consciousness and cultural memory of literature partly take ways which are different from those of other public discourses. This concerns not only the multiple pasts that fiction creates in juxtaposition with the present and the future scenarios, but also its processes of production, communication, distribution, etc.

construction of a *collective historical consciousness* as well as the correlating *identitary options*. These are, in their turn, connected with the contemporary omnipresent fights for recognition, struggles for self-determination and self-assertion, and multifarious forms of identity politics of small-scale "real groups" ("Realgruppen") and anonymous large groups of people. The conflicts thereby settled bear witness to political, cultural, and social processes of differentiation, as well as to the universalising tendencies in precisely the same way as the epigraph of the renowned social psychologist Henri Tajfel cited here, puts it to this day.[5]

Belles-lettres is surely not the only and, today, not even the most efficient medium, in which individuals and groups ranging from small communities to societies and transnational cultures create, express, and consistently recast their temporally structured self-image. Nevertheless, it is and will for quite some time remain an important medium, capable of performing this very function. The contemporary historical novel in Italy provides one particularly interesting example for this. It gives an expression to a historical consciousness oriented towards the present and future of a European nation, challenging and overcoming traditional forms of collective images of the self. What "Italy" used to be once, is now, and might become in a more or less distant future, is in the spotlight of numerous present-day historical novels. One cannot, of course, know for sure in how far such identity projections are influential. An answer to that could only be provided by complex empirical studies of their reception, "translation" and appropriation on the part of their readership. Yet there is no doubt that the voice of literature is heard by and determines the political day-to-day consciousness and self-image of many. High sales figures and public debates on fiction clearly speak for themselves.

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5 See Henri Tajfel, *Differentiation between Social Groups. Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (London, etc.: Academic Press, 1978), and *Human Groups and Social Categories. Studies in Social Psychology* (1981).

Up to the present, this genre has been fostering a differentiated self-conception, in which the mutually interfering and contestant voices struggle for the project of a modern collective identity. It goes without saying that an attractive and acceptable "image" of Italy necessitates not only a historical self-reassurance negotiating continuities and discontinuities of national history, but also a self-reflexive attitude based on the representations of the "other Others" and the "alien." Beside historical distantiation, it is the cultural differences in particular, that social groups champion as a pledge of their *qualitative identity*.[6]

The struggle for the distribution and recognition of each suggested "image" is inalienably linked to an establishment of borders: temporal, social and cultural frontiers that mark a line of distinction between an imaginary literary "us" as an identitary proposal and the groups and worlds of the "other" and the alien. Notwithstanding, these borderlines may also be conceived of, and indeed be permeable to, the most various processes of exchange, thus by necessity entailing the hybridisation of the Self (as well as of the "Other"/alien). It is clear that some of the specific allure of the historical novel can be explained by the largely exploitable potential of fiction's narrative liberties. Like other media in which historical consciousness may express itself, the novel generates sense and meaning within the framework of handling a central historical referent (such as an epoch). A historical narrative can also reinforce the orientation and action potential[7] – the agency – of the members of a group, inasmuch as it foils the present against an extensively thematised past, and projects it onto an anticipated, desired or feared of, future. Such narrative interconnection or "*relationalisation*" of the past, present, and future fosters a *Zeit-Zusammenhang* or *Gestalt*, or

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6 For a clarification of this notion, see Jürgen Straub, "Personal and Collective Identity: A Conceptual Analysis," in H. Friese (ed.), *Identities: Time, Difference and Boundaries* (New York, Oxford: Berghan, 2004), pp. 57-76, and "Identität," in F. Jäger & B. Liebsch (eds.), *Handbuch der Kulturwissenschaften: Grundlagen und Schlüsselbegriffe* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2004), pp. 277-303.

7 See Ernst E. Boesch, *Symbolic Action Theory and Cultural Psychology* (Berlin, etc.: Springer, 1991).

temporal contiguity.[8] In the narrated time, (hi)story plays an important role for the temporally structured self-understanding and self-attitude of a group, for history and identity are closely interrelated. Insofar as this visualisation of history takes place in the specific linguistic form of a narrative, one can speak of a narrative constitution of identity or, in short, of a *narrative identity*.

