

## Pierluigi Gatti

### *Intervista a Fritz Felgentreu*

Fritz Felgentreu, classe 1968, è un antichista e politico tedesco. Prima di essere eletto nel parlamento tedesco, ha insegnato al Liceo, alla Ruhr-Universität di Bochum e alla Freie Universität di Berlino. Organizza con cadenza regolare un *meeting* in un pub di Neukölln (“Fritz&Friends” - Der Stammtisch mit Fritz Felgentreu) in cui incontra i cittadini davanti a birra e Brezel. L’intervista ha avuto luogo negli uffici del Bundestag nella Unter den Linden, dove sono stato accolto da Julia Möser e poi ricevuto da Fritz Felgentreu. L’ufficio e l’intero edificio sono arredati in maniera così spartana che il visitatore non percepisce di essere in una rappresentanza politica.

*You had a brilliant academic career and at the same time a strong passion for politics. You managed to combine those sides of your life. In 1992 you became a member of the SPD at 24 years old, in 1998 you achieved the PhD with W.-W. Ehlers, in 2008 the Habilitation and from 2002 onwards you served as Kreisvorsitzender von Berlin-Neukölln. Now, it seems that the active life got the upper hand: how do you bring your experience as scholar into politics?*

Classics provided me, as well as everyone who spent some years with the auctores, with an outstanding cultural background. First and foremost, my philological studies offered me linguistic skills in preparing speeches and in understanding texts. By linguistic skills, I mean a word richness and a command of rhetorical devices. Secondly, whoever is acquainted with ancient history can better establish a link between modern and ancient events, insofar as ancient sources are paradigmatic. Human beings, the historical actors, did not change much, one can observe it especially in small actions. As a scholar, I focused my research on political authors, such as Cicero, Libanius and Claudian. They all specialized in political communication. I have found that my political experience has helped me to understand their specific messages to specific audiences, and, conversely, my reading experience has helped me to formulate and convey my own messages to the audience I had in mind.

*Homo sum nihil humani a me alienum puto. In Germany, Classics is traditionally conservative in politics, as classical philology deadened our sensibility towards human beings rather than making us more inclined to listen to each other. From 2001 to 2011 you were elected to the Berlin City Council directly by Wahlkreis 2 (Hermannstraße–Neukölln). In 2013 the Neuköllner SPD nominated you in the district Neukölln for the 18th Bundestag and you were elected to the Federal Parliament. Your attentiveness towards a socially difficult neighborhood (where, for example, there are schools without pupils of German origin) has been recognized and rewarded. Where does your tie with Neukölln come from?*

My roots in Neukölln are pretty old and strong. In September 1989, in a groundbreaking moment for Germany, I moved to Neukölln. It was a lively neighborhood where churches, Vereine (i.e. Unions and clubs) and mosques coexist. At that time there was a lot of political and cultural fermentation in progress. In my opinion it was a mirror of future European society. Of course there are some problems, but Neuköllners are tough yet kind-hearted people (in German Neuköllner sind hart aber herzlich).

*Europe is facing or—perhaps more accurately—is NOT facing waves of immigrants from northern Africa and Arabic countries. It is obvious that the number of Muslims in Europe will rise. In the imperial age Rome was a religious melting pot, the traditional gods co-existed with the new goddesses, in United States the religious tolerance is astonishing, religious murders are an entirely rare occurrence. On the other hand, in Europe there are religious tensions, let us think about France. In your opinion, what possibilities are there for the heritage of Antiquity regarding the coexistence of different religions?*

We received the legacy of Enlightenment at the core of which are human rights and the rule of law. We do not have any parallel that we could establish between the ancient and the contemporary world. Our laicism is deeply different from the religious sentiment of the ancient world. The Roman state, for instance, was based on religio, which acted as a political and social glue as a result. On the other hand, in the secular but non-laicistic German society people feel free and protected in the sense that everybody can go to heaven according to their own *façon*. I find the German tradition very suitable and appropriate for Germany, the United Kingdom with its much more distinct social stratification is far from our tradition: in my opinion, the religious enclaves that are establishing themselves are extremely problematic.

*Old and new crisis in Europe: when Trajan became emperor, he received from Nerva a State in not exactly prosperous conditions. The new emperor introduced the *alimenta* (institutio alimentaria) and the *obligatio praediorum*. He invested in social welfare and education, and therefore opened a new course. Nowadays what lessons can Europe learn from the socio-economical politics of that Roman emperor?*

A deep change is a pressing need. Education and education funding are the only remedies for our crisis. The only budget items not cut in the Berlin city state in the years 2005-2008 were the expenses for the educational system. The drama of unemployment, especially in southern Europe, must not continue, because we cannot afford it, but in fact Trajan's method is not the solution for contemporary problems. In many European countries every new generation becomes 30% smaller than the one before it, therefore we are dealing with the problem of how to stabilize shrinking societies.

*The results of the last European elections give cause for concern. Nationalist and populist movements fascinate Europeans ever more. People perceive a sense of failure: the European project has many enemies. The referendum about the UK staying in the EU is a sword of Damocles; we all look at France with dismay. If we contemplate all these phenomena with the eyes of ancient scholars, we do not feel exactly tranquil: the Roman*

*empire lasted until it was united, Byzantium survived longer by virtue of its unity. What can we learn from the experience of the ancient world?*

The theories about the end of the ancient world are many and derive from different ways of stating the problem. The first aspect and difference that leaps at us is the dimension of the Roman empire. The second one is the fact that the European Union is built from the bottom up, while the Roman, the Byzantine empires and, closer to us, the Holy Roman Empire or the French empire under Napoleon were not the result of democratic legitimization. À propos of centrifuge movements and tendencies, it is good for everyone if we build a great unity of European peoples with functioning and effective democratic institutions. Today it is much too easy for malevolent political forces to say that Europe is responsible for any problem anywhere, and I see a danger in this populist attempt to treat the European Union as a scapegoat: What might happen if Europe fell apart again, can be seen from the example of ex-Yugoslavia. We must not allow that to happen.