



## **Collective Identities: From the Politics of Inclusion to the Politics of Ethnicity and Difference\***

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### **Introduction**

There is now a vast literature on the Lega Nord, covering its electoral constituencies, its policies, and its leader, to its ideology, its populism, the role it played in helping to bring down the Italian First Republic, and the massive influence it has had in shaping the political agenda for the last decade. It may seem, therefore, that there is very little left to say about this party which has not been covered elsewhere. Nevertheless, if we start from the premise that the Lega Nord can only be properly understood by analyzing the interplay between three different dimensions, that is to say, an industrial periphery, a collective identity and a social movement/political party, then there is still a considerable way to go before we understand what has been going on in Italy in recent times.

There has been a tendency to take into consideration only two of the above dimensions when addressing and analyzing the Lega Nord. On the one hand, there is the constructivist approach, which has studied the Lega primarily as a nationalist movement claiming to represent a new nation, Padania, or at least as a populist cum regionalist party able to invent a northern Italian 'ethnicity'. Along these lines we can place the works of Biorcio (1997), Schmidtke (1996) and Tambini (2001). The emphasis has been placed upon the ability of the party to construct a collective identity around ethnicity/nationalism out of a series of symbolic markers which have found a resonance with the electorate. As Tambini (2001: 127) put it: 'The case of the League illustrates how identity constructions are indeed crucial to mobilising successful protest, and also that these identity constructions use existing and latent resources'. Within this theoretical framework, the electorate is seen primarily as made up of different constituent groups which have proved responsive to Lega discourse, including small entrepreneurs, young people, people with 'localist' feelings of attachment, etc. These scholars therefore emphasized the construction of an ethnic nationalist discourse on the part of a new populist political party which managed to attract the support of a large part of the northern electorate. They also argued that there existed a close identification between the party and its supporters and militants, which was ritualized and constantly reaffirmed through symbols, images, slogans, metaphors, etc.

This way of looking at the Lega Nord is legitimate and interesting, but it is not unproblematic, because it leaves out a third element which, as I have often argued, throws considerable light on the timing and the reasons for the emergence of ethnicity as a salient collective identity. This third element is the socio-economic constituency which turned out to vote en masse for the Lega in certain areas of Italy at specific times, and which was not simply a passive and willing recipient of Lega populist cum nationalist discourse. This was a constituency which had already started to mobilize in socio-political terms even before it did so in electoral terms (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001). In other words, here was a constituency experiencing collective feelings of grievance, and even rage, which could be constructed in terms of a collective identity. Some scholars have addressed the Lega phenomenon primarily from this angle (especially Diamanti 1993, 1996; also Cento Bull 1992 and 1993; Torpey 1994; Woods 1995), but they have tended to play down the ethnicity aspect. In other words, they have linked a specific socio-territorial constituency to the rise and popularity of the Lega Nord, looking primarily at the policies put forward by the party, such as lower taxes, federalism and privatizations, but also to an extent underestimating the role played by the construction of ethnicity in the process, or relegating it to an early phase of the party's development. I am wary to

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call this the essentialist approach, mainly because I concur with Castells (1997: 29) that 'however attractive the influential notion of "imagined communities" may be, it is either obvious or empirically inadequate. Obvious for a political scientist if it is to say that all feelings of belonging, all worshipping of icons, is culturally constructed'. Nevertheless, this is only part of the explanation as 'nationalism is indeed culturally, and politically, constructed, but what really matters, both theoretically and practically, is for all identities, how, from what, by whom, and for what it is constructed' (Castells 1997: 32). Granted that Padania is an invented nation, in whose interests, from what symbolic materials and to what end was it constructed?

To answer these questions it will be necessary to take into consideration one last element, namely the existence, throughout the post-war period, of two ideologies, the Catholic and the communist, which also acted as territorial political subcultures in two areas of Italy. Generally speaking, interpretations of the Lega Nord revolving around nationalist discourse have tended to ignore the relevance of these subcultures (and their relative decline) in accounting for the party's identity construction and its success as an 'ethnic entrepreneur', according to the definition coined by Türsan (1998: 1). One important exception is that of Biorcio (1997), who linked the collective identity evoked and politicized by the Lega Nord to the particularistic and localistic values associated with a geographical area of Italy. Interpretations centred around a specific territorial constituency as the backbone of Lega support have, by contrast, largely incorporated an analysis of pre-existing political subcultures, with their established shared practices and values, as well as ready-made repertoires of images and symbols (Diamanti 1993 and 1996; Cento Bull 1996; Messina 1998).

In this article I will endeavour to consider the relationship between all three (indeed four) dimensions, and explain why, in my view, a specific territorial and socio-economic constituency found itself represented politically by the Lega Nord via the construction of an ethnic identity. To put it differently, to what extent and why did the Lega Nord have to construct a collective identity based on ethnicity in order to represent a particular electoral constituency? I will then attempt to discuss the implications for Italian politics of the construction of a collective identity built explicitly around exclusion and difference.

