

# After the breakdown of the "First Republic": a turning-point for the Italian Extreme Right?

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## I. From Marginalization to Protagonism

For almost fifty years after World War II, in Italy the availability of political space for the Extreme Right has been very restricted. The most representative party of this area, the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), has never possessed a potential of coalition or of "blackmail" in the parliamentary arena. The interwoven reasons responsible for this isolation are the following three:

1. In the first phase of re-establishment of democracy, the conservative and nationalist circles were kept out of the political game because of their previous involvement in the fascist regime. They found it very difficult to build an autonomous organizational network and were not able to gain the full support of those interest groups, which aimed at containing the influence of the Left. The quick decline of the Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque, a populist, antipolitical movement, which had achieved a considerable success in the immediate post-war period (see Setta, 1995), is a meaningful example of this difficulty.

2. Fear of communism and the high temperature of political conflict in the second half of the 1940s induced conspicuous "law and order" sectors of the Italian public opinion to support the Christian Democracy (DC), to the detriment of its rightist competitors, such as monarchists and the Liberal Party (PLI).

3. The success of the Christian Democrats at the 1948 general elections, where they polled 48.5% of the votes and gained a majority of parliamentary seats both in the Camera dei Deputati and in the Senato, laid the foundations of a tripolar political system, within which the Center played both a legitimated and legitimating role. In order to maintain its monopoly over the Center, the DC has used strategies based on the anti-fascist and/or anticommunist discriminants against the Right and the Left or *ad hoc* cooptations from either of these areas (Chiarini, 1991).

These reasons explain why in post-war Italy, for almost half a century - i.e., until the creation of Forza Italia by Silvio Berlusconi -, a fully legitimated Right, which in a bipolar context could have served as an interlocutor and a potential allied for the Extreme Right, with the effect of limiting its marginalization and moderating its attitudes, did not emerge.

As a consequence of this situation, rather anomalous in comparison with those of the other Western European countries, the MSI, a party which openly admitted its allegiance to the fascist ideology, assumed the almost exclusive representation of the whole Right. The task was not easy, but the shape and the logic

of the Italian party system favoured the MSI in its effort to secure itself a solid electoral "niche".

Owing to the lasting exclusion of the strong Communist Party from the coalitional arena, the DC was indeed forced to enter into an alliance with smaller parties, both in the centrist phase of its governmental strategy (1948-1960) and in the period of center-left cabinets, which started by 1961. The "blackmail" power of these minor partners, added to the centrifugal pressures by its powerful and well-organized internal factions (factionalization was an unavoidable consequence of the party's ideologically and socially heterogeneous character), induced a chronic governmental instability which many people felt as a blame for the political élites and as a proof of their indifference to public interest. The anti-establishment, and in a larger sense anti-political, orientation of the MSI matched this resentment against the "partitocratic" system and allowed the neo-fascist movement to present itself as a reliable protest party, especially in the Southern regions, where its image was not obscured by the bloody reminiscence of civil war. The clientelistic practice which grew up along with the consolidation of the DC's central role in Italian politics certainly affected the legitimacy of the system, and created a considerable potential of dissatisfaction. When, in order to reabsorb the strains revealed by the outbreak of the 1968-69 cycle of protest (Tarrow, 1990; Della Porta, 1996: 21-49), even the oppositional PCI was involved by means of consociational accommodations in the bad performance of a system which «survived without governing» (Di Palma, 1977), the ground for the success of a rightist anti-establishment party was ready.

If the MSI could exploit only to some extent these propitious preconditions, it was due to the emphasis that its leadership always put on the allegiance to the fascist legacy. Many features of the political culture of this party, as shown by its official documents and press, enable us to include it in the category of the Extreme Right (Ignazi, 1994b). Let us mention the emphasis put on the authority principle, a strong nationalist claim, the invocation of law-and-order policies, the demand for enlarged powers of the State vis-à-vis society, the mistrust for parliamentarism, parties and all mechanisms of representation, the apology of hierarchy, the call to traditionalist morals, the resort to emergency measures (capital punishment, use of military troops for social control duties, etc.) in order to ensure the public order.

