

POLITICS IN THE BORDERLANDS: THE CASE OF ITALY'S NORTHERN LEAGUES *

Introduction

Except for the small border minorities (French, German, Slovene) along the Alpine arc, Italy has usually been thought of as an ethnically homogeneous nation. Thus, the explosive rise, since the late eighties, of the Lombard League, has been a surprise to everyone – politicians and scholars, domestic and foreign.

The Lombard League, enlarged in 1992 as Northern League, was one of the key factors in the sudden dissolution of the exceptionally stable party system that had ruled Italy for forty years. The League threw into discussion the very idea of Italian national unity, at one point proposing the break-up of the country into three sovereign, albeit confederate, Republics (*Padania* in the North, *Etruria* in the Center; no name was proposed for the South). Some feared that Italy may go the way of Yugoslavia or the Caucasus – or perhaps Ireland. Calls to arms, more or less metaphorical, were muttered by several politicians.

Things seem to have become less frenzied in the last few months. But the phenomenon of Italy's Northern League(s) certainly remains of great interest to students of politics, of social movements, and of the relations between geography and society. In the context of the present volume, it is interesting to note that ethnic -regionalism in Italy started in the border - and perihel (insular) regions, and that the cradle of the League was the border area between Italy and Switzerland; which reminds, perhaps fancifully, of Ibn Khaldoun's theory on the cycle of corruption of the centres and regeneration from the peripheries. It also stimulates reflections on the relationship between ethnic values (myths) and interests, between territorial (local) attachment and politics, between subnational and sovranational political processes (regionalization of member states and European integration), and others.

The paper is divided into main three parts. In the first, some general -theoretical notions on 'ethnic -regionalism' are recalled. In the second, the origin and characters of Italy's ethnic make-up and its relations with present national identity are synthesized. In the third, the case of the Northern League(s) is described.

Theoretical reflections

Space in sociological theory

For almost a century mainstream social theory has given only a secondary role to space (place, territory, topology, geography, etc.). Social evolution seemed to point linearly to the 'etherialization' of social relations and structures. Modernization was defined as entailing the transition from *Volksgeist* to *Weltgeist*, from community to society, from particularism to universalism, from localism to cosmopolitanism. Technological and economic progress was seen as allowing ever more abundant and unbounded communication and mobility and thus efface any determination, conditioning or 'friction' of space on social behavior. The social

was usually conceived of as a disembodied assembly of social roles free -floating in the abstract space of social systems and structures.

The outlook has changed in the last twenty years, for a number of reasons which have been discussed elsewhere (Strassoldo 1990). Briefly, they can be described as a reaction to the excesses of structural -functional, abstract and 'idealist' sociological approaches prevailing in the central part of the century; and a new emphasis on the material (biological and physical) dimension of social systems and processes. The components of this reaction are numerous. One is the pressure of and inroads from the natural sciences. Of particular significance for the 'respatialization' of sociology, have been, in the sixties, the relatively new sciences of ethology and ecology, emphasizing respectively the role of 'territory' and 'environment' in social behavior of animals and humans alike. Another has been the involvement of sociologists in urban/regional/territorial problems and planning, and their contacts with other socio -spatial sciences (architecture, design, urban geography, regional science, space economy, etc.); materialistic sociological theories gained new impetus (the 'new political economy' approach to urban and regional theory). A third is the rise of the 'phenomenological', psychological, subjectivist, 'micro' approaches, with their holistic claims and their sensitivity for corporeal reality and (perceived) physical settings. It is mainly from such strands that in the eighties a number of acknowledged scholars have spinned sociological theories in which space is given back its old central place (Giddens, 1985; Collins, 1981).

Space in politics

A fourth contribution to the respatialization of the discipline seems to have enjoyed less attention from the leading sociological theorist: the study of politics. This realm cannot be even conceived without reference to its spatial dimensions (Agnew 1987). To begin with, its central concept, the state, is defined by a territory, an organizational center and a boundary. For most of human history, the relations between and within states concerned mostly the partition and control (nomos) of territory (Schmitt 1950); and today as ever, international relations, peace and war, rest mainly on geopolitical facts and factors. This huge and most crucial segment of human reality has been almost completely expunged, for reasons and with consequences that cannot be discussed here (Strassoldo 1979, 1985), from modern sociology.

Secondly, space, in the form of distance and of 'community', is a basic criterion in the realm of political (societal) ethics. Political rules and values work quite differently within political communities and between them. For instance, loyalty, solidarity, justice, equality, and so on were traditionally due primarily to 'neighbours', countrymen, co -citizens, people belonging to the same community (in addition, of course, to relatives and friends). The predicament of peoples in far -away, foreign regions of the earth deserved little ethical political consideration. Thus there was an orderly spatial gradient in the allocation of responsibility. This has collapsed in the present system of global communication; but no alternative rational moral order seems in view.

Thirdly, politics is concerned with the distribution of power and other resources within the state (societal) territory. The relations among centers and peripheries, the nested hierarchy of local autonomies and of local branches of central institutions, the various forms of federalism, the organization and administration of territory, are only the most obvious aspects and tasks of the political system. T.P. O' Neill overstated the case only slightly, with his famous remark that 'all politics is local politics'.

Fourth, electoral studies show a high degree of spatial variation, as well as of stability in time, in voting behavior; there are local -regional traditions in voting, which endure for generations, and in some cases even centuries, however much socio-economic conditions may change; they point to underlying *longue -duree*, spatial structures.

Ethno -regionalism

In some cases, such local -regional variations in political attitudes and behaviors are the expression of what are variously called linguistic, cultural, ethnic or historic minorities (groups, communities), or nationalities, or 'mini -nations'. Most modern nation -states grew by more or less forced submission of weaker groups to dominant ones; some of the former managed to retain some degree of distinctiveness and self - consciousness. Centuries of intentional 'nation -building' efforts by the states, and decades of accelerated assaults by the forces of modernisation, have not succeeded to suppress them completely. Especially in more 'conservative' areas - in remote rural backwaters, in islands and highlands - local, provincial and regional identities linger on, expressed in language, religion, character, folkways, material culture, and memories. But regional cultural variations on a larger scale, although usually more shallow, can be found in almost all societies; as a result of different histories, geography and, perhaps, genetics.

The dominant culture - state -national, urban, modernising, rationalistic, in both its liberal and marxian variants - would define such phenomena as recessive, bound to pass away, and pertaining to the sphere of idle sentiments. Attempts to nurture, promote or revive them by political means were usually seen as reactionary. This had some justification in the history of political thought, as the values of local -provincial -regional cultural specificity (and therefore the right to autonomy) had been extolled by conservative thinkers (Burke, de Maistre, Tocqueville, etc.), in opposition to the frenzy for uniformity typical of the jacobine frame of mind. The suspicion of reactionarism was reinforced by the fact that usually the advocates of minority culture belong to the clergy, the gentry and petty bourgeoisie, while their object was an ignorant, bigot, 'idiot' peasantry.

During the XIX century and up to the nineteen -sixties, the official policies toward such groups were usually two -pronged: 'assimilation' or 'nationalization' at the structural level, by way of state institutions (school, mass levy, parties, public offices) and through economic modernization; and (in some cases) 'folklorization' at the shallower cultural levels. Folklorization means essentially 1) the freezing of spontaneous cultural evolution at a certain moment in time (usually, early XIX century); 2) contrived elaboration of a few, selected cultural patterns, in isolation from the the rest of real, everyday culture; 3) limitation of their exhibition to a few selected circumstances; often in order to make money (e.g., to promote tourism); 4) guidance of formal institutions, approved, controlled and funded by the State. The uses of folklore to the state are, in turn, two -fold. On the one hand, it contributes to the overall national identity, seen as the sum and synthesis of several local -regional traditions. On the other, it gives some satisfaction to each of them. It is no surprise that authoritarian and totalitarian (both national -socialist and communist), states have often been in the forefront in the promotion of folklore.

