

Borders, Nations and States

Frontiers of Sovereignty in the New Europe

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4 Ethnic-regionalism versus the state: The case of Italy's Northern Leagues

Raimondo Strassoldo

Except for its small French, German, and Slovene border minorities placed along the Alpine arc, Italy has usually been thought of as an ethnically homogeneous nation. Thus, the explosive rise of the Lombard League since the late 1980s has been a surprise to everyone. The Lombard League, enlarged in 1992 as the Northern League, was one of the key factors as well as symptoms of the sudden dissolution of the exceptionally stable party system that had ruled Italy for forty years. The League questioned the very idea of Italian national unity, at one point proposing the break-up of the country into three sovereign, albeit confederate, Republics. Some feared that Italy might go the way of Yugoslavia, The Caucasus and Ireland. Calls to arms, more or less metaphorical, were heard.

One of the issues raised by this phenomenon is the place of the Lombard/Northern leagues within the ethnic-regional or mini-national movement which has characterized some modern Western societies in the 1970s (Smith 1981). The Lombard League certainly started out as such a movement, as the very name implies; it is also clear, although usually suppressed by League leaders and overlooked by observers, that it took the lead from earlier ethnic-regional movements in other parts of Northern Italy (*Movimento Friuli* and *Liga Veneta*)

A second issue, not unrelated to the first, concerns the role of space (place, territory, region) in shaping this political phenomenon (Agnew 1987), in particular, the extent to which it can be seen as an example of the centre-periphery opposition (Shils 1975; Gottmann 1980). Most ethnic-regional movements develop in peripheral areas. The Lombard League is no exception: the electoral force of the Northern League climaxes in the border areas. The connection between ethnic-regional movements and peripheral location is often seen in economic and other material disadvantages such as "marginalization"

and "internal colonialism". But this is not the case with the Lombard and the Northern leagues: their home districts are socio-economically the most developed in the country. They were, however, or were believed to be - which in politics does not make much difference - peripheral in reference to the national political system, centered in Rome and perceived as largely shaped by Southern mores and interests. The role of the Leagues in shaking and perhaps renovating the Italian political system reminds one of Ibn Khaldoun's ancient theory on the cycle of corruption of the centres and regeneration from the peripheries.

Much less attention has been given so far to the linkages between the Leagues and international affairs, besides the rather obvious observation that they reaped large electoral benefits from the end of the "communist threat" and therefore also of the "anti-communist dam", the Christian Democratic party (DC). No systematic studies are at hand on the linkages between the Leagues and the process of European integration and the ensuing changes in the role of borders; linkages which are rather well established in the case of European ethnic-regional and of "frontier regions" movements (De Rougemont 1968; Strassoldo 1973). The fact that the strongholds of the Leagues all lie along Italy's Northern boundary is certainly meaningful, but liable to different explanations. The European rhetoric was quite prominent in the early stages of the movement, when the cultural differences between North and South were emphasized and traced back to the historical, geographical and even racial proximity, respectively, of the North to Central Europe and of the South to the Mediterranean. One of the main models for a Federated Italy was Germany, and for Lombardy, the Free State of Bavaria. One of the chief arguments for the threatened secession was that the North was already fully equipped for European Unity, and did not want to "lose the European train" because of Rome's and the South's backwardness. Thus, the Leagues can be seen, to some extent, as a dislocation of domestic political equilibria brought about, quite unwittingly, by the process of European integration. On the other hand, the abandonment of the separation hypothesis has certainly something to do with its clear unacceptability by the rest of Europe.

In this chapter I provide a sketch of the Italian ethnic-regional movements and politics since 1945, an analysis of the general conditions and causes of the rise of the Lombard/Northern League, and a discussion of its changing ideology, strategies and tactics, up to the end of 1994.

Methodologically, this study is based on the sociological literature already accumulated in Italy and elsewhere on the subject (Mannheimer 1991; Diamanti 1993; Schmidke 1993; Cartocci 1994; Poche 1994); and on several years of attentive scrutiny of the phenomenon as it appears in the daily stream of information from general media. Of this, however, no formal record has been taken nor evidence or reference given.