In spite of this extremist image, thanks to the lack of any significant competition, the MSI could attract a national-conservative, anti-party and fiercely anti-communist electorate, and gained enough support to be represented since 1947 at all institutional levels, from the town councils to the Parliament (tab. 1), where the vote of its MPs has been in many occasions a crucial variable for the passage of bills proposed by the cabinets.

Since the mid-1950s the leadership of the MSI adopted a moderate strategy, aimed at counterbalancing from inside the system the growing influence of the Left wing on the DC. Nevertheless, in order to keep the hegemony over the area where it had been confined, and to repel the recurrent challenges of more radical antidemocratic movements, the MSI went on claiming the fascist legacy (Tarchi, 1995b). This choice reinforced the capacity of resistance and the organizational cohesion of the party, but at the same time condemned it to a permanent destiny of marginalization, thereby accentuating the polarization of the political system. (Not by chance, the paradigm of "polarized pluralism", adopted by Giovanni Sartori so as to describe the dynamics of the Italian democracy in the 1960s-

Tab. 1

## MSI Parliamentary Representation, 1948-1996 Number of Seats

Year	Camera dei Deputati	Senato
1948	6	1
1953	29	9
1958	24	8
1963	27	14
1968	24	11
1972	56	26
1976	35	15
1979	30	13
1983	42	18
1987	35	16
1992	34	16
1944	109	48
1996	94	45

Source: Italian Ministry of Interior

1970s (Sartori, 1982), was based on the existence of a bilateral, symmetrical anti-system opposition: that of the PCI on the Left, and of the MSI on the Right).

In spite of some favourable electoral fluctuations during the periods of most intense social conflict - as in 1972, when the MSI got the dividend of the reaction to the protest fostered by the student movement and trade unions, gaining 8.7% of the votes at the general elections -, neofascism was pushed in a corner for 45 years. Such situation persisted despite the rise in the 1970s of a new cleavage, linked to the massive immigration from the Third World, which on the contrary stirred up the birth or the growth of a xenophobic "post-industrial Extreme Right" in other European countries (Ignazi, 1994b).

This ongoing marginalization was confirmed at the general elections of 1992, when the MSI polled only 5.4%. Awkwardly this happened despite the disappearance of one of the systemic constraints which had undermined its appeal: the threat of communism, that had provided a major incentive to the electorate to cast a "useful" vote in favour of the Center. Although hundreds of thousands of moderate voters left the DC, thereby showing their dissatisfaction with the clientelism and the inefficiency of the public administration, they did not converge on the Far Right but on another protest party, the populist and localist Lega Nord<sup>1</sup>.

In the course of only two years (1993-1994), the above situation drastically changed, owing to the combined effect of two leading factors:

- a) the loss of legitimacy of the ruling political élite, overwhelmed by the uncovering of the widespread political corruption of the "First Republic";
- b) the introduction of the plurality principle, due to the adoption of new electoral laws, following the success of an important referendum held in April 1993.

1 Some scholars include the Lega Nord within the class of the radical right-wing populist parties (see Betz, 1994: 115-119, 121-123), but this opinion is far from being unanimously agreed by the social and political scientists (see Diamanti, 1995b).

The disintegration of the DC and of the other Center parties was the basic precondition for the rise of the Italian Extreme Right. This made it possible for neofascism to come out of the ghetto where it had been confined until then. The ongoing exclusion of the MSI from governmental and administrative responsibilities, which had limited its resources, thereby preventing it from establishing enduring exchange relationships with social actors and interest groups, was turned into a *felix culpa*. All of a sudden, the party was seen as different from all the others and as having nothing to do with the clientelistic network of the *partitocrazia*. Moreover, the involvement of several leaders of anti-fascist parties in corruption inquiries and trials weakened the strength of moral stigma linked to the memory of dictatorship. In the climate of diffuse anti-party if not anti-political attitudes, the populist culture embedded in the MSI ideological background underwent a major revival. As a matter of fact, many voters saw in the authoritarian and nationalistic statements contained in MSI programs a proof of sense of State.

These facilitating conditions, as well as some more general factors - the progressive de-radicalization of political conflict in the 1980s, which broke down the formula of the "constitutional arch", explicitly intended to isolate the MSI from democratic parties, and the academic reconsideration of historical judgement on the fascist experience (Ignazi, 1994c) - are certainly very important to a proper understanding of the changing role of the Extreme Right. Nevertheless they are not sufficient to explain the sudden increase of MSI votes from 5.4% to 13.5% in less than two years (see tab. 2). A crucial factor towards such understanding is namely the structural context defined by the adoption of the new plurality electoral laws.