### ***Defining Collective Identity and Ethnicity***

Let me start with a definition of 'collective identities' and of 'ethnicity'. Collective identities can be defined as constituted by a shared and interactive sense of 'we-ness' (anchored in real or 'imagined' or 'simulated' attributes and experiences) associated with a collective agency. Collective identities are fluid and adaptive in order to achieve political recognition, legitimacy or other specific aims. In terms of content, collective identities can be constructed around specific traits which are seen to distinguish one group from another: language, ideology, class, ethnicity or religion.

The definition of ethnicity is similar to that of nationalism: it is generally defined in terms of a set of criteria, including a common religion, common ancestry, shared cultural values, shared history, a shared sense of 'we-ness'. However, according to Keating (2001: 5), ethnicity and nationalism are not the same thing: 'most ethnic groups do not identify themselves as nations or make claims for territorial self-government. Most nations, in turn, comprise several different ethnic groups'. Specifically, Keating argues that ethnic politics can take different forms, the integrative, the particularist, and the disintegrative.

The integrative mode involves excluded ethnic groups making claims based upon common citizenship [...] The particularist mode involves groups making claims to distinct treatment, based on their shared characteristics; this is the basis of much contemporary identity politics. The disintegrative mode involves groups making



claims for self-determination, possibly including their own state. [...] There is a connection between ethnicity and nationalism but it is at best contingent and not necessary. It applies only to one type of ethnic politics and one mode of nation-building. (Keating 2001: 5)

A collective identity constructed around ethnicity emphasizes cultural difference and exclusion. In terms of content, therefore, it contrasts sharply with a collective identity based, say, on class, which is inclusive and universalist because its main criteria for belonging is through acquired social status, or ideology, which is also inclusive because one only needs to subscribe to it to feel that one belongs. Ethnicity appears to have become more prominent and more salient than other collective identities in contemporary societies (Cordell 1999). Among the factors which have been identified for this phenomenon are political instability and transition, especially linked to regime change (Ishiyama and Breuning 1998), a growing perception of state failure (Payton 1999), a collective sense of grievance (Cordell 1999), the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism (Kupchan 1995), and globalization (Michnik 1996).

In the Italian case, collective identities constructed around class, religion and ideology used to play a major part in both society and politics. With the rise of the Lega Nord, a new collective identity constructed around ethnicity emerged. It is this shift, its significance, and its legacy which I wish to analyse in the remaining sections.

### ***Constructing Ethnicity in Italy***

Before the rise of the Lega Nord, Italian politics was marked by the salience of two dominant ideologies, Catholicism and socialism/communism, each of which was also linked to specific territorial constituencies. On the one hand, the northeastern region was characterized by the dominant presence of Catholicism and of the Christian Democratic Party; on the other hand, the central region saw the predominance of the communist ideology and of the Italian Communist Party. Each ideology viewed the other as the enemy; in addition, they both viewed liberalism and to an extent capitalism also as enemies. Collective identities were constructed in these regions around perceived common markers: a common enemy, community-based trust, low social polarization, and distinct traits compared to the rest of Italy (to which I shall return). Despite the fact that the content of the collective territorial identity was ideological, the process of identity construction was remarkably similar to that of ethnicity. Indeed, a social anthropologist, Shore (1993), applied the concept of ethnicity to the communist subculture in central Italy, in a study which predated the rise of the Lega Nord in the northeastern region, and came to the conclusion that communist identity in this region could be equated to a form of ethnicity. The distinction between Us and Them, the attribution of common positive cultural values and traits to Us and opposite negative traits to Them, the identification of a common enemy, the construction of a common ancestry based on Marxist thinkers and revolutionary leaders, were all cited by Shore as indicative of a process of identity construction akin to that of ethnicity. Although the similarity applies primarily to the construction process itself, rather than to its result, there was also an element of essentialism at play, in that the resulting identity tended to be perceived as pertaining to a particular set of people. Shore (1993) also mentioned the fact that references to locality and the use of local-territorial symbols were present in the communist identity, even though these aspects were not emphasized. In other words, being a communist and being from certain regions of Italy was often presented and/or perceived as synonymous and coterminous. At the anecdotal level, I can recall when Catholics referred to people from Emilia-Romagna as *mangiapreti* (priest-eaters) or, conversely, when communists referred to people in the Veneto as *bigotti* (bigots, or parochial church-goers). The markers used to categorize each area were ideological, but the act of categorization itself applied to territorial, ethnicized communities.