As Wilhelm Dilthey's famous dictum has it, it is in history that a man can recognise himself. And when this history assumes the form of a literary narrative – moreover, of a novel, its fictional narrative elements will also include such "tolerated inventions" as actors and occurences, trends and events, the fictional and the factual, that often form a peculiar amalgam. For this reason, historical novels differ from non-fictional historical narratives, although, it should be said, the latter also pay their tribute to poetics by the inevitable use they make of tropes like metaphors and metonyms, and of plot structures such as tragedy, comedy, satire and romance.[9] To a certain degree, historical novels can and must deal with the past and the time progression sustaining the challenge of truthfulness and veracity. Yet along with that, they also can blend the factual with

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 8 Cf. the works of Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol 1 (Chicago, IL.: University of Chicago Press, 1984), *Time and Narrative*, vol 3 (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), and *Oneself as Another* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Jörn Rüsen, *Zeit und Sinn: Strategien historischen Denkens* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1990); Jürgen Straub, "Telling Stories, Making History: Toward a Narrative Psychology of the Historical Construction of Meaning," in Jürgen Straub (ed.), *Narration, Identity and Historical Consciousness: The Psychological Construction of Time and History* (New York, etc.: Berghan Books, 2005), pp. 44-98, which provides theoretical definitions of the concept of "narrated time" and in particular of the notions of "historical consciousness," "narrative identity" and "continuity"; see also Frank R. Ankersmith, *Narrative Logic. A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language* (Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1983); Emil Angehrn, *Geschichte und Identität.* (Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 1985); Jens Brockmeier & Donal Carbaugh (eds.), *Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins B.V., 2001); Jerome S. Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass., etc.: Harvard University Press, 1990).
 9 Cf. Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol 1 (1984); Straub, *Narration, Identity and Historical Consciousness: The Psychological Construction of Time and History* (2005); Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973), *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987).

the fictitious in such ways as to present their readers with a world that has actually never existed.

Literary historical consciousness flows in an experimental field, where the fancy and imagination of the narrating subject are not restrained by any boundaries and which challenges the imaginative powers of a reader in a special way. Literary experimental domains dealing with historical consciousness represent nostalgic projections of historical reconstructions that not only fulfil the pragmatic, psychosocial function of collective identities' constitution and re-conceptualisation but can also unfold their visionary potential in the paradoxical form of a *future-oriented retroception* and *retrodiction*. By this token, historical novels convey and contain the *visionary memory of literature*. Literature and the historical novel in particular, operate with their own instruments of demiurgy[10] insofar as they identify the communicative and cultural memory of a given group as a part of the present-day reality (as represented in literary narratives).[11]

The historical novel is an important source of collective self-understanding and identity constitution in contemporary Italy. As far as both its strictly literary and broadly aesthetical properties are concerned, it is also significant that the historical novel, too, becomes an object of various experiments with literary forms, which often transcend the boundaries of the genre, bringing forth hybrid constructs marked by intertextuality and intermedial components (this can be illustrated with numerous examples from the novels by Umberto Eco, Anna

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10 Cf. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hacket, 1978); Nelson Goodman & Catherine Z. Elgin, *Reconceptions in Philosophy and Other Arts and Sciences* (Indianapolis: Hacket/London: Routledge, 1988).

11 Astrid Erll (2005) introduces a typology of political, cultural, social, and psychological functions of literary narratives, differentiating between five main rhetorical modi, in which literary texts can operate in the function of collective memory media. Beside the experiential (*erfahrungshaftiger M.*) and the monumental (*monumentaler M.*), she also names the historicising (*historisierender M.*), the antagonistic (*antagonistischer M.*), and the reflexive (*reflexiver M.*) modi. An attempt at showing the ways in which the contemporary historical novel may deploy one or more of these modi can be found in Rebane's Ph.D. dissertation (2010); the differentiation between communicative and cultural memory was developed by Jan Assmann (*Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* [München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1992]).

Maria Ortese, Alessandro Baricco, or Tullio Avoledo which draw on, and make an extensive use of, references to a wide range of non-literary media). Many contemporary writers are not so much interested in the "traditional" representation of history in the novel as it was theorised on by the nineteenth-century classic of the genre Alessandro Manzoni [1845]. In the past three decades, the issue at stake has not been the loyalty to historical realism but, rather, the literary purports to "historicise" the present (by sometimes truly artificial means), which often ended up alienating it instead. These forms of literary imagination often overstep the borders of the fantastic, horror, *noir*, and detective stories, striving to boost the desired level of entertainment by their hybrid character. Well-known examples of such fiction include Eco's novels and, along with these, books by Andrea Camilleri, Danila Comastri Montanari, Giuseppe Pederiali or Mauro Raccasi. Detours into the realm of sci-fi (such as to be found in Valerio Evangelisti) are just as frequent as literary resuscitations of historical documents and texts (for instance by Fulvio Tomizza, Giovanni D'Alessandro or Sebastiano Vassalli).

Many of the particularly famous and popular novels (such as *Il cardillo addolorato* by Anna Maria Ortese, or *Baudolino* by Umberto Eco) capitalise on the specific ontological premisses of postmodernist fiction inasmuch as they sceptically question traditional world views (*Weltanschauungen*), rationalistic notions of "reality" and the corresponding epistemic approaches to the world and self. This can be colligated with the kind of ontological uncertainty peculiar of the late (or post-) modernism and thereby expounded as the response of literature to the crisis of Western rationalism. Often, this response has a radical and forceful character; it may engage itself in a ludic deconstruction of the present, but it can, as well, assume the form of a regressive nostalgia for an idealised past and there is also a wide range of possible in-between variants.