Ethnic regionalism in Italy, 1945-1980

Italy is a rather elongated country, with a 2500 year history. Its different parts have been subject to a wide variety of demographic, cultural and political influences. When, towards the middle of the nineteenth century, times were ripe for political unification, it was generally held that the new state should have a federalist character, in order to take into account the deep regional differences. Unity was instead achieved in 1861 through sheer diplomatic-military means. Piemontese centralism prevailed, and an encompassing "nation-building" effort was set in motion. Fascist nationalism was only a culmination of this process. All through these obsessively patriotic eighty years the rule was enforced that every Italian citizen should also be or become culturally Italian. The larger border national minorities (French, German, Slav) were subject to ruthless de-nationalization policies (suppression of any outer signs of culture, interdiction of institutions and associations, prohibition of language, change of personal and local names, dilution through planned immigration from other regions, etc.). With Fascism, open violence against them (especially against the Slovenes) was let loose. Regional-ethnic variation within Italy was denied or ignored, except as a dying object for folkloric studies.

By 1943, the unity of the Italian nation was strong enough to survive the experience of the splitting of the country into a Fascist "Socialist Republic" in the North, under German rule, and a "Kingdom of the South", supported by the Allies. The experience was universally interpreted as due entirely to military contingencies, with no relation to deeper socio-cultural features.

Of the political forces that replaced Fascism some, like the Christian Democrats, were genuinely opposed to nationalism and centralization, and favoured a regional reform; others, like the Marxists, held more ambiguous and instrumental views. The post-war coalition governments recognized the four autonomous regions already set up under international or local pressure: French-speaking Val D'Aosta, German-speaking South Tyrol, plus the two island-regions of Sicily and Sardinia. The new republican Constitution of 1948 provided for a fully regionalistic state structure. Besides the four already in existence, a fifth "special autonomy" region was provided for, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, where the Slovene minority lived. The rest of the mainland was subdivided into fourteen "ordinary autonomy" regions. However, the constitutional provision was not implemented for many years: Friuli-Venezia Giulia only came into existence in 1963, and the "ordinary" regions had to wait until 1971. This staggering is due basically to the reluctance of the governing parties (Christian Democrats and their allies) to devolve central powers; especially unsettling was the perspective of having the middle section of the country (Emilia-Romagna, Toscana, Umbria) ruled by the Communists. Other arguments against the regions - threat to the national unity, politicization of administration, inefficiency, waste - were variously used by different parties.

While the three "special autonomy" border regions were the result of international pressure to protect national minorities, Sicily and Sardinia were granted their special autonomy on the bases of their insularity. But this geographical, spatial feature is inseparable from some feeling of cultural identity. For example, during the Allied military government a separatist movement arose in Sicily. This movement had dubious social, political and ideological bases, linked in part to the mafia, but it was snuffed out with the implementation of the regional autonomy. Since then there have been no signs of a Sicilian ethnic party or movement. In Sardinia, on the other hand, a "Sardinian Action Party" was established right after the fall of fascism, whose political fortunes have oscillated with each election, reaching at times even the highest posts in the regional government. It strives for ever more autonomy from Rome, sometimes with separatist overtones, and is engaged, with various degrees of intensity, in the protection and development of the Sardinian cultural and linguistic heritage. As in Sicily, however, one basic problem in this field is that both islands lack a really unitary "regional language", and no internal "dialect" is acceptable to the speakers of other varieties.