Three explanatory approaches

What happened in the nineteen sixties in Western Europe and Canada was the rather sudden and unexpected activation, often in a 'progressive', and even 'revolutionary' political perspective, of a number of such ethnic-regional (minoritarian, mini-national) groups.

The phenomenon is complex and varied, and has been the subject of a large number of well-known studies (e.g. Smith 1981). No attempt will be made here to review the massive literature; only a few points will be made.

According to one theory, the ethnic-regional movements belong to the wider category of 'new social movements' spawned in the sixties and seventies (the '68). Ethnic groups, immigrant or autochthonous, were seen as a category of repressed, exploited and marginalised minorities, along many others; a new proletariat, and a possible base for revolutionary change of the capitalist, statist structures of domination. This theory was advanced by many left-wing sympathizers of the movements and shared by many of their leaders. The theory was supported by the fact that most ethnic-regional groups were (are) economically deprived; and this was usually imputed to a history of suppression, marginalization, exploitation, and even 'ethnocide' (the familiar 'internal colonialism' argument).

According to others, men rebel not when things are bad, but when they have begun to get better ('revolutions as result of rising expectations'). Applying this principle to the ethnic regional phenomenon, it can be pointed out that it started in a period and in societies marked by strong economic growth, broadening literacy and schooling; and of unfettered liberal democracy. Thus, only after they had secured themselves an acceptable standard of living and access to mass and higher culture, and felt free to participate to the political and safe from retaliations, did ethnic-regional minorities voice their claims. In other words, it is not past suppression, but present perspectives for emancipation the crucial explanatory factor of ethnic-regional revival in advanced countries.

In particular it is pointed out that in many countries ethnic-regional movements correlate temporally with state policies of administrative decentralization (regionalization) and the launching of regional development plans. When the State started to recognize them as collective entities, object of special policies; to give them some level of political subjectivity; and to draw plans for their development, ethnic regions awoke to their plight and claimed for more rights.

A third theory maintains that the emergence of ethnic-regional movements is a manifestation of a much larger, deeper, complex and epochal phenomenon called the advent of post-modern society.

On the macro-level, the crucial fact is the crisis of the (medium-size and small) nation state. By virtue of developments in the technology of communication and transport, this political unit has become too small to perform efficiently its traditional functions, defending citizens from external threats and promoting their prosperity (Aristotle's 'safety and happiness'); the economy and the military have gone sovranational and even global. For the same reasons, it can no longer pretend to control information and culture. Its borders have become very porous. In some parts of Europe, the emotional fascination and identification with the nation-state has been deeply shattered by the horrors of two world wars. In the whole of the continent, European Union has become a competitor of the States as a center of power and loyalty. The budding European institutions have early understood that subnational regionalism is a natural ally of sovranational, continental regionalism (as this phenomenon is called in U.N. parlance), and thus have favoured in many ways its growth. The nation-state has

been one of the hallmarks, and the protagonists, of modernity; its decline in the hearts of men and in the balance of societal power signals the advent of post-modernity.

From a micro-perspective, the core process is the search for a system of identities. Post-modern individual is exposed to global communications, which appear indeed exciting and fascinating, but also chaotic and threatening. He/she is in constant and growing danger of losing his/her identity in the frenetic streams of global information, apparently unstructured and uncontrollable. Some of the old identification mechanisms do not hold any longer; thus the need arises to find new moorings, new roots, new stability, new attachments, new sense of community. It needs not be territorial; but there are biological, 'primordial' drives to this effect. The 'quest for community', the tendency to establish meaningful ties with places (spaces, localities, territories etc.) seems deep and universal. 'Patriotism' is just one expression of this basic human need. According to a growing number of social theorists, the trend toward globalization dialectically generates the counterbalancing trend toward localism (Mlinar 1992). Because its causes and many features are largely different from the old one, it is often called neo-localism (Strassoldo-Tessarini, 1992). Contemporary ethnic-regionalism is a variant thereof.

Ethnic-regional movements, at least in Western Europe, are not marked by the closed, inward- and backward-looking, parochial outlook, typical of traditional ethnic minorities. One of their aims is to translate traditional cultural forms into modern media of expression. They do not reject contemporary culture, but try to select and adapt what is valuable of the old culture; therefore they are often actively engaged in the invention of cultural innovations. Typically, they use modern technologies and forms of communications, in music, literature, performing arts, fashions.

They are not isolated either. They link up across boundaries, hold international meetings, build coordinating bodies and federations, so that at least in Europe one may speak of a 'transnational ethnic-regional movement'. They have also construed a political ideology, centered on the concept of a Europe of small peoples and 'patries', of ethnic groups and regions.

From ethnic-regionalism to state-nationalism

Ethnic regionalism cannot be clearly distinguished from related phenomena. On one side it borders with phenomena variously called localism, municipalism, provincialism, particularism, parochialism, et sim.; on the other side, with full-fledged, old-style nationalism. It is not possible to elaborate on these concepts here. Only two points will be made.

First, the multiplication of ex-colonial nation-states in the last few decades has established a precedent and opened the possibility for a widespread sense of historical injustice. In the present United Nations sit as full members dozens of entities which certainly are a far cry from the idealtype of nation state (in terms of size, capacity for autonomy, historical bases, popular consciousness, cultural homogeneity, etc.). On the other side, innumerable other entities trapped within the boundaries of other states have some of the characteristics of nations. All political systems, be they called states or empires, were formed historically through the same processes of conquest and annexation of one ethnic group (which became nation) on others. The disintegration of the overseas empires has opened the perspective for, and possibly legitimize, the disintegration of those inland, contiguous, usually smaller empires called nation-states.

The caste line between those human groups who had been granted the rights, freedom and privilege of state -nationhood and those who are subject to others and are variously called minorities, linguistic or ethnic groups flies scandalously in the face of the principles of justice, equality and freedom. In this light, there is no ethical reason – although there may be considerable practical ones – to oppose the process of disintegration of the larger, more heterogeneous states along ethnic lines. If language is taken as the simplest defining criterion of ethnicity, a future world of a few thousand basic, 'equal', territorial -political units (states? regions?) can be envisioned.

The second point is that there is a (multidimensional) continuum, or better a hierarchy, between the weaker and the stronger forms of communal identities, from the merely 'vernacular' to the fully -fledged 'national' ones; and that much of the debates and struggles in this field concern the 'true', 'proper', 'right' position of each group in the hierarchy; they are matters of self - and hetero -definition. Rarely can these contrasts be decided by rational, scientific means. Too many of the relevant facts are clouded in fictitious and factious histories; too many have been consciously suppressed by a party, or unduly exaggerated by the other; the 'objective' definitory criteria of the various statuses are too many, often divergent, differently weighted and valued: 'race', autochthony, language, customs, religion, history, economy and so on. More intractable still, because of their volatility (difficulty to measure and mobility through time), are the 'subjective' criteria: identity, will, conscience. Moreover, these are conditioned by a complex causal web of intentional or blind, contingent or structural external forces, which are even more difficult to assess (see, e.g. the debates over 'forced assimilation', which touches nothing less than the theological problem of free will vs. determinism). In sum, no rational calculation of rights and wrongs is possible in this realm. Only the present, effectual ability of the group to enforce his own definition will determine his status in the hierarchical family of peoples. All 'objective' features and 'historical' facts are only symbolic raw materials to fuel the group's (or, better, his leaders' and militants') will -to -power, their readiness to invest, sacrifice, die and kill.