Summarising the above-said, we can say that in the fragmented and conflict-ridden Italy of the present day, the discursively mediated (and multifariously

instrumentalised) need in a collective, and especially national, self-reassurance is also largely tended to by the genre of historical fiction. In the last three decades, a complexly structured historical consciousness has been forming there, that on the one hand strives to promote the national unity and identity, yet on the other hand transcends the national frame of reference in a threefold manner.

It is obvious that in contemporary literary discussions on nation and nationality a large role is played by the stances which relate their cultural semantics to the so-called "postmodern" and "postcolonial" constellation. Beside the differentiation of autonomous regions with their own specific cultural and social identities, many novels refer to larger territorial, ethnical and historical entities that transcend the borders of the Italian nation-state and there are also texts that, in their spatial scenarios, correlate Italy with non-European countries and places. Apart from the Far Orient (China and Japan, thematised, for instance, in the novels by Alessandro Baricco, Carlos L. Monteverde, or Carlo Sgorlon), the Middle East (focalized by Eco, Serafino Massoni, Franco Cardini) has also started to play an increasingly salient role in contemporary historical fiction. In these novels dealing with an extreme geographic and cultural alterity, the concept of "Italy" is reflected with regard to its historical and cultural role in Europe and the constitution of a European consciousness as at once opposed to, and connected with, the non-European Otherness.

It should be clear that all these thematic focalizations endow *belles-lettres* with a prominent political dimension, especially since the Italian *Sonderweg* of late national consolidation[12] has, in the last years, spawned various nationalisms and an ideologically fanned yearning for a strong and stable state-centred national identity. Yet this nation-state frame of reference for a collective self-reassurance has also been undermined in a number of ways, not in the last place

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12 Cf. Carlo Tullio-Altan, *Italia: una nazione senza religione civile. Le ragioni di una democrazia incompiuta* (Udine: Istituto editoriale veneto friulano, 1995); Ernesto Galli della Loggia, *L'identità italiana* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1998).

by the no less parlous regional ethno-nationalisms and historical narratives that disrupt the borders of the nation. This point can be illustrated by the literary topos of the "Mediterranean identity" or the pervading narratives on the "Europeanisation of Europe" and larger, globalisation.

Works of literature are an indicator of an economic, political, cultural and psychological change, which encroaches upon and transforms the "ontological landscapes" of a country. In contemporary Italy, literature represents one voice among many, yet its functions are several. It complements official (both scientific and less so) historiography and is a critically sensitive seismograph, capable of diagnosing topical oscillations in the collective mood. It also provides frameworks of orientation by visualising and expressing historically reflected self-images, group identities and viable future scenarios. Inasmuch as it re-creates the old, and constructs new collective identities, the historical novel critically tackles questions of legitimation of political projects on the regional, national and supranational level and opens up new perspectives on the shared past that would facilitate the country's cultural integration into the global network.

Collective Identity

A functional colligation of the historical novel with the construction and reconception of collective identities posits the question of this notion's definition, application and essence. A reference to a "collective identity" brings about considerable semantic problems, for while the concept of a "personal identity" is actually a far clearer one than one might take it from its reputation and can often be applied unequivocally,[13] "collective identity" lacks clarity. The debates on

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13 See Jürgen Straub, "Personal and Collective Identity: A Conceptual Analysis" (2004) and "Identität" (2004).

"collective identities" seem to be operating in an airless space and the notion is deployed in such arbitrary and undifferentiated ways, as to mean just about anything.

This arouses a suspicion that this signifier might, after all, have no signification, is an empty sign with no referent, and owing to its nebulosity best suits ideological discourses that conjure up instead of describing, invoke instead of addressing, and mobilise instead of explaining.[14] Literature, and especially the historical novel, can and often do, get involved in these diffuse convolutions masking the issues of influence, power and dominance. It is not, therefore, surprising that "collective identity" belongs to the vocabulary of ideological and political mobilisation, which often takes a violent course and culminates in an outbreak of violence.[15] An affirmative usage of the suspect term largely shuns any criticism, and collective identity is, thereby, usually acclaimed as something "positive," "necessary," or even as an imperative "fetish."[16] In philosophy and science, however, it is no longer regarded in such an unequivocal way, just as "personal identity" and in the latest progressive debates "collective identities," are hardly ever objectified, reified, essentialised, or "naturalised." Heidrun Friese's foreword to the book she edited on this subject summarises the current positions in the debate on collective identity and postulates a broad consensus among those. The author' pertinent "balance sheet" shall be taken as an important pointer in our discussion of the ways in which contemporary historical fiction constructs Italian identity with its regional differentiations and national, European and global dimensions:

> Following Benedict Anderson, the common identity of a "we" has
> increasingly been conceptualised as "true imagined communities," as

14 Ernesto Laclau (ed.), *The Making of Political Identities* (London: Verso, 1994).
15 Lutz Niethammer, *Kollektive Identität: Heimliche Quellen einer unheimlichen Konjunktur* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2000).
16 Ibid., pp. 37ff.

social and cultural constructions. A critique of discourse that emphasises the variety of forms in which cultural values are produced has replaced the earlier critique of ideology that relied on the assumption of the existence of positive truth and aimed at substituting "true" for "false" consciousness. Such critique of discourse is based on the insight that identity is being consolidated through social practices, cultural symbols and discursive formation. The most important strategy to make certain ascriptions and boundaries appear as unalterable is to represent them as "natural," objective and inaccessible. [...] Discourse analysis subjects such essentialist objectivations to a critical procedure that focuses on the institutions and discourses of power and discerns the linguistic and symbolic strategies of power. Poststructuralist theories [and not only these; J.S. & G.R.] that no longer place the identification of universalistically-grounded commonalities in the centre of their concern understand "identities" as the products of exchanges that cross boundaries, and as processes of negotiations that are, as a matter of principle, not subject to any closure. The staging of identity is then considered as a part of social, as well as eminently political, practices and as a cultural text which refers to various significations, employs a variety of historical codes and creates and activates a range of different memories and images.[17]

This consciousness predicated on the critique of discourse throws scepticism on the questionable concept and all the symbolical (and particularly discursive) practices involved in the processes of founding, articulation, and the apology of a

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17 See Heidrun Friese, "Introduction," in Heidrun Friese (ed.), *Identities: Time, Difference and Boundaries* (New York, etc.: Berghahn, 2002), pp. 4f. The discourse analysis assumes a theoretical and methodical form here and of course, the currents cited by the authors are not the only ones predicated on this kind of critique. It should, besides, be considered that Anderson's catchphrase "imagined communities" by which the researcher expresses his stance that collective identities are imaginary constructs or "fabrications," in no way means that identities should be understood as inventions coming from nowhere but rather, that they should be justly substantiated where doubts arise.

qualitative identity of a group. Those who speak of collective identities or call upon them by introducing an "us" as dissociated from "you" (the Self contrasted with the Other, or one's own contrasted with someone else's) tend to idealise and elevate their own group. Identity discourses and politics of this kind often aim at gaining an ideological control over larger groups. Not infrequently, they promote a voluntary or involuntary slide into violent conflicts.[18] The (pseudo-)scientific aura surrounding the catchword does not change this fact but on the contrary, only imparts a "serious" and legitimate appearance to a baleful speech. *Identity matters*: "The assertiveness of a speech drowns out the indeterminacy of its content, which regularly invokes historically specific references to compensatory religious narratives, to lost or threatened social traditions and matters of course, and to neo-science."[19] This is true not only for the historical past but also for the present day; and *belles-lettres* plays its part in it.

The notion of collective identity, which, in a seemingly innocent way, is introduced to draw a line of distinction between different groups, only too often covertly operates with "objectifying" criteria that pave the way to practices of inclusion and exclusion.[20] Criteria of belonging often doom those who do not belong to isolation and their most extreme objectives can consist in an "exclusion" from life, persecution and elimination. Religion and "race" traditionally serve as an essential psychological and legitimating cement in the collective identity constructions in which Niethammer discerns a perennial "tendency to fundamentalism and violence"[21] that no law can effectively neutralise. Accordingly, collective identities operate in the spaces where the law's prescriptions have no actual validity. They are normally on the move "in the free

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18 Lutz Niethammer, *Kollektive Identität: Heimliche Quellen einer unheimlichen Konjunktur* (2000).
19 Ibid., p. 625; own translation.
20 Recently, social exclusion has been generally theorised on as a form of violence – structural, cultural, etc., although there is also some controversy. See Heinz Bude & Andreas Willisch (eds.), *Exklusion: Die Debatte über die Überflüssigen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2008).
21 Lutz Niethammer, *Kollektive Identität: Heimliche Quellen einer unheimlichen Konjunktur* (2000), p. 625.