As a consequence of international treaties and moral support from "mother" nations beyond the state border, ethnic/national parties command a large majority of voters in the two areas where the French (Franco-provençal) and the German minorities live, i.e., Valle d'Aosta and Alto Adige (South Tyrol) respectively. In the latter case, the situation is a bit confused by the fact that officially there is one autonomous region comprising two autonomous provinces, Alto Adige / South Tyrol and Trentino; but since 1972 the Region is only an empty shell. The German minority in South Tyrol - which is a solid majority in its own province - is clearly of the national, and not of the ethnic-regional, type, and after a long and hard struggle has been granted a large degree of autonomy. The Trentino question is less well-known and less linear. This is an Italian-speaking mountain area which only came under Italian administration in 1918. Nostalgia for the higher degree of local autonomy enjoyed under the previous Austrian rule lingered on, and re-surfaced after 1945 in the form of a strong localist-autonomist movement, which cannot be called ethnic-regional because of the lack of distinctive language claims. In the following years it was subsequently mostly swallowed up by the Christian Democratic party, surviving only as a splinter party (*Partito Popolare Trentino Tirolese*, PPTT). In the last few years it has flourished again.

Also in Friuli-Venezia Giulia one has to distinguish the two parts of the region. Venezia Giulia is a misnomer for the city of Trieste, an ethnically mixed city of the Hapsburg empire where Italians always held the dominant position. Since the late nineteenth century they grew nervous about Slovene encroachment, and developed ever stronger pro-Italy attitudes. In 1945 the city suffered a brief but murderous occupation by Tito's troops and received 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 (population 900,000) has long nurtured a cultural-historical identity, but this was translated into political terms only after 1945. A Society for Friulian Autonomy was active from 1945-53. But the inclusion of Friuli among the "special autonomy regions", requested by only a few local Christian Democrats, was bitterly opposed by many local nationalists, fearful that autonomy would foster secessionism and give leverage to Yugoslavian claims over parts of the region. This fear also helps to explain the fifteen year delay in implementation of the Region. In fact, the autonomist feeling has always been very weak, and limited to a handful of lay intellectuals (like Pier Paolo Pasolini) and lower clergy. With the setting up of the regional institutions, ethnic-regional awareness was reactivated; a *Movimento Friuli* was founded in 1964, which at the 1968 elections won twelve per cent 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, and perhaps most important of all, social and economic development. Its ideology was significantly influenced by local "revisionist" historians and literati, extolling the values of ancient local autonomous political systems (the Friulian "patriarchal state") and literature; by the contemporary foreign and Italian writers on ethnic-regional matters (G. Heraud, R. Laffont, S. Salvi, etc.); and, later, by some ideas from the New Left. With this mixture, the Movimento Friuli managed to become a significant political force, but in the late 1970s its fortunes declined, due basically to a cleavage between the older clerical-moderate-conservative and the younger marxist-revolutionary wings. In the 1980s it was reduced to about three per cent (Strassoldo 1985) and in the 1990s it dissolved. Other political formations took its place (*Lega Autonomia Friuli*), with about the same low level of electoral turnout.

The example of Friuli was probably not without significance for the neighboring, much larger Veneto (population 4,300,000). In the late seventies, a *Liga Veneta* (Venetian League) was founded. While Veneto had a much more glorious history (for example in the Republic of Venice), the main initial motivation of the *Liga Veneta* was simply the perceived threat to local culture and way of life posed by recent immigration from the South, both in the public sector and in private industry, spurred by the region's lively rates of economic growth. One of the more characteristic rally cries of the *Liga* was *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 1980s mighty Lombardy also got the ethnic-regional message.

The case of the Lega Lombarda - Lega Nord

Since Late Roman times the region around Milan has been one of Italy's powerhouses. This was originally due to the exceptional productivity of its

agricultural in the plains, to the ironworks in the mountains, and to its position along one of the great commercial channels between the Mediterranean and the North (the Genoa-St. Gothard-Rhine valley axis). In Roman times, Milan had been one of the imperial capitals; after its decline, neighbouring Pavia was chosen as the capital of the Goths' and then the Lombards' (Long-beards) Italian kingdom. In the new millennium Milan again became again one of the major economic and political powers. Its strong ties with transalpine Europe are witnessed by its 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 nineteenth century was ready for the industrial revolution. By 1980, it was by far the largest (9 million), richest and most modern region in Italy and one of the world's great industrial regions.