Regionalism and ethnicity in Italy: historical background

The goal of this section is to highlight, in an historical perspective, the main sources of Italian ethnic diversity. It also purports to sketch the history of the building of the Italian nation, since its political unification in 1860 (1870), and the relations of Italian state nationalism to regional ethnic cultures and national minorities. It is hoped that this can prepare the ground for a better understanding of the contemporary emergence of ethnic regional movements, and in particular of the one that has revolutionized contemporary Italy's political system, the Lombard League.

Italy's ethnic composition: main blocs

Italy is a rather elongated country, with a variety of horographic and climatic regions. It stretches from Africa (to which it belongs geologically) to Central Europe. Its original settlers have come, in a number of main different waves, both from the mainland and the sea. Its present ethnic -regional composition is the result of a very ancient and complex population history, which we shall try to summarize and periodize.

Antiquity

In early historical (pre-Roman) times, the peninsula was the home of three main groups of peoples. In the North, earlier settlers (Ligurians, Venetians, and others) had been overwhelmed, since the VI century b.C., by Celts (Gauls), who settled solidly the Alps, the Po Valley and the northern Apennines, and in a more scattered fashion down to Umbria. The central section (from present-day Florence to Naples) was inhabited by a variety of ancient populations, considered the most autochthonous of all Italians; among the most famous, the Etrurians (Tuscans). The Southern coastal areas were settled, since the VIII century b.C., by Greek colonists. Incidentally, it is the Greeks who extended to the whole of the peninsula the name of Italia, originally a district of present-day Calabria inhabited by a tribe of calf worshippers (Vitoloi). Southern Italy became known as Magna Grecia, Greater Greece. Far less important, both numerically and culturally, seems to have been the Phoenician (Punic) colonization of western Sicily and Sardinia.

All these peoples were conquered and given political unity by Rome, in a process of expansion lasting about four hundred years (500-100 b.C.). They adopted Latin language and civilization; but their genetic and cultural differences were not effaced. Differences along the North-South axis can still be rather clearly detected in physical appearance, in the para-geological sediments of language ('dialects') and, according to recent research, in the mixes of blood alleles (L. and F. Cavalli Sforza, 1993).

Middle ages

Unified Roman Italy lasted for about six centuries (100 b.C. to 500 a.C.). Then came other six centuries of invasions and occupations, cutting Italy up in a wide variety of more or less firm political systems. The main invaders from the North-East were two German peoples, Goths and Lombards (Longobards, Long-beards). Goths briefly seized the entire boot, and then melted in it, leaving little (but real) traces. More significant was the second invasion. The Lombards were a race of giants, coming from the shores of the Baltic, after a detour in Pannonia (Hungary). They conquered most of continental Italy and ruled it for about two centuries, (568-787) until they were beaten by another German tribe, Charlemagne's Franks. By then, they had already taken firm root in the country. In both the Goth and the Lombard case, the numbers of the conquerors were small, perhaps 200 000, in comparison to a 'Roman' population of perhaps 5 millions. But their ruling socio-political position permitted them to exert a disproportional role in shaping the new Italians, especially in the North and in the interior parts of center-south. In part they retained their upper-class status within the new Frankish political order; in part they sank and mixed with the rest of the population. It can be said that today's continental Italians are basically the synthesis of a large Latin (Latinized) substratum with a German ruling minority.

The central and southern Lombard Duchies, Spoleto and Benevento, retained their political independence longer than the Northern ones. For a while, also Apulia bore the name of Lombardy. But the name took a firmer root in the North, designating the region around the former capital of the Lombard kingdom, Pavia, thirty kilometers south of Milan.

In this period, important parts of Italy (the northern Adriatic coasts, the middle section (present day Romagna, Marche and Lazio) and portions of the South continued to belong formally, but less and less effectually, to the Byzantine empire. In 830 the Arabs

conquered Sicily, holding it for about two centuries. They also raided many other parts of the country, Rome included. In the first half of the XII century, the whole of Southern Italy fell into the hands of invaders from quite a different quarter, the Normans. By 1071 they had wrestled also Sicily from the Arabs, and organized their whole domain according to a feudal system that would characterize the country until the present century. Byzantines, Arabs and Normans left clear traces both in the genetic stock and in culture. After them, the South was ruled by a succession of foreign powers, each leaving its marks especially on the elites: Germans (House of Svevia), French (Anjou), Catalonians (Aragon), Spanish (Habsburg and Bourbon).

A North-South cleavage in socio-economic structures, probably existing since Roman times and partly due to environmental reasons, was apparent. Southern Italy became a land of extensive dry agriculture, organized in latifundia held by feudal barons. The development of an urban, commercial and manufacturing economy was hindered also by geographical and geopolitical obstacles (lack of mineral resources, difficulty in harnessing the water courses for power and navigation, exposure to Arab raids on the coasts). On the contrary, Northern Italy was characterized by the abundance of water, both for irrigation and for other purposes (transport, power), and also some mineral resources. Moreover, it was open to commerce with her Northern neighbours. This favoured the rise, since the XI century, of the bourgeoisie and the free city-states. Since then, the whole of Europe became acquainted with Lombard manufacturers, merchants and bankers (see London City's Lombard Street). When the Northern city-states had to form an alliance to fend off Barbarossa's imperial army, they called it Lombard League (1167). In the following three centuries, competition among them resulted in the emergence of a smaller number of principalities ('regional states'). Milan was one of the most important; at one moment (1402) it narrowly missed the chance of conquering the whole North-Central Italy. No potentate, Italian or foreign, ever managed to conquer the whole of Italy before the Risorgimento; mainly because of the opposition of the Papacy, jealous of the integrity of his temporal state, placed right across the middle of the booth.

Modernity

By the middle of the XV century, the Italian political system was structured as follows: in the Po Valley, about 12 independent regional city-states; in the central section, 5; in the South, three 'Kingdoms' (Neaples, Sicily and Sardinia), all subject to the king of Aragon. In the following century the North became the battlefield of great European powers, France, Austria and Spain, and some of the regional states lost their independence; the Duchy of Milan was ruled for a century and a half (since 1559) by Spain, and for the same length of time (1713-1859) by Austria. At the beginning of the XIX century, of course, also the whole of Italy, like most of Europe, became a vassal state to the Napoleonic empire.

All these centuries of foreign domination had important effects on many features of Italian culture and character, especially of the upper classes; but hardly any on ethnic composition. The trickle of foreigners who settled permanently as military and civilian officials, technicians, businessmen etc., and mixed with residents has been quantitatively irrelevant.