playing fields of culture."[22] They are just as intrinsically intertwined with it as they are with violence: "This intermediation between culture and violence performed by the collective identity stipulations arises as a consequence of the notion's construction and the social mechanics of its practices, and is by far and large independent from the intentions of those who formulate such notions or make use of them."[23] Many mean it well and yet (as the theory of social identity shows) naively fail to recognise the potential performative power of the mere distinctions of collective identities and end by acting in a similar way as those who know what they are speaking of, when they talk about a collective or cultural identity. Carl Schmitt, Georg Lukács, Samuel Huntington, or the *Nouvelle Droite* (as well as the countless other political groupings like Lega Nord in Italy) recognise its covert complicity with violence and use this connection in an ideological and strategical way by making the latter appear legitimate, or practically necessary. Even Kofi Annan or Zygmunt Baumann and so many others who do not profess any fishy friend-vs.-foe distinctions or geopolitical justifications of a clash of cultures, diagnose a rise of conflict potentials, which, it is often repeated, may result in the formation of novel collective identities or rampant ("negative") *identity politics*. For Niethammer (and many other social and cultural scientists), propaganda, invigoration and formation of collective identities, as well as the activities performed in their name, mostly represent the endeavours to seize the power and dominance and, at times, also the compensatory efforts, caused by one or another form of real impotence or irrational complexes of inferiority.

We have to keep in mind the following: identity constructions and identity politics virtually nowhere simply rest on a sober assessment of empirical evidence. Their significant import consists in the elaboration of differences between the Self and the Other, or the alien; they instrumentalise magical and religious perceptions and imputations, projections and manipulations that

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22 Ibid., p. 626.
23 Ibid.

gradually or abruptly devalorize other socio-cultural groups and in an extreme case (which is by no means a rare one) demonise these as "an embodiment of evil." When such psychosocial, initially "merely" symbolical, linguistic or discursive practices are constitutiv für the self-image of a group, nourish its self-esteem and provide a generally binding system of orientation for the group's agency and life, the situation becomes truly parlous. Conflicts and their escalation become the agenda of "negative" identity politics, and it is no longer surprising that the circumspect observers of the present-day world depict apocalyptic scenarios menacing whole ethnicities, religions, nations and cultures with persecution and elimination.[24]

There is no doubt that the numerous discourses, in which "collective identities" make their shadowy appearance "do not aim at a rapprochement but, rather, at a confrontation between the irreducible political and cultural entities, for whom their essence appears just as unquestionable as a religion or natural phenomena and who reject already the first step to a political communication: that of allowing a public contestation of their premises."[25] Niethammer's unease, which had led him to his brilliant criticism on the flashy concept of "collective identity," is perfectly understandable and exemplifies political rationality.

The outlined analysis and critique of "collective identity" can be brought into connection with the social psychological research of Tajfel.[26] His works are known as a theory of social identity and reconstruct both a person's social identity – which is considered as one aspect of a highly complex personal identity – and the processes of group consolidation, stabilisation and the social differentiation of groups which essentially underlie the construction and practical continuity of collective identities. Tajfel's research shows how already in the phase of their

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24 Lutz Niethammer, *Kollektive Identität: Heimliche Quellen einer unheimlichen Konjunktur* (2000), pp. 11f.
25 Ibid., p. 631.
26 E.g. Henri Tajfel, *Differentiation between Social Groups. Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (1978), and *Human Groups and Social Categories. Studies in Social Psychology* (1981).

formation, groups engage in a practically natural, *automatic mutual dissociation* resulting in the ascription of a "positive" identity to an own group and negative imputations against other group(s) (and the connected social identities). As far as groups are concerned, the "postulated" differences reveal themselves to be a result of *active differentiations* called into being by instrumental objectives that may or may not be clear to their agents. Groups emerge, expand and preserve their coherence by holding another (constructed and imagined, fictive or "really existing") group up as a negative measure of comparison and contrast – including all those symbolical implications and potential practical consequences denounced by Niethammer. In the light of this empirically founded theoretical model, a social differentiation effected for the sake of group consolidation, social integration and cohesion of the own group's members is *inevitably* a discrimination. The members of (an)other group(s) are not only perceived as "others" or "alien" with regard to the own and customary but are also subsequently devalorized and – at least symbolically – *categorised* as possible objects of legitimate aggression and violence. By this token, a qualitative social differentiation slips, *nolens volens*, into a disqualification of the Other. Such is the diagnosis, on which many critics of collective identity constructions and identity politics converge. Moreover, Tajfel emphasises, along with that, that it is this very group formation and the oft biased, self-eulogising comparisons that provide the members of a group with a positive *social identity*. By social identity he understands (as mentioned above) the aspect of a personal identity constituted by the belonging of a person to a group or groups. Viewed under this perspective, social identity is directly dependent on collective identities, and qualitative identities of both individuals and groups are, therefore, partly interdefinable.