That an ethnic-regional movement would sway such a region is certainly a rather intriguing event. In the early 1980s Mr. Umberto Bossi, a restless young man from the a village north of Milan, developed some interests in vernacular poetry, culture and ethnic regional movements. Formerly, he had tried his hand as a pop singer, enrolled in a medical college and worked briefly for the Communist party. He established ties with a mentor of the small Piedmontese ethnic movement, B. Salvadori, and called at the *Venetian Liga* and the *Movimento Friuli*. He saw some scope for such an initiative 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 seven 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 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 attaining national prominence; the following year its vote reached 18-20%, and the first place in many townships. In 1992 it formed a coalition with the other regional leagues, named *Legga Nord*. The result was, in comparison to the glacial pace of Italian electoral change, a true landslide north of the Po: 25-30% voteshare in Lombardy, Piedmont, Liguria, Veneto, Friuli.

Sources of success

This success has many sources. As with the older Leagues and regional movements, it provided a new political message. For the first time in modern history, the Lombards were declared a nation different from the other Italians,

with full rights to self-government. A complete break with tradition was carried out also in its form of political discourse. In contrast with the convoluted, often byzantine, highly sophisticated style of political communication prevalent in Italy, League leaders adopted an elementary, uncouth linguistic code. Mr. Bossi perfected the art of speaking like the common man, someone with whom the populace could completely identify. In contrast with the word ballets of established politicians he used the bludgeon. His speeches were 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 Kalashnikovs and "cutting throats from ear to ear"). He also shows an utter disregard for consistency in thought and proposals; his dramatic announcements and sudden about-faces are so frequent as to legitimize the suspicion that they are carefully planned to keep the public constantly dazzled. In some ways, he embodies the ancient figure of the rabble-rouser; in others, the consummate post-modern politician.

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 and the merciless suppression of internal dissent. Also traditional is the building of a system of specialized "collateral" agencies 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 it suffered from very low exposure in the larger, national media; its growth relied almost exclusively on personal networks and local press and electronic communication. Finally, the Lombard knack for hard work, discipline and efficiency, allied to 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 took off, while the others had stalled or failed.

Favourable structural conditions

Wider structural conditions were also conducive to the growth of the League. In the late 1980s, the moral basis of the two main national parties, the Christian Democratic and the Communist, was dissolving. Their ideological "raison d'être" had slowly eroded respectively with the secularization of society and the withering away of revolutionary, millenaristic expectations. The PCI, *Partito Comunista Italiano* (now PDS, *Partito della Sinistra*) had 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 aftershock of the

destruction of the Berlin Wall and the ensuing collapse of the Soviet empire. It is paradoxical that in Italy one of the main consequences of the fall of Communism has been the crumbling of the system erected against it. The Communist Party adapted swiftly to the new circumstances, changing its name to Democratic Party of the Left, and jettisoned most of its old doctrine, while keeping its organization and its multifarious structural roots in society. It suffered sizeable losses, but was able to hold its heartland (the regions of Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany and Umbria), thus containing the League steamrollers north of the Po river.

The presence of a powerful Communist Party had resulted, for several decades, in a "blocked" party system in which there was no acceptable alternative to the Centrist governments. This inevitably led to "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 then as the only wholly uncompromised and clean political force. But it cannot be ruled out that Milan's prosecutors had been encouraged by the winds of political revolt already raised by the Lombard League.

Italy's fiscal system had been reformed in the early 1970s, and by the end of the decade small businessmen, who until then had largely skirted taxes, began to feel increasing pressure. By the mid 1980s, 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. As is well-known since the Boston tea party, this is the surest recipe for revolution.

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 and in ill-conceived aid programmes in the South. Deficit spending and a mounting national debt - in the late 1980s getting close to one year's GNP - raised nightmares of state bankruptcy and general financial catastrophe.