Lesser Ethnic islands

This sketch of the main ethno-historical traits of present-day Italy should be completed by mention of a number of tiny ethnic islands, usually of a few thousand people each. Along the Alpine arc, from Gressoney to Sauris, some valleys and plateaus on the South side of the Alpine divide have been settled in the Middle Ages by isolated groups of German herdsmen, lumberjacks and miners. In the South, one finds a number of Greek and Albanian communities, who had crossed the Adriatic in flight from the Ottoman invasion of the Balkans, in the XVI-XVII centuries (some Greek communities, however, are considered by some to be direct heirs of Classic and Byzantine Greeks). The same applies to some Croat communities in Abruzzi (central Italy). In Sardinia there are some remnants of a Catalan community (Alghero). There are also Piemontese and Lombard communities, of uncertain origin, in the middle of Sicily and Calabria. Finally, like in most of Europe, Italy houses also, since time immemorial, Jews and Rom (Gypsies). Together with the larger 'national minorities' (French, German and Slovene) along present boundaries, these groups are estimated to amount to about 1% of the Italian population.

Nation building in Italy, 1860-1940

That Italy was a hopelessly diverse country, united only at the high-culture level by a literary language – Dante's, Petrarca's and Boccaccio's Florentine – used only by a restricted elite, was commonsensical until well into the XIX century. The differences in social, economic and cultural characters between North and South were enormous. Very few could envision a unitary Italian nation-state of the French model. Most initiators of the Risorgimento, in the first half of the century, strived only for a federation or confederation of autonomous states free from foreign rule. Only Mazzini's followers insisted on a unitary republic. Then, after the 1848 debacle of the Republican and Federalist forces, the Risorgimento movement was seized by the House of Savoy, a French dynasty which for centuries had slowly enlarged its domain across the Alpine divide. The Austrian rule in the Po valley and Tuscany was ousted mainly thanks to the military intervention of the French emperor, Napoleon III (1859). Piedmont, now become Kingdom of Italy, was basically more than satisfied; but Mazzini's wing, militarily organized by Garibaldi, forced the half-hearted Piedmont to swallow also the South (1860), Veneto (1866) and the papal state with Rome (1870).

For a few years after unification, there were still discussions over the best political-administrative articulation of the new nation state. The federalists lost out; the whole of Italy was to become a strictly centralized state of French type; a Piedmont writ large. Piedmontese legislation and administration was simply extended to the rest of the country; all traces of the former statelets were wiped out, their memory damned. For a good century, Italians were subjected to a relentless indoctrination in unitarian patriotism. 'We have made Italy; now we have to make the Italians' sighed a Piemontese statesman of the time. Italian language had to be taught to a largely illiterate populace that only spoke very different, mutually unintelligible dialects. At that time, it is estimated, only about 2% (outside native Tuscany) knew Italian. Street and squares, down to the tiniest village, were used as textbooks in patriotism: they all were named after the glories and heroes of the Risorgimento. All main public places and buildings were adorned with patriotic monuments.

As in other European countries, also in Italy at the turn of the century nationalism turned into colonial imperialism – the search for 'a place in the sun', the revival of Roman glories; and in 'irredentism', expansionism, the search for contiguous territorial

aggrandizement. Nationalists clamored for chunks of territories belonging to France (Nizza, Savoy, Tunis), Switzerland (Tessin, Grison), Austria, (Tirol, Gorizia, Trieste, Dalmatia) Greece (Ionian islands), Albania, even the United Kingdom (Malta). Italian nationalism ran full course during World War I – called the ‘fourth war of independence’, the crowning of national unification – and turned into Fascism thereafter. All through these patriotic eighty years regional –ethnic variation in Italy was energetically suppressed, except at the folkloric vernacular level. Italy’s history was rewritten to emphasize the Latin heritage; all other components, and especially the Northern ‘barbarians’ were negated. It was taken as a matter of fact that everybody within the state borders had to be an Italian national. If he was not already, he had to become. Border national minorities were subject to an open, official policy of forced assimilation. All their organizations were disbanded, their signs and symbols destroyed, their leaders interned and jailed. Family names were often forcibly Italianized. With the advent of fascism, open violence worsened the minorities’ plight. Italy’s amiable national character turned very ugly at the borders and towards ethnic minorities.

The regionalisation of Italy, 1945 –1971

With the collapse of the Fascist regime, in 1943, Italy was divided into a Fascist ‘Social Republic’ in the north, under German rule, and a ‘Kingdom of the South’, supported by the Allies. The experience was interpreted as due entirely to military contingencies, with no relation to deeper socio –cultural features. It was a matter of course for everybody that after the war Italy would resume its unitary ‘nature’. There were then only some separatist movements in Sicily and Sardinia, quickly mopped up.

The now dominant political forces – Catholic and Marxists – saw excessive nationalism and centralization as two of the main causes and characters of Fascism, and set forth to redress them. The new Italian Republic was to emphasize local autonomies and a regional articulation. 19 ‘historical’ regions were granted some degree of administrative autonomy by the 1948 Constitution. Five of them were peripheral regions, marked by special problems (insularity or presence of national minorities) and these were given special, broader autonomy: Sicily, Sardinia, Valle d’Aosta, Trentino –South Tirol, and Friuli –Venezia Giulia. The former four were already in existence; the last was set up only fifteen years later (1963). The other, ‘normal’ regions, had to wait eight more years (1971). This staggering indicates how hard it was to turn the old centralistic state into a regional one. The basic obstacle was the reluctance of the parties (Christian democrats and their small allies) who had managed to occupy the central ‘control rooms’ to devolve powers to lower instances; some of whom were clearly going to be occupied by the Communists. The opposition to a real regional devolution are by no means over. In the eighties, many political observers noticed a tendency of the Central State to undermine regional autonomies and reclaim its powers. This time the rationale seems to be the inefficiency, waste and corruption said to be rampant in regional administrations, especially in the South.

Ethno -regional and autonomist political movements in Italy, 1945 –1980

In Italy, regional identity feelings translated into political movements and organizations only in a few cases. As we have mentioned, in Sicily during the Allied occupation (liberation) and immediately thereafter, a separatist movement arose; it had murky social, political and ideological bases, and was short –lived. Since the setting up of the regional

autonomous government, there have been no talks of a 'Sicilian autonomist movement'. This was, on the contrary, the case of Sardinia, which established a lively 'Sardinian Action Party'; and even more so of the Valle d'Aosta, whose Union Valdotaïne has always been the ruling party. The Region Trentino -South Tirol has been practically split into the two linguistic provinces, German Bolzano and Italian Trento. In South Tirol, the local regional party (Sudtiroler Volkspartei) dominates political -administrative life, and the Province enjoys a large degree of autonomy. The Trentino question is less linear. Its autonomist movement was rather strong at the end of the war, but then was mostly swallowed up by the Christian Democratic party. It lingered on for thirty years, and more recently seems to have partly contributed to the success of the Green party. In the last few years, it has emerged again, in the wake of the collapse of the Christian -Democratic party.

Also in Friuli -Venezia Giulia one has to distinguish the two parts of the region. Venezia Giulia is an unfortunate name for the Trieste metropolitan area. Trieste is an ethnically mixed city, where Italians always held the dominant position. Since the late XIX century, they grew fearful of Slovene encroachment. In 1945 the city suffered a brief but bloody occupation by Tito's 'slav -communists' and the influx of about 60 000 nationals displaced from Istria and Dalmatia. To this day, Trieste's political life is marked by an almost paranoid, Slav -hating form of nationalism.