This analysis of "collective identity," its practical and discursive construction and distribution hits the mark on many, and even too many occasions. Nonetheless, the diagnosis that inseparably connects the processes of group differentiation, accompanied by formation, preservation and assertion of a collective identity with the devalorisation of "other" groups, is not entirely

impervious to criticism. Niethammer, Tajfel and many others interpret the semantic and pragmatical-performative, psychosocial "happenings," which they reconstruct, as *an effect of "social mechanics,"* which takes place independently from the conscious will and actions of the agents involved. This theoretical assumption, though it may often be true, can, nevertheless, also be *principally* doubted: not *every* practice of the articulation of collective identity is corrupt or entails a devalorization of other groups and their automatic becoming objects of legitimated exclusion and other forms of violence.

One has to draw distinctions between different variants of identity politics under a normative, ethico-moral and political perspective. There also exist perfectly *legitimate* politics of difference and struggle for recognition, equal life chances and rights which cannot be conceived without the framework of "collective identity" – an "us"-sense and a shared consciousness based on the concurrent interpretations of history, present and expected future of the members of a group. This point has been correctly emphasised in many contemporary feminist or so-called postcolonial theories.[27] An identity politics born out of *defensive experiences of difference* gains prominence "if it stresses the awareness of social flaws and isolation, regards intuitive rapprochements between the isolated as a sensible force and endows subjectivity with pride," but it is weak "if it endows the advanced achievement with the paranoia of a victim, feigns an objective biological identity where it has to search for subjective cultural affiliations first and tricks itself with mystical constructions about it's own origins."[28]

It is, therefore, basically, a normative, moral and ethical, and political argument and yet the doubtlessly parlous concept of "collective identity" may be rehabilitated in yet another way, too. Its defence would necessitate a conceptual

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27 Cf. María do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan, *Postkoloniale Theorie: Eine kritische Einführung* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2005).
28 Lutz Niethammer, *Kollektive Identität: Heimliche Quellen einer unheimlichen Konjunktur* (2000), p. 266.

distinction between two variants of collective identities' qualitative determination. Elsewhere, we have accentuated these two types, pointing to another manner in which the term could be deployed in a more constructive way than the one, at which so much righteous criticism has been directed.[29] Here, one simple fact has to be taken into account: *not every* social differentiation is coterminous with a discrimination that puts an end to the recognition of and an unprejudiced attitude towards, the Other and the alien. Those who treat collective identities within the framework of scientific research, ascribe something in common to a variable majority. They do not equalise its members in every respect – that is, the cases where it is done are obviously absurd[30] – but only in some selected and specified, explicit ways. This partial equality or similarity does not connote an "essential unity of a group"[31] but merely a commonality, which is also temporally limited and does not exclude a wide range of differences in other respects.

The collectively shared features engendering a similarity-based commonality can be established empirically, if not objectively reified. They bear upon relevant (and not peripheral), sometimes even central aspects of a given socio-cultural life-form (*Lebensform*, in Wittgenstein's sense). It is the conjunctive experiential spaces and horizons of expectation that provide occasions for and lead to, a communicative and discursive negotiation and articulation of collective identities and not the immutable, "natural" properties of people sharing them. Empirical research dedicated to collective identities takes into account the internal (emic) perspective of individuals belonging to a group, or counting themselves among its members. With regard to this concept that appears plausible from the viewpoint of empirical social and cultural sciences, one can speak of a *reconstructive* type, which has to be kept apart from the *normative* type.[32]

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29 See Jürgen Straub, "Personal and Collective Identity: A Conceptual Analysis" (2004) and "Identität" (2004).
30 Lutz Niethammer, *Kollektive Identität: Heimliche Quellen einer unheimlichen Konjunktur* (2000), p. 19.
31 Ibid., pp. 19f.
32 For a more detailed account of this typological distinction see Jürgen Straub, "Personal and

While the latter type targets or prescribes, stage-manages and insinuates, perhaps even imposes a "stringent" and "compulsive" historical continuity and practical coherence with regard to the features (allegedly) shared by all members of a group, the former type taps the (historical) communicative practices as well as the self- and world-pictures of the subjects in question, in order to be able to describe a given collective identity from the stance of reconstructive and interpretative, social and cultural sciences.[33] By this token, it deals with a *reconstructive postscription* in emprical research, rather than with a *normative prescription* (within the framework of moral, political, and ideological discourses).

According to this conception, collective identities are, generally, constructs serving solely to describe a commonality in the practical self- and world-attitude as well as in the self- and world-picture of the members of a group, which has, at any rate, to be further specified. Collective identities find their expression in the consentient practical conduct, as well as in the qualitative self- and world-descriptions on which people concur. They are rooted in such accords, accommodating and conjunctive self- and world-images, and shared practices. These accords and the practices connected with them spawn traditions which people may feel themselves as belonging to. Historical novels, doubtlessly, can be listed among these practices and phenomena (and whether they explicitly speak of "collective identities" or not, does not matter at all). In a flashback to the chosen past epochs, they set forth particular traditions and propound to their readers, whom they address as a group, multifariously detailed offers of identification – for instance, as "the Italian nation" envisaged in the totality of its past, present, and future.

