

Italy: Why did the young footballer Seid Visin, take his own life?

Friday 11 June 2021, by [KELLAWAY Dave](#) (Date first published: 6 June 2021).

Dave Kellaway writes about the tragic death of a young footballer in Italy and why taking the knee is an important statement against racism.

I was checking out the news from Italy today and I saw a story. It is relevant following the racist booing of English international footballers taking a knee in Middlesbrough at a recent friendly match. This is the letter that Seid Visin, the 20-year-old who committed suicide in Nocera, had sent to some friends and his psychotherapist in January 2019. He eloquently comments on suffering, from the small and bigger acts of discrimination that he experienced every day. Seid reflects how he even internalised the racism he experienced by joining in with his friends' racist comments against other groups. He had been on the Milan youth football team for two years. Like most young hopefuls he did not make it through to the top level so he had returned to study in his hometown of Nocera near Naples. I know the town well, a mostly working-class community, it is a few miles from where I regularly stay with my partner's family.

The letter was read at the footballer's packed funeral in Nocera on Saturday 5 June [my translation]:

"Faced with the social and political situation in Italy, I, as a black person, inevitably feel called into question. I am not an immigrant. I was adopted when I was a child. Before the waves of immigration in recent years, I remember with some arrogance that everyone loved me. Wherever I was, wherever I went, everyone approached me with great joy, respect, and curiosity. Now, however, this atmosphere of idyllic peace seems so far away; it seems as if mystically everything has been turned upside down, winter seems to have descended on me extremely suddenly and viciously, without warning, on a clear spring day.

Now, wherever I go, wherever I am I feel, like a boulder on my shoulders, the weight of people's sceptical, prejudiced, disgusted, and frightened looks. A few months ago I managed to find a job that I had to leave because too many people, mostly elderly, refused to be served by me and, as if that were not enough, as if I did not already feel uncomfortable, they also blamed me for the fact that many young (white) Italians could not find work.

After this experience something changed inside me: as if an unconscious mechanism had been created in my head by which I appeared in public, in society, different from what I really am; as if I was ashamed of being black as if I was afraid of being mistaken for an immigrant as if I had to prove to people, who did not know me, that I was like them, that I was Italian, that I was white. Even to the extent that when I was with my friends, it led me to make jokes in very bad taste about blacks and immigrants. I would bombastically say that I was racist towards blacks as if to emphasize that I was not one of them, that I was not an immigrant.

Beneath the posturing though, the only way of understanding what I was doing was fear. Fear for the hatred I saw in people's eyes towards immigrants, fear for the contempt I heard in people's

mouths, even from my relatives who were constantly wistfully invoking Mussolini and talking approvingly about “Captain Salvini”. [Salvini is the leader of the racist Lega party] The disappointment of seeing some friends (I don’t know if I can call them friends any more) all singing the ‘Casa Pound’ rallying songs [a fascist group] when they see me. The other day, a friend of mine, who is also an adoptee, told me that some time ago, while he was playing football with his friends, happy and carefree, some women approached him and said: ‘enjoy this time of yours, because in a while they will come and take you back to your country’.

With these raw, bitter, sad, sometimes dramatic words of mine, I do not want to beg for sympathy or pity, but only to remind myself that the discomfort and suffering I am experiencing is a drop of water compared to the ocean of suffering being experienced with strength and dignity by those people who would rather die than lead an existence in misery and hell. Those people who risk their lives and many have already lost it, just to smell, to taste, to savour the flavour of what we simply call ‘Life’.”

These final words scream out and cut through the cynical and callous policy of British Home Secretary Pritti Patel. Today she has railed against the social media companies for allowing clips of video showing migrants and asylum seekers crossing the channel. As if the motivation for people leaving war zones or dire poverty can be reduced to watching a video on social media. She lumped social media with the traffickers as encouraging the criminal act of getting into flimsy boats and risking your life getting across the channel. Silent on the fact that it is the complexity and difficulty of using so-called ‘normal channels’ of asylum application that forces people to take these measures. Lying too because seeking asylum is not a criminal act but protected in international law. It is totally hypocritical because Patel’s own family benefited from the slightly less racist immigration laws of the time.

Seid’s tragic story also highlights racism and sport. Prowess in kicking a football does not provide a shield of any kind for black people. David Goldblatt in an article on diversity and the upcoming Euros football tournament comments:

“When Mario Balotelli, Italy’s first black football star, played for the national team, fans would often sing, “There is no such thing as a black Italian”, and he would be subject to abuse by crowds allowed at Italian team training camps.” (Observer 6th June 2021). **David Goldblatt**

Unlike in France and Britain, very few young players from ethnic minority communities in Italy have broken through into top-level football. In my experience openly expressed racist comments and actions are more noticeable too in Italy. A country from which millions emigrated historically, Italy now has a 6 million-strong non-white community. The latest opinion polls show Salvini’s Lega (League) and the post-fascist Fratelli d’Italia (Brothers of Italy) polling together at around 40%. Both have taken a racist anti-migrant line. Salvini is currently on trial for breaking the law when he was the Minister of the Interior in the first Conte government for refusing to allow a packed ship of migrants, many of who were ill, to dock at an Italian port. Meloni, leader of the Fratelli is competing with Salvini as the most popular Italian politician on the right and her group has grown steadily in popularity winning the governorship of two regions. In polls, it is on 19,7% just ahead of the historic left of centre part, the PD (Democratic Party). It is hardly surprising that racist attitudes remain strong.

Nevertheless, Seid’s suicide note has provoked quite a reaction in Italy. Salvini has scrambled to say he is against any discrimination on the grounds of someone’s skin colour. Enrico Letta, leader of the social liberal PD has even expressed regret that Italian society failed Seid using the phrases ‘Excuse us’ and ‘Forgive us’ in a series of tweets. Of course, it was a PD minister, Minniti, who set up the notorious system whereby desperate migrants are picked up at sea and taken back to terrible detention camps in Libya. Roberto Saviano, the Neapolitan writer of the book Gomorrah who has to

have a permanent bodyguard against death threats from the Camorra, has denounced Salvini and Meloni as 'proud racists' and 'clowns'. Salvini retorted that Saviano was just a jackal feeding on someone else's suffering. Sadly, the Italian father who adopted Seid (who was from Ethiopia) has minimised the role of racism in his son's suicide. Perhaps admitting it would put into question his own personal investment in integrating Seid into Italian society.

Maybe we can leave it to another footballer, Claudio Marchisio, a former Juventus star, to point out the contradictions in people's attitudes on race in Italy (and everywhere else) today:

We are a country of integration when you are a young talent or when you score the decisive goal in an important match but then people refuse to be served in a restaurant by somebody of a different skin colour. We are a country of integration when the athlete wins a gold medal at the Olympics. We are a country of integration which searches for obscure Italian roots when a [non-white] actress stars and wins an Oscar but when there are black kids in your child's class we turn up our noses.

claudio marchisio

Dave Kellaway

* You can watch a video Seid made here within the Corriere della Sera article where the original Italian letter is published:

https://www.corriere.it/cronache/21_giugno_05/seid-visin-lettera-razzismo-67f25824-c5ee-11eb-8929-1e7e5315cef2.shtml

P.S.

• Anti*capitalistresistance. 06 Jun 2021:

<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/why-did-seid-visin-take-his-own-life/>

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