Friuli (pop. 900 000) has long nurtured a cultural - historical identity, but only after 1945 this was translated into political terms. A Society for Friulian Autonomy was active from 1945 to about 1953. But the inclusion of Friuli among the 'Special Autonomy Regions' was bitterly fought by the local power elite, fearful that autonomy would foster secessionism and give leverage to Yugoslavian claims over parts of the region. This fear also explains the 15 -year delay in implementation of the Region. In fact, the autonomist feeling has always been very weak, and limited to a handful of intellectuals (like P.P. Pasolini) and lay lower clergy. With the setting up of the regional institutions, the ethnic -regional awareness was reactivated; a Movimento Friuli was founded in 1964, which at the 1968 elections won 12% of the vote. Its platform included: more autonomy for Friuli, from Rome as well as from Trieste; protection and development of the ethnic -linguistic heritage; European federalism (the 'Europe of the Regions' model); environmental conservation; anti -militarism; and, of course, social and economic development. Its ideology was significantly influenced by local 'revisionist' historians and literati, extolling the values of ancient self -government (the 'Patriarchine State'); and by Italian and foreign writers on ethnic -regional matters, such as Sergio Salvi and Guy Heraud; and, later, by some New Left ideas. It became a significant political force, but after a few years it began to decline, due basically to a cleavage between the 'older' clerical -moderate -conservative and the younger marxist -revolutionary wings. In the eighties it was reduced to about 3%, and in the nineties it dissolved (Strassoldo 1985).

The example of Friuli was probably not without significance for the neighboring, much larger Veneto (pop. 4 300 000). In the late seventies, a Liga Veneta (Venetian League) was founded. While Veneto had a much more glorious history (the Serenissima Republic of Venice) it seems that the main initial motivation of the Liga Veneta was the threat to grass root culture and way of life posed by recent immigration from the South, both in the public service sector and in private industry. One of the more characteristic rally cries of the Liga has been ' *Fuori i terroni* ', 'Southerners go home'. The Liga Veneta's electoral support was modest, hovering on the 3 -4% of the regional vote.

Finally, in the eighties also the mighty Lombardy (pop. 9 000 000) got the ethnic regional message.

The case of the Lega Lombarda – Lega Nord

The rise of the Lombard League

As we have seen, the region around Milan has been, since the Late Roman times, one of Italy's powerhouses. This seems originally due to the exceptional productivity of its irrigated agriculture in the plains, to the ironworks in the mountains, and to its position along one of the great commercial axes between the Mediterranean and the North (the Genoa -Rhine axis). As mentioned, Pavia was chosen as the capital of the Lombards' (but it had already been the Goths') Italian kingdom, and became one of the major political powers in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance. Its strong ties with transalpine Europe are witnessed by Milan's Dome, one of Europe's grander gothic cathedrals. Lombardy managed to retain its economic and civil leadership even during the centuries of foreign domination, and in the XIX century jumped swiftly on the train of the industrial revolution. By 1980, it was by far the largest (9 million), richest and most modern region in Italy; indeed, one of the world's great industrial regions.

That an ethnic -regional movement would sway such a region is certainly a most intriguing event. A sizeable social -scientific literature on the League has flourished, and much more is certain to be forthcoming (see references). The story is about as follows. In the early eighties Mr. Umberto Bossi, a restless young man from the a village north of Milan, evolved some interests in vernacular poetry and culture and then in ethnic regional movements. Formerly, he had tried his hand in pop music, enrolled in a medical college and worked briefly for the Communist party. He established ties with a mentor of the Piedmontese small ethnic movement, and called at the Venetian Liga and the Movimento Friuli. He saw some scope for such an initiative also in his home region and, with a handful of cronies, founded the Lombard League. In 1985 they ran in the municipal elections in a few communes of the province of Varese, getting about 2.5% of the votes. Two years later (1987) the League participated to the electoral contest in the 7 northernmost Lombard provinces; again, its overall turnout was around 2 -3%. Enough to stimulate some political and scholarly interest. In the following two years, its share in the whole of Lombardy increased to about 6%: in the highly fractured Italian political system, it had become the fourth major party (after the Christian Democrats, Communists and Socialists, and ahead of many ancient little parties) and an unsettling political phenomenon. At the European elections of 1989 it won 16.4% of the votes, becoming the second major party in Lombardy and a national case; the following year reached the 18 -20%, and the first place in many townships. In 1992 it formed a coalition with the other regional ligas, named Lega Nord. The result was a landslide north of the Po: 25 -30% in Lombardy, Piedmont, Liguria, Veneto, Friuli (figg. 4,5,6).

Proximate causes : radical innovation in contents and form of political communication

This success has many sources. Some are in common with the older Leagues and regional movement, i.e. the complete novelty of the contents and form of the message. Like the Friulian and Venetians movements, the Lega declared the Lombards a nation different from the other Italians; they had therefore right to complete self -government. Moreover, they

were a Central European nation, with little to do with the Mediterranean; geographically, culturally and economically related more to Switzerland and Bavaria than to Southern Italy. As regards the form of the message, it was marked by a radical break with the dominant style of political communication. In contrast with the involute, highly sophisticated political jargon prevalent in Italy, League leaders, even before Bossi, adopted an elementary, uncouth, even vulgar linguistic code. Mr. Bossi perfected the art of speaking like the common man – more cultivated, and not even much brighter than him; someone with whom the populace could completely identify. In contrast with the word balletts of established politicians, he uses the bludgeon. His speeches are full of macho expressions (the most famous being ‘the League has it hard’) outrageous invectives (‘Rome, the Great Robber’) and violent metaphors (including references to kalashnikofs and ‘cutting throats from ear to ear’).

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Proximate causes : traditional organizational style

In contrast to the novelty of its contents and communication form, the organizational style of the League seems quite traditional. It has been criticized for being a ‘Leninist’ type of party, in its high degree of centralization (Mr. Bossi is unquestionably the Boss), the tight gatekeeping (boundary control), the merciless suppression of internal dissent. Also traditional is the emphasis on building a system of specialized ‘collateral’ organizations aimed at different social groups and interests (working class, businessmen, youth, women, catholics, etc.). Like the other parties, the League also uses all the traditional propaganda and fund raising techniques, from party ‘festivals’ to marketing gimmicks. In the early years, however, it differed from them in the very low exposure in the larger, national media; its early growth relied almost exclusively on personal networks and local communication (press and electronic). Finally, the Lombard knack for hard work, discipline and efficiency, but also the organizational skills of Mr. Bossi’s clique, his personal capacities and finally the considerable technical and economic resources of the region, help explain why the Lombard League off, while the others had stalled or failed.

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Deep -seated conditions: the grievances of Northern productive lower middle class

But clearly other explanatory factors, pertaining the ambience conditions of Italy in the mid -eighties, are involved. These may be described as follows:

a) The dissolution of the moral basis of the two main national parties, the Christian Democratic and the Communist one. Their ideological *raison d’etre* had slowly eroded, respectively, with the saecularization of society and the withering away of revolutionary, millenaristic expectations. The PCI (now PDS) has long ceased to appear as a threat to ‘western civilization’. Correspondingly, also the Christian Democratic party lost its function as the ‘dam’ and ‘shield’ against Communism. This process culminated in 1989, as an immediate aftershock of the destruction of the Berlin Wall and the ensuing collapse of the Soviet empire. It is paradoxical that one of its main consequences in Italy has been the fall of the system centered on the Christian Democratic party. The Communist Party adapted more swiftly to the new circumstances, changing its name in Democratic Party of the Left, and jettisoning most of its old official ideological tenets, while keeping its organizational structure and its multifarious roots in society. It suffered sizeable losses, but was able to

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defend its heartland (the regions of Emilia -Romagna, Tuscany and Umbria), thus containing the League steamroller north of the Po river.