In doing so, novels can also make use of different accentuating modi of identity construction and therefore frequently oscillate between scientifically

Collective Identity: A Conceptual Analysis" (2004) and "Identität" (2004).

33 For theory, methodology and methods of reconstructive, interpretative or qualitative research see Bohnsack (2007).

corroborated reconstructive postscriptions and ideologically motivated, polemogenous normative prescriptions. This aspect is not in the last place targeted by social and cultural analyses of fiction. It is precisely our endeavour in the last section of the present article, where we shall demonstrate by an interesting and slightly maddish example, how the "europeanised" (predominantly Northern) Italian novelists make references to the *Celts* in an attempt to give light to the history, present and future of their nation. The Celts as the true ancestors of Italians (and Europeans), indeed; this sounds bizarre and yet it is an important strand in contemporary Italian *belles-lettres*, a thread that meanders through many present-day popular practices, culminating in a symbolical, discursive and practical politics (for instance, that of the right-wing party of Lega Nord), which deploys the mysterious idea of Celticity in order to "re-devise" North Italian regional identity, or to appeal to the identity of its adherents.

This example of an identitary reference to the Celts shows the meaning of a *remembrance* in the name of groups (that taps into either the communicative or cultural memory). *Remembrance visualises an absent once-present as the past*. As the sciences, allied with both psychology and philosophy – in the first place epistemology, but also aesthetics, rhetorics and other branches of philosophical research – have shown, such visualisations do not follow upon the traditionally implicit, idealised "laws" of an objective representation of the past in an emulative, mimetic, or reproductive manner.[34] A visualisation of the past is far more an arrangement of, at least apparently, former events in the present achieved with a help of symbolical (e.g. linguistic or special narrative) means, which depends upon a current situation and is partly influenced by it. It is related to it under the perspective of a remembering subject and is a motivated action,

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34 For an overview see Carlos Kölbl & Jürgen Straub, "Erinnerung," in P. Kolmer & A. G. Wildfeuer (eds.) (in Verbindung mit W. Hogrebe, L. Honnefelder, Ch. Horn, W. Kluxen, W. Vossenkuhl), *Neues Handbuch philosophischer Grundbegriffe* (Freiburg i. Br.: Alber, 2010, in press), and "Zur Psychologie des Erinnerns," in Ch. Gudehus, A. Eichenberg and H. Welzer (eds.), *Gedächtnis und Erinnerung: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2010), pp. 22-44.

intentionally biased by the agent and performed in accordance with his/her own priorities.

What are, then, the implications of all the above-said, for the literary acts of remembrance in the historical novels which depict the Celts as the most important ancestors of Italians and Europeans? What meaning has this "remembrance" for those identity discourses and identity politics that strive to determine where the Italians "come from," who they are today and what future they may, therefore, hope for? What meaning do the Celts actually attain in the contemporary Italian novels dealing with selfhood and the familiar, otherness and the alien?

Italianised Celts, Celtic Italy

In order to base the history and identity of the country in far-reaching reminiscences and to accommodate these visions within the nation's cultural memory, Italian novelists establish references to various "ancestors," such as, quite evidently, the Etruscans. Yet the fact that the Celts, too, are conceived of in recent fiction as the forebears of the Italians, appears rather surprising. It becomes even more striking if one considers the actual extent of the role, which the Celts nowadays play in the "historicizing" self-assurance of some Italian writers. A "positive" counterpart of the Germans (who in the traumatising aftermath of the World War II in Italy have largely become a popular scapegoat) and antagonists of the Romans (themselves reconceived of as a historical metaphor of a thwarting imperial endeavour in the latter half of the 20th century and recently charged with further negative connotations based on the often distorted analogies with the present-day *Pax Americana*), today the Celts are frequently called upon as *the* ancestors of the Italians (and other European peoples) who most contributed to the formation of the Italian cultural identity

(whose matrix, as some writers and cultural activists claim, is already imprinted in the genes). Yet their status of the "glorious Other" surrounded by myths, rhapsodised and celebrated by many, does not rest on much solid historical knowledge (and the blanks in the evidential support of the "Celtic cause" already start with the very name of the ethnie). One is even induced to believe that it is precisely the lack of scientific evidence that enables the "Celtic past" to function as a locus of historical imagination and psychosocial projections, to be endowed with a libidinous quality and strategically instrumentalized in a virtually arbitrary way.