Tab. 2

MSI Votes in the Parliamentary Elections,  
Camera dei Deputati, 1948-1994

Year	Votes	%
1948	526,670	2.0
1953	1,582,567	5.8
1958	1,407,913	4.8
1963	1,571,187	5.1
1968	1,414,794	4.5
1972	2,896,762	8.7
1976	2,245,376	6.1
1979	1,930,639	5.3
1983	2,511,487	6.8
1987	2,282,256	5.9
1992	2,107,272	5.4
1994	5,202,398	13.5
1996	5,875,391	15.7

Source: Italian Ministry of Interior.

While the new configuration of the Italian party system increased considerably the political space available to the MSI, the bipolar dynamics of electoral competition partly filled the legitimacy deficit which had penalized it. On one hand, the splitting of the Christian Democracy in four splinter parties (Patto Segni, PPI, CCD,

CDU)<sup>2</sup> and the disappearance of all the other Center parties (PSI, PSDI, PLI, PRI) dismantled the widespread clientelistic network which had excluded from the electoral market large sectors of voters, mainly in the Southern regions. Thus the large support potential of many conservative voters, who in the past had chosen the DC as the less of evils, "holding their nose", was set free (Morlino and Tarchi, 1996). On the other hand, as an effect of the plurality system, many political and social actors of moderate orientation rapidly accepted the hypothesis of an alliance with the MSI in order to build a successful electoral cartel against the Left.

Hence, under the pressure of the Tangentopoli<sup>3</sup> scandal, the Extreme Right suddenly achieved that power of coalition and blackmail which it had in vain sought in the past decades through its unconditioned anti-communism. At this point, we can ask ourselves whether this can be considered a real turning-point in its history, or yet another contingent adaptation due to the exceptionality of a phase of transition.

## II. Which kind of change?

In order to answer to such a question, it is necessary to inquire whether the participation of the MSI in the "Polo del buongoverno" electoral cartel and in Silvio Berlusconi's cabinet (April 1994-January 1995) with 5 ministers and 12 undersecretaries has been associated with an ideological and organizational transformation of the party or not. And, if it has, in which degree.

A preliminary answer can be found in the change of denomination implemented by the neofascist leadership in order to favour acceptability on behalf of potential allied forces. Significantly, the label *Alleanza Nazionale* was adopted in the aftermath of the successful local electoral tests in Autumn 1993. In this instance the impressive score of some MSI candidates showed that, given the crisis of the DC, the capacity of mobilization of the party with respect to moderate public opinion was undergoing a noticeable growth. The open support acknowledged by Berlusconi to Gianfranco Fini, the national secretary of MSI, at the Rome municipal elections, is an example of the novel "respectability" achieved by the party. But, since a change of name is neither easy nor painless, especially for parties comprising a relevant amount of "faithful" activists (Panbianco, 1982) and attributing an important role to symbolic factors in the socialization of its members, the new label was presented alongside with the old one for more than one year. Even when, in January 1995, the XVII MSI National Congress ratified the dissolution of the party and its reconstitution as *Alleanza Nazionale*, the old emblem (a tricolor flame) was kept, although in a reduced scale, within the new symbol, following the example of the PCI's change into the PDS.

2 The DC suffered a first split in 1992, when Mario Segni, a liberal-catholic MP, launched his own movement *Popolari per la Riforma*, later *Patto Segni*, accusing the party of being indifferent to the need of institutional reforms. The CCD, *Centro Cristiano Democratico*, was created by some leaders of the DC's conservative wing in the summer 1993, when the party assumed, under the Secretary of Mino Martinazzoli, the new label *Partito Popolare Italiano*, PPI, and shifted to an open strategy of "dialogue" with the PDS. After the March 1994 electoral defeat - 15.7% of the vote -, the PPI was shaken by a sequence of controversies and turnovers. As a consequence, its more moderate wing, led by the deposed secretary Buttiglione, split to form the CDU (*Cristiano-Democratici Uniti*).