To an extent, therefore, if we are to accept Shore's analysis, the Communist Party in some areas of Italy was an ethnic entrepreneur, albeit involuntarily, but it certainly did not fight for a political project based on an ethnic struggle. Rather, it addressed collective grievances in terms of class exploitation. The collective-territorial identity built around class was used as a resource to be spent on the national political stage. It produced 'symbolic capital' which, together with social capital, allowed the socialists, and later the communists, to wrest concessions from the state and to obtain political power at local and regional level. In the end, these two types of capital – symbolic and social – combined to produce real capital with the result that a capitalist society and economy organized around small and medium sized firms emerged in central Italy. Here lies the paradox of the communist subculture which continued to dominate certain regions of Italy even when small-scale, diffused entrepreneurship became the dominant socio-economic mode. To an extent therefore it can be said that, despite the content of the collective identity (in this case strongly based on anti-capitalism) appearing to be in contradiction with the new social reality, voters and residents in the central regions did not see it fit to replace their traditional values (and political party) with new ones. The reasons for the persistence of a left subculture in these regions still need to be properly assessed, but the more pro-active and efficient role played by local government institutions in supporting economic development and sustaining political socialization appears to have been an important factor.

In the Northeast, in contrast to central Italy, the content of the collective identity did change and was reconstructed explicitly around ethnicity by the Lega Nord. Why did this happen? To answer this question, we have to consider a series of factors, relating to both structure and agency. In terms of structure, the most important factor was the political crisis of the Italian state which coincided with a time when many northeastern manufacturing firms were being integrated into a global economy and were having to face increased economic competition and increased pressure to reduce costs and improve efficiency. The crisis of the state, coupled with the traditional inefficiency of state administration and state bureaucracy and a burgeoning state deficit, created a situation in which a sense of collective grievance and self-victimization developed. Many people in the northeastern region, especially small entrepreneurs, artisans, the self-employed, but also anybody working in the private sector, began to harbour strong feelings of discontent, and even rage, towards the state for its inadequacies, its high taxes, its perceived indifference to their needs for greater efficiency. The state was perceived as an entity which was redistributing resources away from them (to the South or to sustain a corrupt political class) and failing to provide services to them. The state was also perceived as a hindrance to, rather than a facilitator of, links between the local and the global economy. In this context, the state lost legitimacy in the eyes of many voters. As Massimo Cacciari (2000), the centre-left ex-Mayor of Venice, put it in an interview, many people who started to vote for the Lega Nord in Lombardy and the Veneto felt unrepresented at the political level and victimized by the state. As he put it, their position can be summed up in the famous slogan at the time of the American Revolution: 'No taxation without representation'. This is why the Lega Nord has been associated with a form of anti-statist protest, which was indeed an important component of Lega discourse. However, anti-statism and protest against taxation went hand in hand, already in the early days of the Lega, with federalism, i.e., with the idea of a federal restructuring of the state coupled with greater regional autonomy. This is where, in my view, ethnicity in its 'disintegrative' mode comes in.

To sum up, in the 1980s and 1990s Italy's traditional subcultures experienced a different trajectory. In central Italy, the structure and content of identity stayed the same, so the political agenda also remained unchanged. In the Northeast, in contrast, the existing identity structure remained, but its content changed due to new socio-economic and political circumstances, and as a consequence the political agenda changed as well.



Santambrogio (2001) recently argued that a distinction needs to be made between a political ideology and a political subculture. A subculture seeks to be accommodated within the wider shared parameters of a common culture, whereas an ideology tends to be conflictual and to present itself as a radical alternative to an existing society. As he stated, 'with reference to the recent history of our country [...] it is correct to speak of a Catholic and a communist political subculture, in so far as neither thought of placing itself outside a common framework' (Santambrogio 2001: 71). According to him, what characterizes a subculture is precisely a collective identity which is conceptualized as being within a social space shared by other social groups, for instance within a common democratic framework, or indeed a nation-state (ibid.). It could be argued, therefore, that the communist and Catholic collective identities acted as a form of ethnicity in the 'integrative' and the 'particularist' modes, as defined by Keating. In other words, the two collective identities (subcultures) acted to accommodate, within a common state, groups that had felt excluded from, or aggrieved by it. In the case of the Lega Nord, there was a clear shift towards the 'disintegrative' mode of ethnicity, requiring a much more exclusionary form of identity construction.

### ***Transforming Subcultural into Ethnic Markers***

The construction of ethnicity on the part of the Lega Nord was to an extent relatively easy: all the markers of difference had been present in the old Catholic subculture even though they had not been symbolically charged. When Gilberto Oneto (1997), defender of an exclusive ethnic identity in his book *L'invenzione della Padania*, was asked why the Lega was strongest in those areas where the DC had also been strongest, he replied, 'Because the DC in Padania was rich in localistic values, values which never reached the top of the party' (quoted in Rumiz 1997: 134). What Bossi had to do was to give symbolic charge to these markers and to build up a sense of 'we-ness' which deliberately excluded other parts of Italy.