b) The sclerosis and overfattening of a 'blocked' party system that did not allow for really free competition in the bid for government. The 40 -years occupation of power by the centrist coalition had inevitably lead to featherbedding, 'consociativist' practices (i.e. the parties in power 'buying out' the opposition) and widespread corruption. Italians have always been cynical on the honesty of their administrators, but only after the Milan 'Clean Hands' operation started (february 1992), was the incredible extent of corruption fully exposed to public opinion. The ensuing disgust gave a huge boost to the League, seen as the only uncompromised and clean political force. But in turn, it is clear that Milan's district attorneys had been encouraged by the winds of political revolt already raised by the Lombard League.

c) Italy's fiscal system had been reformed in the early seventies, and by the end of the decade medium and small businessmen, who until then had largely evaded taxes, began to feel increasing pressure. By the mid -eighties, the pressure on Italian taxpayers in general had reached Scandinavian levels; while the services rendered by the State, it was felt, remained at a 'third -world' level. Moreover, the procedures for paying taxes were becoming ever more difficult, time -consuming and uncertain, due to a continuous outflow of new fiscal measures. Paying taxes had become a torture; and it is well -known, since the Boston tea party, that this is the surest source of resentment against governments and of revolutions.

d) There was also a general feeling, in the productive North, that the Italian central state, occupied by the corrupt party system, wasted hard -won taxpayers' money in an inefficient public sector, in excessive welfare, in ill -conceived aid programs in the South, in clientelism. Deficit spending and a mounting national debt – in the late eighties getting close to one years' GNP – raised nightmares of state bankruptcy and general financial catastrophe.

e) In the minds of a growing number of Northerners, one cause of inefficiency and corruption in the public sphere was imputed to the fact that the public service, at all echelons, was occupied overwhelmingly by Southerners. This is due to the national competition system for public jobs, and the much higher quest for such jobs in the South, where opportunities in the private sectors are rarer. Thus the proportion of Southerners in such services as the military, police, elementary and secondary school, health service, judiciary, mail, rail, revenue, and others are much higher than their share in the population, and many of them have moved to fill such posts in the North. Southerners are also accused of having a special inclination to such low -paying but often non -demanding jobs, and better connections to get them (clientelism). The state was increasingly seen by Northern productive classes as a huge machine to create jobs for Southerners and funnel them to the North. And they grew all the more impatient of being vexed, or at least ill -served, by a State that spoke with a distinct Southern accent.

f) This tied with a lurking 'anti -Southernism', that had already emerged at the times of the great immigration of the late forties and fifties, when hundreds of thousand Southerners had come to work in the fast developing industrial North -West (the triangle between Turin, Milan and Genoa). As it always happens in this cases, the indigenous populations showed some hostility against the culturally different newcomers. Such feelings resurfaced in the seventies, when the immigrant communities were considered breeding grounds of organized crime (encroachment of Mafia, launching of the 'kidnapping industry'). Antisouthernism, an undeniable ingredient of both the Liga Veneta and the Lega Lombarda in their early stages, has in several ways been muffled as they grew. It must be noted that in the Laegue country, so far,

there have been no recorded incidents between supporters and immigrants; on the contrary, many of the latter have joined the League.

g) Another early target of the Leagues is immigration from poorer countries. In the late seventies, Italy, long a country of emigration, began to house growing flows of immigrants from the Third World. Colored crowds began to form, specially in larger cities. This aroused the xenophobic and even racist feelings inevitable in such circumstances. Undeniably, the early League rode this wave; but, as in the case of anti-southernism, the anti-immigration argument has also been toned down in more recent years.

Sociological bases and ideology

In sum, the Northern Leagues may be interpreted as a manifestation of, or reaction to, a number of grievances of the Northern productive strata over many general features of the Italian socio-economic and political system. At the beginning it had a markedly lower-middle-class basis; then it expanded in both directions, the common workers (specially self-employed, artisans, etc.) and upper-middle professional class. Some of its features – social bases, strong centralization, aggressive style – have elicited fears that the League embodies a new form of fascism; but there are many crucial differences. Many studies show (e.g. Mannheim 1991) that support does not come from the traditional right, but from the entire political spectrum, and mostly from the centre (ex-socialists and ex-Christian democrats.). The League may be more rightfully defined as a populist protest movement, or a movement of the 'radical center'.

Another basic diversity between the League and the traditional right concerns the use of violence. Although the communication style of the League – particularly of Mr. Bossi – is often very violent, the League has scrupulously stuck to peaceful political means, and refers constantly to the voting booth as the only weapon of its revolution.

Perhaps more important are differences in ideological contents. The League is squarely opposed to one of the central values of fascism, i.e. nationalism and etatism (statolatry, authoritarianism, the ethical view of the state, etc.). Italian neo-fascists (adherents of the MSI, Movimento Sociale Italiano) were among the staunchest enemies of the League.

At the beginning of the Leagues' career, the question could be raised whether their 'ethno-regionalism' would evolve into a small-scale state-nationalism. Subsequent events showed without any doubt that this was not the case. No reference has ever been made to the Long-beard saga as possible historical legitimization of Lombard independence from Rome or hegemony over Northern Italy. Early attempts to found Lombard identity on cultural and linguistic commonality (the Lombard People, or Nation) failed, because modern Lombardy, as an administrative region, includes provinces with many centuries of separate histories, and speaking very different dialects. Some early attempts to use 'Lombard' as a 'national' official language of the League failed also for more practical reasons (lack of adequate political lexicon). The protection and development of local languages and other features of 'nationhood' was thereafter squarely rejected as an expression of 'vernacularism' and 'folklorism'. The situation is different in other Northern regions, such as Veneto, that sport a more consistent unitary history and homogeneous dialects. The several Northern leagues still refer to their regional constituencies as 'nations' but hardly anybody takes it seriously.

The abandonment of the mini-nationalist rethoric is also correlated to the unification of the several regional leagues under Lombard leadership. Even more than in the case of Lombardy, there is a conspicuous lack of cultural (linguistic, historic, etc.) commonality between the several regions of the North; except, of course, those that brand them all as

Italian. Many studies have shown that the North, as a socio-geographical concept, elicits hardly any feeling of attachment or identity (Strassoldo 1992). The only commonality among the Northerners lies in their socio-economic level of development, in their lurking anti-Southern prejudice and in the common resentment, based on economic interests, against the southern-dominated central State. Accordingly, now the Northern League presents itself as a purely (and complete) political, not ethnic-cultural actor; of national, not regional scope.

Some ambiguities undeniably obtain. For instance, one recurrent proposal of the Northern League has been the 'unification' of Northern Italy in one macro-region called Padania. This is argued in essentially economic-instrumental terms (optimal dimensions, efficiency, etc.). But the suspicion remains that these be only rationalizations, in an acceptable code, of a deeper unrepresentable wish to build a wall against Southern encroachment. It may also be added that the project is not wholly welcome by the other Leagues, fearful of the loss of identity of their own region under Lombard hegemony. Milan would not be accepted much better than Rome as a centralistic capital. In order to dispel such fears, it was suggested that the capital of Padania be not Milan but Mantova.