3 Under this label, the Italian media designate the cases of political corruption discovered in the early 1990s.

Beyond these formal elements, the transition from the MSI to the Alleanza Nazionale was characterized by a mixture of persistence and change (Ignazi, 1994a).

Concerning the organizational aspects, the new political actor has inherited the old structures entirely. The most significant adhesions to the Alleanza Nazionale took place at the upper and intermediate élite level, with the recruitment of a certain number of professional politicians from the DC and the other Center parties, and of a few independent intellectuals and technicians. At the grass-roots level the turnover appears to be slower.

Tab. 3

## MSI Organizational strength, 1970-1995

Year	Number of members	N. of local units
1970	188,878	1,821
1971	205,794	2,415
1972	239,075	2,721
1973	225,030	2,843
1974	210,018	2,501
1975	212,120	2,304
1976	217,110	2,429
1977	160,339	1,926
1978	152,234	2,123
1979	174,157	2,471
1980	165,810	2,363
1981	176,417	2,561
1982	159,169	2,048
1983	165,308	2,158
1984	180,688	2,496
1985	141,623	2,014
1986	156,520	2,275
1987	165,427	2,720
1988	151,444	2,109
1989	166,162	2,338
1990	142,344	3,020
1991	150,157	4,185
1992	181,243	5,933
1993	202,715	8,337
1994	324,344	8,451
1995	467,539	10,284

Source: MSI National Direction, Organization Office. Communications to the author, 17.5.1990, 28.6.1990, 5.7.1990, 30.11.1990, 20.7.1994, 5.5.1995, 12.1.1996, 12.4.1996.

The effective consistence of the *circoli di ambiente* (basic organizational units) into which the first members of the AN have been recruited was unclear. The official figure of January 1995, 1,650 clubs, with a total of 33,000 members, was no doubt inflated. In any case, the new members were a minority if compared to the number of MSI members at the eve of congress - 324,344, distributed over 8,451

local branches, according to official figures (tab. 3)<sup>4</sup> - gathered under the new label. The territorial articulation of the party was still centered around the pre-existing MSI sections. The majority of deputies and senators elected in 1994, too, had been MSI militants (Verzichelli, 1994). The AN National Assembly elected at the end of the congress, i.e. the largest executive body of the party, comprises a leadership which is of MSI origin in its majority. Even the electoral criteria of this Assembly echo the neofascist mistrust for the democratic method: 200 members were imposed by the leadership, another 200 proposed on a blocked list, 50 coopted on the basis of a direct designation by the President, only 50 were chosen through a free vote of the delegates. Moreover, only 17 out of 101 members of the National Direction were not holding a high-level position in the MSI hierarchy prior to the creation of the Alleanza Nazionale. Finally, AN was born without an autonomous statute. The Congress approved only the first four articles, and in order to know the others a period of seven months had to pass.

As in the old MSI, the organizational structure of the AN is highly centralized and with a strong charismatic connotation (Diamanti, 1995). In addition, the adoption of a presidential model accentuated such characteristics, by reducing the role of the middle-level élite (Tarchi, 1996b). With the new statute, approved by the National Assembly at the end of July 1995, the territorial units of the MSI merged with AN circles and the members of these associations were kept under the control of the neofascist local leadership. The presidential structure of the party allows the leader Gianfranco Fini the powers of a monarch: without consulting any executive body, he can dissolve a circle, remove from office leaders at any level, expel a member; and he chooses the candidates for general elections. Internal democracy has practically disappeared. From this point of view, hence, the birth of the Alleanza Nazionale has certainly not represented a radical discontinuity with respect to the past.

As far as the political culture of the "new" party is concerned, the judgement can not be as clear-cut. The theses submitted to the XVII Congress delegates, who approved them almost unanimously, show, at least on the surface, a significant distance from the historical roots of the MSI. The AN program refers to a Right which is not «born out of fascism» and which «accepts the democratic values rejected by fascism», even recognizing that «anti-fascism was the crucial historical moment to restore the democratic values which had been crushed by fascism» (Tesi, 1994: 8). All forms of both authoritarianism and totalitarianism are condemned, and even corporatism, which had always been one of the programmatic strongholds of the MSI, is left aside, and free market economy *de facto* accepted, under the only condition of recognizing the social needs (Tesi, 1994: 4). Instead, the most evident trace of a persisting linkage with the traditional radical Right-wing culture is to be found in the suspicion towards the representative principle, a mistrust expressed through the refusal of the «old mechanism of delegation» and the preference for «direct democracy». The proposal of a double vote, one to choose the government and the other to elect the members of Parliament (Tesi, 1994: 13), is clearly inspired by a plebiscitary mentality.