One of Bossi's intuitions was that he could use the socio-economic model of development typical of the Northeast as a unique model to be branded in contrast to the South and even to other northern areas. In this he was not alone. Several sociologists and economists had pointed to the small-business model of development typical of central and northeast Italy as a specific form of capitalism. In 1977, when he published *Tre Italie*, Bagnasco had distinguished between three Italies, the underdeveloped South, the Northwest, whose economy was based on large-scale industry, and the Northeast and Centre (Third Italy), which had industrialized in the 1960s and 1970s on the basis of small family firms, small towns and villages, and agglomerations of industrial districts. In his book *Fragmented Societies*, Mingione (1991), taking Bagnasco's famous study on the three Italies as a starting point, argues that these three economic systems were qualitatively different and distinct from each other – they did not represent different stages of capitalist development but different capitalist systems, which were not integrated and which the state had some difficulty keeping together.

The socio-cultural characteristics of the Third Italy, according to both sociologists and economists, are as follows: strong kinship ties, weakly polarized society, small and flexible firms, a strong sense of diffused trust fostered by the persistence of kinship and friendship ties and face-to-face familiarity, use of dialect, etc. These characteristics, commonly associated with positive social capital (Putnam 1993, Cento Bull 2000), were emphasized and turned into ethnic markers by the Lega Nord.

Ancestry, which, apart from the city-states, was primarily restricted to the North, was conceptualised by the Lega emphasizing a traditional rural society, viewed with nostalgia. The whole of Italy shares this ancestry, of course, but for the Lega it coincided with a specific rural society which was again restricted to the North, i.e., a society and a landscape marked by the silk industry, cocoon rearing and the cultivation of mulberry

trees. As Bossi wrote in 1992, referring to an emblematic episode in his childhood during the Second World War, 'We were gathered in the farmyard, all of us in the family, taking the leaves out of the corn cobs. It often happened to spend an evening like this, all together, to hear the stories told by our old people, or to talk about the season, or the countryside, or the simple life of the village [...] I seem to recall the scene: the old people [...] were sitting in a circle, we the children were crouching down; my mother was talking. We were talking of the cocoons, the ones my uncle had piled up in a corner with the leaves torn from mulberry trees. Our last word was in fact silk. [Then the bombs started to fall].' (Bossi 1992: 7) In the rallies and gatherings of the Lega Nord in the late 1980s and early 1990s, supporters used to dress in traditional peasant costumes and sang folksongs dealing with life in the silk mills (*filande*).

The reference to a rural world strongly shaped by silk industrialization was also indicative of the fact that the 'imagined community' constructed by the Lega in the early years coincided with a sub-area of the North, that is, with the Catholic subculture. Silk industrialization, in fact, was restricted largely to the subalpine arc: it was an economy and a society dominated culturally and politically by the Catholic Church and the Catholic movement. By contrast, the socialist areas of the Po Valley had a rural economy which revolved around rice, cattle and wheat production, with different land-tenure systems. In his book *La secessione leggera*, Rumiz (1997) identified very vividly the territorial limits of the Lega's ethnic identity when he pointed out that the river Po, far from symbolizing the unity of the North, actually marked its internal divisions. As he pointed out, people in the Po Valley often remarked that living south of the river meant a lot of different things, including different politics. To a large extent they were also against Rome, nevertheless here 'the Alps are far away, there are no bigots tied to the priest's tunic and the church tower [...] and here we pay taxes, all of them, because schools and hospitals work well' (Rumiz 1997: 96)

As far as shared values were concerned, Bossi insistently talked of the work ethic, the propensity to save, the frugality of northern people, especially Lombard people, and again linked these values historically both to a rural society in which every member of the family worked either on the land or in silk mills, and to the small-scale industrialization of the post-war period. In this way he kept referring to a set of values which were seen as having developed among a specific sub-national community sharing a common past and a common future. In other words, these values were projected onto the past and into the future, constructing an imagined community with a common destiny.

The common enemies that the Lega emphasized were the centralist state and immigration. Anti-statism, as Messina (1998) pointed out, had also been a trait previously associated with the Catholic subculture. Conversely, in those days Europe was still seen as an ally, as was globalization. The enemy was also the South, a construction which presents interesting aspects, because it reinforced and gave voice to the anti-statist mood of rage in the Northeast. The South was constructed as an enemy not only because it drained resources from the North, but because southerners had managed to conquer and control the central state and were using it to foster their own interests and not those of the productive North. The Lega pointed out that most administrative personnel and most representatives of the political class of the DC and PSI were from the South. While in the North people had been more interested in making money and creating enterprises, in the South they had looked towards the state and had succeeded in penetrating state institutions in force, governing the country in a way which diverted resources to a parasitic southern economy and socio-political class and which tolerated high levels of inefficiency and waste. If political unification had symbolized the dominance of the more progressive North, the Italian First Republic had ended sanctioning the dominance of the corrupt and backward South. In this state of affairs, the North



withdrew its consent to be ruled by the state (in its centralist mode) and refused to recognize its legitimacy. As Savelli put it (1992: 10) in a book written to explain and popularize the programme and ideas of the Lega Nord,

The fiscal system [...] subtracts resources from the productive part of the country, not in order to organize and manage the necessary public services, but to distribute them to the non-productive part, so as to gain its consensus as well as an income for itself.