In the minds of a growing number of Northerners, one cause of inefficiency and corruption in the public sphere was 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 fewer. Thus the proportion of Southerners in such services as the military, police, elementary and secondary schools, 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.

This linked with a lurking "anti-Southernism", that had already emerged at the times of the great immigration (1950-1970), when hundreds of thousands of Southerners had come to work in the fast developing industrial North-West (the triangle between Turin, Milan and Genoa). As usually happens in such conditions, the indigenous populations showed some hostility against the newcomers. Such feelings hardened in the 1970s, when the immigrant communities were considered breeding grounds of both petty and organized crime (encroachment of Mafia, launching of the "kidnapping industry"). Anti-southernism, an undeniable ingredient of both the *Liga Veneta* and the *Legha Lombarda* in their early stages, has in several ways been muffled as they grew. It must be noted that in the League country, so far, there have been no recorded incidents between supporters and immigrants; on the contrary, many of the latter have joined the League.

Another early target of the Leagues was immigration from less developed countries. In the late 1970s, Italy, long a country of emigration, began to house growing flows of immigrants from the Third World. This aroused xenophobic and racist feelings especially in large cities. Undeniably, the early League rode this wave of unrest; but, as in the case of anti-southernism, the anti-immigration argument has also been toned down in more recent years.

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, among workers (especially self-employed artisans) and among the upper-middle professional class. Some of its features - social bases, strong centralization, aggressive style, early "racist" veneer - have elicited fears that the League embodies a new form of fascism; but differences are deep. To begin with, throughout its career the League has scrupulously shunned recourse to any violence other than verbal. Secondly, its central official values, like federalism, localism, autonomy, anti-etatism, are squarely opposite to those of fascism. Thirdly, events in 1994 amply demonstrated the incompatibility between the two. That its anti-fascist stand is earnest has been now amply acknowledged also by most of its political opponents, and all studies show that the support does not come primarily from the traditional right, but from the entire political spectrum, perhaps mostly from the centre (from former socialists and Christian Democrats). The League is now usually defined as a populist protest movement, or a movement of the "radical, angered centre".

The evolution of the League's ideology

In its short life - hardly a decade - the Lombard/Northern League has exhibited a remarkable capacity to adapt its ideology to political necessities. In earlier years, the question could be raised whether its Lombard "ethno-regionalism" would evolve into a small-scale state-nationalism. Subsequent events showed without any doubt that this has not been the case. 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. The protection and development of local languages and other features of "nationhood" and expressions of "vernacularism" and "folklorism" were thereafter squarely rejected. 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 constituencies as "nations" but few take it seriously.

The abandonment of the nationalist rhetoric is also correlated to the unification of the several regional leagues under Lombard leadership. There is a conspicuous lack of cultural commonality between the several regions of the North. Piedmont, Liguria, Lombardy, Emilia, Veneto and Trentino are the result of at least a thousand years of separate political histories, and this has left its sediments in collective memories and languages (dialects). Several studies have shown that Northern Italy, as a socio-geographical concept, elicits hardly any feeling of attachment or identity (Strassoldo 1992a). Accordingly, the 1992 project to break up Italy into three separate sovereign republics in the North, Centre and South, bound only by a federal-confederate compact, failed to enthuse the League electorate. In more recent times it was described by the League leadership as a mere metaphor.

A more moderate arrangement was then advanced, whereby the concept of sovereign republics was substituted by that of "macro-regions" ("Padania" in the North, "Etruria" in the Centre, and simply "South" for the third one). This model was based on more economic-instrumental arguments (optimal dimensions, efficiency, etc.) than on historic-cultural ones. But this too failed to draw much support.

At the end of 1994 a third model was proposed, in the guise of a constitutional reform project, according to which Italy would stay one, but Federal, Republic: the present twenty regions would be compacted into half as many, endowed with much larger powers and re-christened "states"; Rome would retain its capital status within a "Federal District". This very "American" project, presented on very open terms, clearly goes a long way towards compromise. All other parties have received and even praised it as a serious basis for discussion. The reaction of the representatives of traditional regional identities remains to be seen.