The anti-nationalism of the League shows also in its loud Europeanism. The distinction between Northern and Southern Italy is often equated as the distinction between Europe and the Third World. Northerners pride themselves of belonging to the Central European, not Mediterranean, culture area. The virtues of Austrian 'good administration' over the Lombardo-Veneto are sometimes contrasted with the vices of Roman rule. More importantly, references to United Europe recur almost obsessively in League rethorics. The arguments are that Italy must 'europeanize', i.e. modernize itself, along the lines suggested by the League; that without such radical reforms she will not be able to meet the standards set for European membership, and risks of being thrown out of the Union and sink into the Mediterranean. In a more radical form, the argument is that if it does not disentangle itself from the deadweight of Mediterranean Italy, the North would lose the 'European train'. Thus, paradoxically, the goal of European integration has unleashed forces pushing for Italy's disintegration.

A third central value in league ideology (or symbol in its code) is federalism. This notion had a curiously contradictory valence in Italian political discourse. Accepted and even praised in reference to international politics (e.g. European federalism) it had become anathema domestically. As we have seen, it was beaten in Risorgimento and never revived. Even parties more opposed to state centralism, in pre- and post-fascist times, spoke only in terms of local autonomy and of regionalism.

The Leagues' vision of a federal Italy has little to do both with the early Risorgimento thinkers and with more recent regionalism. It is also somewhat vague and fluid; more a myth than a goal. At some points, it seemed nothing but another name for secession. The League ideologues stress that the cultural, socio-economic and political diversity of the three parts of Italy are a fact, and that their project only intends to set up a more adequate, rational, equitable institutional framework to keep the three Italies together. This project is perhaps the most unsettling and strongly attacked element of the League ideology, and shows remarkable variations in time, place and circumstances.

More recently, a central place in the League ideology has been taken by the principles of economic individualism, unfettered free enterprise, market economy, deregulation, de-taxation, privatization; what in the eighties came to be known as reaganomics and thatcherism, and is negatively defined as the tendency to remedy the excesses of 'etatisme', socialism, the public economy and the welfare state. This correlates obviously with the interests of the

original core of the Leagues's constituency – small business – and with some of the macroscopic diseases of Italian society. It also is perhaps the less original part of the League's ideology, having been the international conventional wisdom of the eighties. The League is charged of showing the typical latecomer's naive radicalism, and reproached because it advocates such policies with a callous lack of concern ('solidarity' is the magic word) for the weaker parts of society, territorial or otherwise. It has been often accused to side with the better off, the 'strong interests'; to foster narrow egoism, materialistic individualism, particularistic localism. This sort of allegations are easy to make and to rebutt; but hard to substantiate.

Strategies and tactics

The Leagues presented themselves as radically opposed to the established party system. All parties were qualified as 'Roman', and violently attacked as criminal organizations. No horse - trading or coalition formation was thinkable. The Leagues run alone and will seize power alone, when they will get the absolute majority of the votes. This uncompromising attitude has certainly been one of reasons of their success. However, in more recent times it had become obvious that winning 50% plus of electorate in the North is very difficult, except sporadically, in small communities; and utterly impossible south of the Po. This put some serious problems in overall strategy.

A first way out was attempted through expansion in the Centre - South. The League attempted to present itself in some municipal elections there, and to set up confederate Leagues; but the operation failed miserably. On the contrary, some 'Southern Leagues', squarely opposed to the Northern one, came into brief existence. Clearly, an organization with that name and root ideology had no chance outside the North.

The second alternative was secession. The regions where the Leagues would achieve, by democratic means, the absolute majority of the votes, would recall their representatives from the national parliament, stop funnelling their tax money to Rome and set up their common government. This, of course, would open the scenario of a civil war. Mutterings on these subjects circulated from time to time in the early nineties, but ceased in more recent months. On the contrary, the League now emphasizes more and more loudly that only the acceptance of its basic principles – federalism, liberalism, etc. – can save Italy, keep it together and help the South.

The third alternative was, of course, to look for possible allies. This meant the painful abandonment of the radical anti - party stance and the beginning of old -fashioned politicking. But it was the only way out after the municipal elections of november 1993, when the League suffered a stall or even a rollback from previous results; in general, it did not cross the threshold of 25%. In particular, it lost its bid to break out of the 'north of the Po' stronghold and seize the three 'openings to the sea', Genoa, Venice and Trieste. Coalition formation was also imposed by the electoral system unanimously approved by referendum in april 1993.

After some aborted dallying with the moderate -catholic splinter group of Mario Segni, in February 1994 the League stroke an electoral compact with Forza Italia, a brand new political formation just founded by media mogul Silvio Berlusconi.

The socio -cultural and organizational differences between the two forces were enormous. The League began as a spontaneous, grass -roots, genuinely popular movement; Forza Italia is the top - down creation of a single entrepreneur, throwing into the adventure all

the power of his money, his organizational skills and his media empire. The Leagues' style was aggressive, conflictual, raucous, plebeian; Berlusconi's suave, reassuring and classy. The League poised itself as a revolutionary force, set out to destroy the old party system; Forza Italia appeared rather as the anointed heir of the vanished centre parties. Most of all, The League was inevitably, by the logic of its name, a sectional force; Forza Italia appealed, as the name implies, to the whole of the country.

What they had in common was their stark newness, their radical opposition to 'etatism' and socialism, and their emphasis on individualism and free enterprise (liberism). The resulting coalition was therefore christened 'Pole of Liberty'.

Public opinion polls and recent elections had showed that in the Center-South, voters disgusted with old center parties were moving towards the 'Traditional Right', the ex-fascist party, Movimento Sociale Italiano. In order to receive them, the MSI changed his name into 'National alliance' and proceeded to ally itself with Berlusconi's 'Forza Italia'. The resulting coalition, running only in the Centre-South, was called 'Pole of the Good Government'. The League and the Right were in square opposition in a number of basic values – especially on national unity, centralization, and etatism. Again, the only common ground was 'anti-communism'. Thus a peculiar situation obtained, where the logical principle of transitivity was suspended: Forza Italia was allied in the North with the League, and in the South with the traditional right; but the League and the Right remained in opposition.

The electoral campaign was likewise peculiar, the League – and especially its leader, Umberto Bossi – spending most of its energy in savage attacks against the 'fascist' fellow travellers; and also against Berlusconi. What seems to have happened is that public opinion polls where showing that Berlusconi's embrace could turn out to be deadly for the League.

At the national political elections of March 27-28th, 1994, this strange coalition achieved a smashing success: about 43% of the vote nationwide, a comfortable absolute majority in the House of Representatives. But the League suffered the feared loss: about 1.5% nationwide; almost 15% of its electorate had crossed over to Forza Italia.

At the time of this writing (April 1994) the League is struggling to retain its role in spearheading political change in Italy and in avoiding being bowdlerized and assimilated by Berlusconi's party. It is engaged in a desperate attempt to impose, if not its leadership in the coalition, at least its fundamental special value, i.e. 'federalism'. The outcome of this struggle is uncertain.