The instrument for this appropriation is the centralist state in which a political class which is less and less expression of civic society and more and more oligarchical, a true nomenklatura [...] has gradually taken on ever wider tasks, ending up managing more than half of the national product. From an economic point of view, this system has lost by now any functionality: by constantly increasing public taxation, it is destroying the very sources of the wealth which is needed to support the assisted part of the country.

Finally, if the state and the South were the enemies, in the early days the EU and globalization were allies (today they are the new enemies). The construction of ethnicity and anti-statism went hand in hand with the acceptance of a supra-national entity and of a global economy. The reasons for this were a belief in a future 'Europe of the Regions' as opposed to a Europe of nation-states, and the belief that the Northeast as a region was already competing successfully in the global economy and would emerge as a winner on the international scene. From this point of view, the mood was optimistic: once it got rid of the central state, the North would prosper in economic terms. This vision of the world helps us understand the construction of a collective identity revolving around difference and exclusion, in contrast to previous collective identities constructed around equality and inclusion. Difference not only justified severing links with the state but also competing independently in the global economy as a winner, doing away with the protection of the state. In short, the central state was rejected because it drained resources from the North, governed in the interests of the South, failed to provide the necessary services to the North, and finally because the protection from the outside world it traditionally offered was no longer needed. Military protection and political stability could come from NATO and the EU, and economic protection was rejected in favour of global competition.

All the above factors coincide largely with those listed in the introduction to this article and identified in the literature as producing a fertile terrain upon which, in both eastern and western Europe, new collective actors were able to construct an ethnic identity and a nationalist politics. With specific reference to Castells's (1997) identification of the key questions that need to be addressed to account for the revival of collective identities, what has been said above helps to explain 'how, from what, by whom' the construction and politicization of ethnicity took place in Italy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. One question, however, remains: 'for what' was it constructed?

### ***To What End the Politics of Ethnicity?***

The rise and success of the Lega Nord have often been attributed primarily to economic reasons, as an example of the 'secession of the affluent', a term coined by the American scholar J. Torpey in 1994. As he wrote, 'Culture, usually the *aqua vitae* of group identification, takes a decided back seat to economics in the preoccupations of the Northern League and its supporters' (Torpey 1994: 314). As for ethnicity, 'insistence on the ethnic and cultural dimensions of conflict within and between states diverts our attention from the possible economic sources of nationalist, irredentist, and secessionist strivings' (ibid.: 313). He went on to compare the Lega to the tax revolt movement in California in the 1970s, adding that this parallel 'suggests that the "secession of the

affluent" need not take exclusively territorial forms. It has been expressed this way in Italy simply because the affluent happen to inhabit a particular region of the country' (ibid.: 314f.).

With the added benefit of hindsight, this interpretation had several weaknesses. First, it failed to recognize that the Lega was strong in areas previously dominated by a Catholic collective identity. In this way, the presence of a whole range of potential symbolic markers which could be constructed as ethnic went undetected. Second, it did not address the question of why economic grievances had found an outlet in ethnicity and nationalism as opposed to other forms of identity. Finally, it overlooked the connection between the construction of difference, anti-statism and regional autonomy. Yet there is an important difference between a tax revolt which is directed at the state in recognition of the power of the state to favour different social groups and electoral constituencies and therefore to lower taxes, and a tax revolt which refuses to accept that the state has the right to impose taxes in the first place. In the former case, there may well be what Torpey calls the rejection of the obligation towards a shared well-being that is implicit in the idea of national belonging but it is a rejection aimed at a redistribution of power within the national framework; in the latter case, it is a rejection implying exit from, rather than voice within the state.

Whereas in Italy the old collective identities constructed around ideologies based on class or religion were used as resources to wrest concessions from the state, a state seen as the main repository of power and distributor of material goods, a collective identity constructed around ethnicity can be used for a political project which effectively rejects the legitimacy of the state and fights for gaining autonomy *from* the state as opposed to gaining representation *within* the state. Unless the construction of a collective identity emphasizes uniqueness, distinctiveness, separateness and difference, a political agenda focussed on political autonomy is hardly credible.