The League's insistence on such projects has brought about an important change in Italian political discourse: the wide acceptance of the concept of federalism. Federalism was the prevalent political doctrine in the early Risorgimento period, but for more than a century after the unification under Piedmont, it was damned as a reactionary device to revive the old statelets and principalities and as a threat to national unity. Often praised as good for other countries, like Switzerland and the United States, and as a framework for inter- and supra-national integration, it was considered unsuitable for Italy, for a variety of reasons. Initially, the League's emphasis on federalism was taken by almost all other parties as separatism in disguise; more recently, it has been accepted as a legitimate and positive request for more local autonomy, state decentralization and regional devolution. Almost all Italian political parties now declare themselves federalist - in some sense and to some measure.

A second core-value of League ideology, Europeanism, has been considerably neglected in more recent years, following the decline of anti-Southern polemics. As we have seen, one of the main concerns behind the rise of the League was that the backward South would impede the progressive North to stay in the core countries of the United Europe, and drag it down into the Mediterranean and the Third World. This was the nightmare behind the Northerners' separatist temptations, to which other traditional anti-southern motifs and stereotypes undoubtedly accrued. But, as already seen, this strand in the League's political culture immediately became indefensible: it aroused charges of racism, was severely criticised also by the Church, became an embarrassment in the face of the growing numbers of Southern immigrants who wanted to join the League, and blocked its plans to spread in the South. In sum, as the league pursued political respectability and national responsibilities, it had to drop the anti-Southern motive. As it did this its European argument also lost its teeth, because in itself Europe is an uncontentious issue in Italy. For many years, all political parties in Italy have supported European integration; early dissent of the Communists has long since been converted. Many of the leading Italian advocates of the European idea have come from the South. As is well known from many public opinion polls, Italians have always declared themselves more enthusiastically pro-Europe than most other member nations. The reason why the European argument has almost disappeared from recent political discussions in Italy is that everybody agrees on it, and "holier than thou" arguments do not arouse audiences.

More recently, a central place in the League ideology has been taken by the principles of economic individualism, unfettered free enterprise, market economy, deregulation and privatization; which in the 1980s came to be known as Reaganomics and Thatcherism. This correlates with the interests of the original core of the League's constituency - small business - and with some of the macroscopic diseases of Italian society (huge state debt). But the new emphasis on these values is a consequence of the League turning its assaults against the Left. By the end of 1993, the combined effects of Operation Clean

Hand and of the League had been the practical destruction of the centrist government parties - Christian Democracy, Socialists, Liberals, Republicans, Social-democrats. The only traditional political forces left standing were the former opposition parties, at the right and the left. The rightist one seemed too small and irrespectable as a competitor; so the League's wrath turned on the Democratic Party of the Left. The League's campaign against *statismo* (statism), *assistenzialismo* (welfarism) and public intervention in the economy and so on was aimed specifically against the former Communists. This emphasis however is the less original part of the League's ideology, having been international conventional wisdom of the eighties. It was also reproached (for instance, by the Church) as a symptom of egoistical particularism of the better off groups of Italian society, both territorial and otherwise. In other words, the League's new emphasis on market and business values prompted the inevitable countercharge of lack of social and national "solidarity".

Strategies and tactics

In the course of only five years, the League's strategy and tactics changed remarkably. At the outset it held an uncompromising stance against the established party system (*partitocrazia* or party-crazy). The first goal was to reach absolute majority in the North, and from this power base start negotiations for a radical federalist reform of the Italian state (the "Three Republics" idea). To this goal, a penetration of federalist ideas and movements in the Centre-South was envisaged and attempted, but failed utterly. By 1993 it was clear that the League had insurmountable difficulties in spreading south of the Po river, and that it was losing momentum even in the home bases. The mayoral elections in November 1993, held in the new "majority system", marked the tapering off of the movement's growth curve and an embarrassing failure of the much-publicized drive to reach the "openings to the sea", i. e., to capture the city-halls of Genoa, Venice and Trieste. The polls showed that the centrist electorate would not simply turn to the League, but tended to turn out in all directions; in larger cities and south of the Po river it tended to turn rather evenly both to the traditional left (ex-Communists and allies) and toward the traditional right (*Movimento Sociale Italiano*). A big surprise came from the South, where it was generally thought that the old centrist parties would be able to hold thanks to the entrenched patronage system; instead, here too the left-right polarization obtained.