In the last decades, Italy has been swept by a real "Celtomania" which manifests itself in countless festivals, celebrations and events. Whoever they used to be and no matter if they had ever been an ethno-culturally homogeneous group, "the Celts" are conjured up and used by the most diverse groups to the most diverse ends. The "Celtic idea" resurfaces in a critique of consumerism and patriarchal social structures, it reverberates in the laments about the rootlessness of modern humankind and the emptiness of an abstract constitutional patriotism, and invigorates attacks on cosmopolitism. The idea is quite true of the Italian political right wing, in the first place the party *Lega Nord*, which has been widely drawing on the presumed Celtic legacy of the North Italian regions in its rallying call for a reinforcement of the "Padanian identity." Yet, while there exists at least some, though vague, historical evidence of the Celtic sediments in Lombardy, the stronghold of the *Lega Nord*, the "Celtic revival" in Friuli represents a case of an actual *invention* of a regional ethno-historical identity. The search for possible Celtic origins of the regions had initially been launched in the 19th century but it was not until the postwar years that this aspiration gained momentum. The parlous political and social potential of such "fortuitous rediscovery" is well reflected in the dystopian novel *Lo Stato dell'Unione* [The State of the Union, 2005] by Tullio Avoledo,[35] which gloomily parodies the purports of some

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35 Tullio Avoledo, *Lo stato dell'unione* [The State of the Union] (Milano: Sironi, 2005).

Friulian politicians engaged in the "Celtic venture." It can be conjectured that the sudden outbreak of this rampant search for new identifications in Friuli had been triggered off by the general geopolitical outcome of World War II and was additionally reinforced by the specificity of the region's ethnic and cultural history. Entrenched in three main cultural substrates – the Latin, the Germanic, and the Slavic, the Friulian population might have found it rather appealing to dissociate its history from that of its victimisers, deny any historical affiliation with the power-hungry centralised "Roman" state but also distantiate itself from the prevalently Slavic Eastern Bloc, which, with the beginning of the Cold War, became an embodiment of the "enemy." These sentiments promptly found their adherents among politicians, writers, and broad public, and nowadays, the wide range of "Celts-inspired" artefacts includes novels, comic strips, essays, music and so forth.

The "Celtic case" reflects many of the earlier outlined dangers inherent, if latently, in the construction and promulgation of a collective identity, which find their immediate and foremost expression in the practices of inclusion and exclusion. Especially the Friulians' search for their Celtic roots illustrates Niethammer's and Tajfel's positions, according to which such practices often do not rest on any objective and empirically proven criteria but, rather, emerge as a result of complex socio-political trends and historical conjunctures. However "innocuous" their cause may appear, they frequently bring about an eruption of hostility towards and an escalation of violence against, a constructed negative "other" that may, only too soon, get out of their initiators' control. As recent examples from the North Italian regions, especially Friuli, show, an adoption of, and a struggle for, particular collective identities in many cases merely mask a yearning for political power and social influence and go hand in hand with a chauvinist politics of exclusion of and intolerance towards, the perceived "non-belonging" individuals and groups. The championed "Europeanisation" of Northern Italy based on the "discovery" of its "Celtic cultural matrix" takes place (for the time being, however, mainly symbolically) at the expense of those, to

whom the "European hereditary privileges" are denied: the South Italian regions, groups of immigrants from the ex-Eastern Block and North Africa, as well as the unemployed, destitute and other socio-economic "undesirables."

On the Beauty of *Belles-lettres*: Some Conclusive Remarks

As we have shown earlier, a collective search for new, viable identifications may take either of the two routes: that of *normative prescription*, or the other one of *reconstructive postscription*. As far as fiction is concerned, its role in these processes is also twofold and where *belles-lettres* do not lapse into slogan-ridden political pamphletisms (and it is dubious indeed whether they deserve, in that case, the denomination of "*belles*"), they usually freely float between the two modi of identity construction depending not only on the agency and views of the author but also on the broader cultural, social, political and economic substrate that nourishes them. Speaking with Bakhtin, a novel is, by its nature, a product of dialogic imagination. By – but in most cases precisely *against* – the will of its author it is polyphonic and polemical, contestatory and subversive, not so much asserting some truths as critically questioning them.

At the same time, of course, fiction regarded as a medium of entertainment is often not taken in earnest. Like a proverbial fool, the only person at a court who could speak unwanted truths without a fear of punishment and yet whose position hardly ever made people seriously heed to his words, fictional literature appears to cater primarily to leisure. Yet, as stated above, it may also fulfil the role of a barometer of socio-cultural change and provide an invaluable empirical material for research on the "collective psyche" and historical consciousness of a given society or group, rich in controversy and challenging one-sided theoretical approaches to the phenomena of collective identities and their construction. Fiction, and the historical novel in particular, projects the secret longings and

fears of a society (or its constituent group[s]) into its history, present and future, explicitly or implicitly warns against the undercurrent dangers of given social conjunctures, and suggests new perspectives in the collective self- and world-pictures, transforming them all in its visionary lens.♦

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