The Lega's goal, therefore, was self-determination. By this I mean 'a legal arrangement that gives a group independent status or expanded powers within a federal state' (Philpott 1998: 81). Although some scholars add consociationalism to the institutional options available to groups seeking self-determination (e.g., Moore 1998), this was precisely the political settlement the Lega was fighting against and wanted to dismantle. The Italian polity, in fact, was characterized by a high degree of consociationalism throughout the period of the First Republic, and the Lega made it clear that the system had been responsible for spiralling debts, the exploitation of the productive North and the 'bankruptcy' of the state. Consociationalism and 'partyocracy' were identified by the Lega with a form of state, hence the party's adoption of an alternative form of state as both a means and an end to its politics. Bossi realized, however, that the creation of an ethnic identity was a necessary prerequisite for any claims to self-determination. As Nevola (1998) made clear, claiming to form a separate ethnic group or nation is not by any means a sufficient condition for acquiring the right to self-determination, but it is nonetheless a necessary one. It is not a coincidence that those European countries which have introduced a federal or quasi-federal system, among them Belgium, Spain and Great Britain, have done so under pressure from sub-state nationalist movements and in recognition of forming a multi-national entity. In other words, ethnicity provided the justification for attacking consociationalism and replacing it with a federal state. However, it could only be used for this purpose if, to use Keating's definition, it took on a disintegrative mode. According to Keating, as we saw, it is only in this mode that ethnicity produces separatist nationalism, which helps explain the subsequent invention of Padania on the part of the Lega.

The links between ethnicity and federalism were clearly established by the leaders of the party in the early 1990s. At the first Party Congress of the newly-formed Lega Nord, held





at Pieve Emanuele, near Milan, in 1991, Umberto Bossi argued openly that the peoples of the North were being exploited by the ethnic dominance of southerners in public administration and the government, and concluded that this required a drastic change. As he put it, the centralist state was an expression of 'ethnic prevarication' (Lega Nord 1991). This point was taken up at the same congress by Francesco Enrico Speroni, who affirmed that there was in Italy a 'Southern ethnic egemony', thanks to which southerners had come to control state institutions and in the long run had determined a socio-political-economic disequilibrium between the different regions (Lega Nord 1991). More importantly in the context of the present discussion, Bossi in his intervention explicitly rejected what he called a 'defensive' ethnonationalism bent on making claims to distinct treatment for a particular group and asserted that 'the ethnonationalism that we propose was not and did not seek to be a defensive philosophy, but a tool for attacking the centralism of the state' (Lega Nord 1991).

The ethnic aspect was played down in the electoral programme agreed upon a year later, even though there were still references to the different communities of peoples which made up the Italian peninsula. However, the ethnic prevarication of one part of the peninsula upon another was turned, with a more neutral choice of words, into 'the way in which the current regime, inspired by anti-industrial concepts and in pursuit of clientelist interests, exercises the government of the *res publica*' (Lega Nord 1992: 4). The emphasis was strongly on the need to reduce the huge public deficit and to make political parties and institutions more accountable to their electorates and more responsible in the way they spent their resources. Nevertheless, it was clear that federalism was in fact conceived as a form of state which would impose 'northern values', based upon a work ethic, a rather crude understanding of solidarity, private enterprise, and law and order.

If we agree that there was a close link between the construction of an ethnic identity, the fight against consociationalism and the federalist political agenda of the Lega, then we should view ethnicity as an integral part of the Lega project. This appears to contradict the view that the party went through an 'ethnic' phase in the early 1990s, which was later replaced by the construction of a less exclusionary collective identity, 'far more flexible and open to frame realignment' (Ruzza and Schmidtke 1996: 201). In this view, the Lega experienced, in other words, a 'transition from a culturally essentialist to a relativist position' (Ruzza and Schmidtke 1996: 203). I believe that this is true, but only in the sense that when the Lega tried to broaden its electoral appeal from 1992 onwards, it played down those ethnic markers which clearly evoked an 'imagined community' restricted to an area previously dominated by the Catholic subculture. Later, when the party invented Padania, it had to reconcile the symbols and values generally associated with the Catholic subculture with those associated with the communist one, a task which required a dilution of the previously constructed ethnic content and which in the end proved impossible to achieve. The Lega's critique of the centralist state, however, continued to be based upon an ethnicized view of Italy as divided into distinct and discrete peoples.

To conclude, the construction of an ethnic identity based on a unique community of fate whose goal was self-determination (as defined above), was necessary to give coherence and legitimacy to a political project whose main tenets were regional autonomy, the rejection of the role of the central state, especially its right to impose taxes in the name of national solidarity, and the acceptance of globalization as open competition producing winners and losers. The emphasis on ascriptive difference justified the rejection of the principle of national solidarity because this is based upon the notion of a unitary community sharing a common space and common interests beyond any differences of class, religion, language etc. In this context, it is not very useful to separate culture from economics. While it is true that economic reasons played a vitally important role in accounting for the rise of the Lega, it is also the case that the rejection of the 'centralist'

state and the campaign on a federalist (later secessionist) platform could only be framed in terms of irreconcilable ethno-cultural differences.

***The Legacy of Ethnicity (I): The Lega Nord and Devolution***

Today, the politics of ethnicity has faded and the revolt of the North has been channelled towards gaining greater representation and power for certain constituencies of voters within the national state. Yet the politics of difference has penetrated Italian culture and politics in ways which remain unclear and ambiguous.