Discussion

The foregoing narrative of an undoubtedly complex socio-political phenomenon has incorporated, at several points, some theoretical reflections. It would be possible, but space consuming, to elaborate on them systematically and assemble them in a theoretical final chapter. In the light of the scientific perspectives of the Belfast seminar, perhaps two sets of variables can be singled out, and the following and relationships be discussed:

a) those between local, regional, national and international forces (systems, values, interests, images);

b) those between ethnic-regional values and other social, political and economic values/interests/forces.

a) As to the first set, it can be suggested that the state-national level is still, also in the Italian case, by far the most powerful one. Early proposals that the North secede unilaterally from the rest of the country, or that Italy be broken up into three confederate, but

separate republics, seem to have not been taken seriously by the overwhelming majority of citizens, even in the North. The League had to water down the proposal into a vaguer 'federalist model', and to argue that federalism was not meant to break Italy up but, on the contrary, to fix her up; to serve the interests of all its regions (peoples). Conversely, the force of ethnicity (ethnic regionalism, small -nationalism) seems to be very limited in Italy, except for the internationally recognized and protected national minorities (French, German, Slovene) along the Alpine boundary. Regional ethnic patriotism (Venitian, Lombard, Piedmontese, etc.) was important at the beginning of the Leaguist movement, as a radical departure from the dominant political culture of the 'Roman' or 'Italian' party system; but it proved unviable in practice and of limited political appeal. Due to a very long and complex history, Northern Italy is a patchwork of very small -scale (less than provincial level) local cultural identities and dialects. Many studies have shown that Northern Italy was not perceived and felt as an object of positive attachment. None of its local culture and dialects could aspire to hegemonize it; and, because of their primitive and lowlier character, local dialects were not, in general, usable in political discourse. Quite early, the Lombard League had to resign to use standard Italian; and even more necessary this was in communication among the different regional leagues. In other words, neither the Lombard League nor the Northern League had a genuine ethnic -regional common base. As many studies have shown, regional identity in Italy is often artificial and contrived; strong, true attachments are at a much lower level.

An untouched question in this context is the role of religion. Although superficially very weakened, the hold of the Catholic church on Italy's deeper culture and conscience seems to have worked effectively against fragmentation. The commonality of religion between the various parts of Italy certainly favour political unity. Moreover, the Church criticised sternly, in many occasions, the 'egoistical' 'particularistic' 'anti -solidaristic' character of separatist movements, and defended strongly the value of national unity. How effective this was in softening the League's early radicalism has not been assessed; we would suggest it was decisive.

The international level also plays an important role, or rather two; in opposite directions. Firstly, it has fueled the North's growing dissatisfaction with the Italian state. The North, bordering with the more advanced parts of Europe, having easy access to them, and having developed strong economic relations with them, saw in Europe an exemplar of civil development. The central place of Federalism in the Leagues's ideology comes more from the Swiss, German and Austrian examples than from domestic traditions. The 'Free state of Bavaria' was envied as an ideal model for Lombardy. It was pointed out that the protection and valorization of local, regional, ethnic, minority cultures was an official European policy. Full integration into the United Europe was stressed as a paramount goal, which the backwardness of the Italian state, and especially of the South, would jeopardize. Thus the international, European level exerted a strong, albeit wholly unintentional, pull in the rise of the Northern Leagues.

On the other hand, it seems clear – although no documents are at hand – that the international level also discouraged the Northern League's early secessionist tendencies. No known political force, in Europe or in the world, could wish the disintegration of Italy; specially after the Yugoslav precedent. If any search for foreign support was tried by the League, it must have found icy reception. Thus it can be safely hypothesized that the international system worked against the League's early separatism and for the integrity of the Italian nation -state.

The role of the border deserves some special discussion in the context of the Belfast seminar. A glance at the electoral map makes it evident that the ethnic (national minority) parties are a border phenomenon, and that the regional Leagues started out from border areas. This is particularly true of the Lombard League, whose cradle and core lies within a handful of kilometers from the Swiss border. Unclear is (excluding sheer chance) the relative weight of the type of causality involved: was it more of a synchronic -geographic type, or longitudinal -historic? Was it more active -behavioral or more static -sedimentary? What was more important: the easy, and envious, knowledge the citizens of northern Lombardy could gain of their fellow -Europeans across the border, or the fact that millennia -long historical vicissitudes of the area crossed by the border had made Lombards (and Piedmontese, Venetians, etc.) more similar, in some ways, to Swiss and Bavarians than to Southern Italians? In the first case, the effect of the border is to facilitate communication and knowledge; in the second, the artificiality of political boundaries, separating culturally homogeneous areas, is highlighted. No evidence is at hand to solve this question; but it seems obvious that both factors obtain.

b) As to the second set of relationships, it seems clear that the appeal to ethnic culture, values and language is of quite minor and diminishing importance in Italian socio-political events, in comparison to economic, material interests; and that territorial (community, primordial, personal) ties, albeit still meaningful, are meeting a strong competition by mass, and especially electronic, communication. The Northern Leagues started out stressing regional identities, in opposition to the national identity imposed by the centralistic, 'Roman' state; and especially in opposition to other cultures (first the Southerners, then the Third -world immigrants). But such outlooks were easily liable to devastating charges of bigotry and racism; and although they still sit deep in guts of many rank -and -file militants, they have been wholly suppressed in the official discourse of the Leagues. Instead, the centerstage has been taken by economic issues: reduction of fiscal pressure and of the public sector, deregulation, privatization, less welfare state, incentives to small business, 'fiscal federalism', and so on. The Leagues still make some token gesture towards regional ethnicity and sub -nationalism; they still refer, sometime, to the 'nations' and 'peoples' (Piedmontese, Lombard, Venetian, Friulian, etc.) of which Italy is 'made up'; but this rethoric is more and more empty and embarrassing.

In other words, it seems that regional -ethnic identities (and their negative radicalizations, 'racism' and 'xenophobia') provided the emotional bases, the raw resources for initial political mobilization; but that they could be accepted by, and used in, the political system of modern Italy, only after transformation (rationalization, legitimization) into something else: the federalist ideology. Raw racism and xenophobia proved unacceptable by a liberal -democratic political system, such as the Italian one undoubtedly is; and positive local regional ethnic identities proved too weak to sustain, alone, a political party.

This process can also be characterized as a transformation from a primordial, naive, 'closed' ethnic identity, to a modern, 'open' one, that recognizes the existence and equal dignity of other identities; from a merely dissociative, boundary -building, separatist policy to one that takes responsibility and feels solidarity for the other subjects.

The prevalent power of national values, on the other hand, is clearly demonstrated by the triumph, at the elections of March 1994, of the parties estolling them: 'Forza Italia' and 'Alleanza nazionale'. It can also be added that a third competing coalition, mainly composed of ex -Christian Democrats, 'Patto per l'Italia', also put its stakes on the national reflex; but that was not enough to save it.

The March 1994 elections, which swept away the party system that had ruled Italy for almost half a century (Christian -democratic, Socialist, and other minor center parties), will certainly be the subject, in the near future, of much research. Here it can be pointed out that the campaign was marked by an almost exclusive emphasis on economic issues, by a wholly incongruous and inflated contraposition between Left and Right (Communism and Fascism, Progress and Liberty, etc.) and that it was carried out to a large extent on television. The triumph of Berlusconi seems to be due to four main reasons: 1) his image as a successful entrepreneur – a very rich self -made man – appealing to the country's more 'achieving', upward -mobile strata, and to the more hedonistic ones; but also to the more deprived, the young, and many others; 2) his image as a complete newcomer in politics, expressing the country's unremitting rejection of the old, corrupt political class; 3) his appeal to national unity and solidarity, in contrast with the League's sectionalism; and, 4) his command of the mass media, both in the sense of controlling them and of being a consummated mass communicator. The weight and order of importance of these (and other) factors are open to debate. But that a party could be assembled from scratch in two months and capture something like a third of the Italian electorate certainly is to be imputed, to a large extent, to the power of electronic communication. This means, conversely, the effacing and bypassing of those communications that are grounded in personal contacts, face -to-face relations, real human interaction, community, and locality. Whether this has been a temporary short -circuit – and a shock – or a permanent feature of the Italian socio -political system, remains to be seen.

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