At this point it was inevitable for the League leadership to revise its strategy. Unilateral secession, with the inevitable armed confrontation, was not taken as a serious option by anybody; the alternative could only be coalition formation with other parties. This was also imposed by the logic of the new electoral system, introduced by almost unanimous plebiscite in April 1993. After some dallying with the moderate-Catholic splinter group of Mario Segni, in February

1994 the League struck an electoral deal with *Forza Italia*, a brand-new political formation just founded by tycoon Silvio Berlusconi.

The socio-cultural and organizational differences between the two forces were enormous. The League was a spontaneous, genuinely popular movement; *Forza Italia* is the sudden, top-down creation of a single entrepreneur, throwing into the venture all the power of his money, his business organization, and his popular image as a very successful self-made man. This at least is the prevailing view; some plot-theorists think that it had been in the making for many years. The League's early growth was based on grass-roots, personal interactions, with very little, and mostly derisive, exposure in the media. *Forza Italia* was a virtual creation of Berlusconi's media empire. The League's style was aggressive, confrontational, raucous, plebeian; Berlusconi's suave and reassuring. 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. 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. Finally, the League appeared bent on breaking up Italy; *Forza Italia* struck all the chords of deep-seated national patriotism.

Against these differences, there were three basic commonalities: both forces were new (one almost, the other wholly) in the political arena, and thus free from the corruption of the old party system; both appealed to basically the same social groups, the productive middle classes (with a more lower-middle and working-class slant for the League, and a more upper-middle class one for *Forza Italia*); and both shared a moderate, "petit-bourgeois" ideology, pitched somewhat artificially in shrill anti-communist tones.

Tentatively, a fourth commonality may be suggested: their roots in the Milan area. The hypothesis may be advanced that the whole of Italy was tired of a political system perceived as dominated by Roman and Southern mores, and was ready to experiment the hegemony of Italy's Moral Capital, as Milan has been known for generations.

However, the Centre South kept some of its differences. While widely accepting Mr. Berlusconi, it lacked the counterpart of a Mr. Bossi. Instead it had a leaning toward the traditional, neo-(ex-, post-) Fascist Right. The young leader of the *Movimento Sociale Italiano*, Mr. Gianfranco Fini, was quick to grasp the opportunities opened by the crumbling of the old centrist parties. He managed to tone-down the Fascist heritage, and succeeded in presenting his party as a moderate-conservative one, clean and patriotic. At the mayoral elections of November 1993, he enjoyed good success all over the country, and a large one in the Centre-South. In the wake of this, a coalition was formed in this part of Italy between Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* and Fini's party, now re-christened *Alleanza Nazionale*.

Thus a strange situation obtained: in the North, a coalition between Berlusconi and Bossi (*Polo della liberta*); in the Centre-South, a coalition between Berlusconi and Fini (*Polo del Buon Governo*). But Bossi, with his

typical nonchalance for formal logics, negated the transitivity rule, and thundered that he was not, and would never be, allied with "fascists".

The League's campaign for the March 1994 national political elections was likewise paradoxical: the main target for attack - often savage, as usual - was not the opposing left-wing coalition, "The Progressives", but the "fascists", and to a minor extent, *Forza Italia* itself.

Against most expectations this strange coalition achieved a smashing success: about 43 % of the vote nationwide, gaining a comfortable absolute majority in the House of Representatives. Within it, however, the big winners were Berlusconi and Fini; the League lost almost 15% of its electorate.