Let me start with the Lega Nord's 'new' project, devolution, that is, the transference of all competencies in the fields of healthcare, education, and local policing to the existing twenty regions, or at least, to those regions which demand such powers. Out of the grand vision of the division of Italy into three macro-regions as conceived in the early 1990s, a decade later the Lega Nord appears to have settled for devolving powers to the existing regions in just a few matters. It is true that Bossi, currently Minister for Reforms, sees this as only the first step in the direction of a thorough overhaul of the form of the state, but it still raises the interesting question of why the party has chosen to proceed in this piecemeal fashion and why it has chosen to prioritize these three areas of competence over many possible others.

The answer lies in the fact that health and education are the single most important areas of public expenditure and that transferring their control to the regions is seen as a way of regaining control of the 'bloated' welfare system. As Bossi declared in the Senate when explaining his reform, 'Devolution does not stimulate the conflict between North and South but the exact opposite, because it imposes the need to manage the *res publica* – both in the North and the South – with the same degree of responsibility' (*La Padania*, 28 November 2002). However, the real impact of the Lega's devolution bill was disclosed by the President of the Lega deputies, Alessandro Cè, during a press conference held on 29 October 2002 (*La Padania*, 30 October 2002). Cè explained that the present system of resource transfers to the poorer (southern) regions, based on an automatic formula, would only last for three more years, to be replaced by a redistributive mechanism subject to the potential fiscal capacity of individual regions, their ability to fight tax evasion and the degree of efficiency of the services they provide.

This declaration did nothing to reassure those concerned about the future of the South. As *Il Mattino* (22 November 2002), a local Naples paper, reminded its readers, the current automatic formula for transferring resources would be replaced by 'constant severe exams'. The paper concluded its assessment of the devolution bill as follows: 'The South in the hands of the North, one would be tempted to say, of the North's clemency of judgment'. A similar view was expressed by the President of the Calabria region Giuseppe Chiaravallotti, of Forza Italia, who pointed out that 'the principle of monitoring the destination of the funds is acceptable to avoid theft, but it cannot be done on the basis of a master/servant [...] formula' (*La Stampa*, 21 November 2002).

This is, in my view, a fair understanding of the significance of Bossi's devolution reform. Not secessionism, to which the Lega turned in 1995-6, but a revised version of the federalist project of 1991-2, with the aim of reverting the domination of the North by the South (as in the First Republic) into a domination of the South by the North, based on the wealth, 'superior' values and economic rigour of the latter. Such a domination is justified in terms of the South's own salvation from itself, from its degenerate clientelist and criminal values which had successfully and tragically been imposed upon the whole country for so many years. The reform is therefore predicated on a clear cultural (ethnic) separation between two regions and two peoples, one of which can now be placed in the condition of dictating its own laws and criteria to the other, thus eliminating the need to secede. This is not to say that secession is completely discarded – one can envisage it



regaining credit within the Lega if devolution fails – but the logic underpinning devolution is different from and in many respects an alternative to secessionism.

Even if secession is not on the cards, Padania lives on. Bossi's speech to the Senate when presenting his devolution bill was entirely from a northern perspective. He referred to the North's participation in the Italian unification movement, indeed argued that Italy had been unified by the North and thanks to the North. Yet the period after unification had brought only disappointment and distrust towards the new state among the peoples of Padania, leading them to reject politics altogether, because 'the politics of Rome did not interpret the economic or social development nor the just aspirations to autonomy of those peoples'. It was because of the Lega Nord and its federalist project that Padania had regained faith in politics (*La Padania*, 28 November 2002).

One can see from the above that devolution is more a continuation of long-standing aims and strategies than a new development. Devolution, in the same manner as federalism in 1992 and even more so in 1991, should be seen as the means to give the North control of the public purse, thus reversing what, according to the Lega, had been happening at the time of the Italian First Republic. The devolution project is once again explicitly linked to a vision of Italy as divided into two different peoples, and to the Lega as representing the interests of one area of the country. Ethnicity may no longer be used explicitly as in 1991, but it still underpins the logic of the reform of the state pursued by the party.

### ***The Legacy of Ethnicity (II): Left-wing Parties and Intellectuals***

The politics of cultural difference appears to be spreading beyond the Lega. To give just one example, recently the head of the *Ulivo* (the coalition of centre-left opposition parties), Francesco Rutelli, referred to the northeastern electorate as being made up of small firms bosses who, as he put it, 'are proud of exploiting immigrants and not paying taxes and will never vote for the left' (*La Repubblica*, 11 January 2002). In a more sophisticated manner, the distinguished historian Paul Ginsborg (1998) differentiated between more civic and less civic regions in Italy. But while the controversial study by Putnam (1993) had identified the northern and central areas with civicness and the southern region with uncivicness, Ginsborg viewed the northeastern regions as less civic, and the central regions as the most civic. Beyond the intrinsic merits of each position and interpretation, it looks as if the politics of difference has now succeeded in infecting the left, too. If the images of the South and southerners held by the Lega supporters were uniformly negative, constructing a collective 'Other', the images of the northeast and its inhabitants are rapidly also (re-)acquiring the connotations of an 'Other' among left leaders and supporters. No longer are the residents of the Veneto referred to as bigots as at the time of Christian Democracy. Now they are referred to by using the Lega's ethnic markers in reverse, in a form of anti-racist racism.

Replying to Rutelli, in an article entitled 'When one goes in search of an imaginary enemy' (*La Repubblica*, 13 January 2002), the sociologist Ilvo Diamanti remarked that the image of the 'racist and tax-evading small boss' had become a 'territorial label' and compared it directly to Lega Nord discourse. Indeed, Diamanti pointed out that when the Lega Nord had attacked 'thieving Rome' and the 'dishonest South', the party had used such stereotypes with the aim of making sense of the world for their own militants and wider electorate. Nevertheless, in those days Rome was undoubtedly a target for the Lega, while the South was an inaccessible area in electoral terms. By contrast, Diamanti reminded the readers of *La Repubblica* that in the northeastern regions the *Ulivo* coalition had obtained 42% of the votes in the 2001 elections, that is to say, a percentage equivalent to that obtained in the rest of the country, with the exception of the 'red belt' regions. Diamanti then asked the question 'How is it possible to stigmatize this area as hostile, inhabited by inimical tribes?' and concluded with another poignant question: 'Why should social actors and social contexts towards which the *Ulivo* expresses such

malevolent judgments (and prejudices) continue or indeed start to vote for this coalition?’

Diamanti had put his finger on the spot, showing the folly of a left discourse mirroring that of the Lega. The latter, for all its irrational aspects, could be fully explained in rational terms: the Lega had constructed an image of the South as a negative ‘Other’ in order to strengthen a sub-national collective identity, in the knowledge that the South was electorally a no-go area and in a deliberate attempt to challenge the nation-state. The *Ulivo* was apparently falling into the trap of constructing as an ‘Other’ an area where, despite considerable support for the Lega for most of the 1990s, the Left was by no means a marginal political and ideological force. In addition, the *Ulivo* was doing so at a time when it had put itself forward as a national political coalition working in the interests of the ‘national community’ as opposed to sub-national constituencies. Almost certainly Rutelli’s comments signalled nothing more than the frustration of the *Ulivo* for its defeat at the 2001 elections, nevertheless they also raised the spectre of the national political space becoming divided along constructed ethno-territorial fault lines.

### **Conclusions**

For most of the post-war period, Italy’s political subcultures and their respective parties, the DC and the PCI, played an integrative role. Whether we believe, like Shore (1993), that they constructed collective identities comparable to forms of ethnicity, or whether we prefer to stress their universalist ideological content, the fact remains that both subcultures acted to accommodate their respective constituencies within the Italian nation-state. Such a process had already started in the Giolittian period, when the Liberal governments had been able to reach a compromise with the Socialist Party and the Catholic movement. After 1945, the Communist Party and Christian Democracy chose to retain their ‘difference’ while accepting a common national space. The former ‘renationalized itself as a part of Italian reality. It reflected and fostered a strand in national culture that was deeply pessimistic about the unification and the state it had produced, but believed in the capacity of the family, the local community and “the people” to work together’ (McCarthy 2000: 246). In the 1970s, the party theorized and subscribed to the policy of national solidarity. As for the DC, according to Bedani (2000: 231), the party was ‘the major national unifying force, the automatic point of reference not only for Italians but also for its foreign partners’.

In contrast to the integrative role played by Italy’s traditional political subcultures, the Lega Nord set out to construct a collective identity with the disintegrative aim of self-determination. Just when the nation-state seemed to have finally laid to rest competing ideologies and sub-national political cultures, it was challenged head-on by a collective identity which denied its very legitimacy. This set into motion a chain of reactions, ranging from explicit condemnation and outright rejection of Lega Nord discourse to neo-patriotism (Patriarca: 2001). The seeds of a politics of difference and territorial racialization may however have penetrated the Lega’s adversaries in ways which are not yet fully understood and whose effects cannot be predicted. If this were the case, the Lega will have left a much more serious legacy than the one the party has already been credited with for injecting in the Italian political discourse federalist and neo-liberal notions and policies. Ethnic identity is a much more intractable form of identity than ideology, because ‘the very principle is disintegrative, since those who lose under any arrangement will have an incentive to constitute themselves as an ethnicity. Because ethnic identity formation is typically a reactive process, in which groups are defined by reference to the other, it is in principle exclusionary and divisive’ (Keating 2001: 15). The replacement of the Catholic subculture with a collective identity constructed around ethnicity may have set into motion a process of political competition between groups which will greatly impede the transition to a Second Republic. Such a transition can only be successful if particularist allegiances can be transcended (as they were after 1945) in



the acceptance of a framework based on a wider common culture and wider common interests.

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