The League was now trapped. Having chosen to play national democratic politics and to drive for government positions in Rome, it had inevitably become a minor force (7 % nationwide). Its more moderate supporters spilled over to *Forza Italia*; its more radical ones became increasingly angered over the whole strategy.

The wagging of the League between the temptations of power and the instinct for opposition, between the hope to bring about the "federalist revolution" from the Roman palaces and the desire to take again to the streets calling for the Republic of the North, between sticking to the deals with the other parties and keeping faith to grassroots militants, characterized Italian politics in the following months. While some League representatives have become ministers in Berlusconi's government, Bossi and others kept attacking and threatening to topple it. The tensions between the "ministerial" and the radical souls have already resulted in some desertions to *Forza Italia*. These tensions have provided the groundwork for new elections but most observers think that the League's renovation of Italian politics has already gone as far as it could, and that the Thermidorian restoration has already set in.

Conclusion

The experience of the Lombard/Northern League suggests that the nation-state is still the most powerful level of political organization in Italy. 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, have not been accepted by the overwhelming majority of citizens, even in the North. 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 (Venetian, 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, local cultural identities and dialects. Many earlier studies have shown that Northern Italy is not perceived and felt as an object of positive attachment. None of its local cultures and dialects could aspire to hegemonize it. From the beginning, the Northern League had to use standard Italian in their political communication.

The international level also plays important roles in the development of the League, especially in terms of the European Union. Firstly, it has fueled the North's growing dissatisfaction with the Italian state. The North, bordering with the more advanced parts of Europe, having easier access to them, and having developed strong economic relations with them through the internationalization of the Northern economy, saw in Europe an exemplar of civil development. The central place of Federalism in the League's ideology comes more from the Swiss, German and Austrian examples than from domestic traditions. Thus the international, European level exerted a strong, albeit wholly unintentional, pull in the rise of the Northern League. On the other hand, 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, especially after the Yugoslav precedent.

The role of the border deserves some special discussion in the context of this book. A glance at the Italian 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 border. But this has little to do with the changes in the functions of internal and external boundaries issuing from the process of European integration, since Northern Italy's borders are mostly with non-Union states (Switzerland and, until 1 January 1995, Austria). Rather, it has to do with general aspects of the border situation (proximity, access to cross-border cultures, similarity of geographical environment and historical experiences) as well as with general features of international relations in this part of the world (such as openness and cooperation) (Gubert 1972; Strassoldo and Delili Zotti 1981).

Ethnic-regional identities were only one component of the set of political resources upon which the Northern Leagues built their early fortunes; the other being economic interests. Their relative importance is hard to assess. Ethnic regional identities seem to have been more important in the earlier, more peripheral leagues (in Friuli, Piedmont, Veneto) and less in the Lombardy case. The Lombard League, and the confederation it hegemonized, the Northern League, seems to be better characterized as a fiscal revolt, a populist or "radical centre" movement than an ethnic-regional one. Its extraordinary success seem to originate from the sheer demographic and economic strength of Lombardy - one of Europe's great industrial regions - and to a constellation of unique historical contingencies: an able leadership, a concomitant set of

crises in Italian society (moral, fiscal, financial and economic), the operation "Clean Hand" and the disappearance of the Communist world.

Ethnic-regional claims and the material interests of the productive classes of the North provided only the raw resources for initial political mobilization; they could not be used as such in the political, cultural and moral system of modern Italy. In this regard, the early stem criticisms of the Catholic Church's hierarchies of the League's "particularism" and "lack of social and national solidarity" is significant. So those resources had to be transformed, rationalized and legitimized into the ideologies, respectively, of federalism (including fiscal federalism) and liberalism. Whether, or to what extent, the federalist program can be used to reform the Italian system in such a way as to give some satisfaction to the (rather weak) demands of ethnic-regional movements along the Northern Italian borders remains to be seen. At present the prospects seem dim.

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