<sup>4</sup> As most Italian parties do in order to give an image of organizational strength, the MSI has always largely over-estimated the consistency of its own membership. By analyzing the number of the delegates and the criteria adopted for their election, we can assess at about 60,000 the actual number of its members at the moment of the last Congress of the party, held in January 1995 (see Tarchi 1996b).

However, the real reach of the evolution of the Italian Extreme Right has to be measured referring not only to the official statements of its programmes, but also, and above all, on the ground of praxis. From this point of view, the Alleanza Nazionale presents some undeniable contradictions. Its leaders often exhibit allegiance to democracy, but every now and again they boast of the merits of Mussolini and his regime. The party rejects any use of violence and accepts the dialogue with the Left, but the echoes of the neofascist rhetoric are frequent in its press. Such a wavering behaviour is connected to the need to preserve the capacity of mobilization and identification of the rank and file. In order to succeed in this endeavour, the AN leadership must periodically appeal to the heritage of neofascist ideals (and nostalgia) and thereby emphasize the differences which keep the party separate from its liberal and former Christian Democrat partners of the Center-Right cartel "Polo delle Libertà" (see Tarchi, 1996a). This strategy of duplicity has already been rewarded. At the Fiuggi Congress in 1996, a small number of delegates split to follow the MEP and former national secretary Pino Rauti in his refusal of the new course. As the change from the MSI into the AN has not been the consequence of an external "threat" but only a strategic move to enlarge the party's room to manoeuvre and legitimacy, its implementation has not induced a real conflict among the factions which supported the old leadership<sup>5</sup>. Within the top-level élite of the Alleanza Nazionale, many old *routiniers* of neo-fascist politics stand side by side with national-conservatives and former christian democrats, and the middle-level élite cadres do not seem to interpret the change as a turn. In their opinion, reference to fascism is untouchable, nationalist ideas are still predominant, anti-system attitudes are considerable, mostly among youth (Vignati, 1995: 175-180).

From this concise overview, it should be evident that the moderate turn of the Extreme Right's largest party of postwar Italy is basically a tactical and instrumental move. As several scholars have pointed out (Ignazi, 1994c; Tarchi, 1995a; Carriotti, 1995), this change has been neither preceded nor prepared, within the party, by a critical discussion of the neofascist experience. On the contrary, AN leaders frequently pay public homage to the "glorious" struggle of their forefathers. The same strategy of accommodation is not a novel one in itself: already in the 1970s, under the label *Destra Nazionale*, the MSI had made big efforts in order to gain credit as a respectable Right movement, although with only a limited success. Nevertheless, an excessive emphasis on the analogies with the past does not take into account the changing profile of Italian politics after the breakdown of the "First Republic". Once the MSI-AN was accepted as an electoral and governmental partner by the moderate cartel, the external perception of its identity inevitably entered an evolutionary path. The party leadership is now aware that a nostalgic reversing would endanger a substantial portion of the votes gathered at the March 1994 (5,202,398) and April 1996 (5,875,391) elections: those of the ex center parties voters (50%, or even more, of the overall AN electorate).

The uncertainty about the future of this evolution is therefore linked to other factors, not directly dependent on the will of the party's headquarters:

a) the effective dimension of the gap between the political culture of the AN leadership, that of the membership and that of the electorate;

5 At the XV (1987) and XVI (1990) national congresses, the fractionalization of the MSI was evident, with six factions competing to get, or to influence, the secretary. An agreement of four out of these six factions allowed Fini to regain the party leadership in July 1991.



b) the possibility of a change in the systemic conditions which favoured the rise of the MSI in 1993-1994.

Each of these two topics will be investigated very briefly in the following paragraph.

### III. Some uncertainties about AN future

#### A. *Members and voters: a cultural gap*

Available survey data and electoral studies show that, at least from the mid-1970s, the distance between the values of MSI voters and militants has been considerable (Calvi, 1980; Ignazi, 1989). More recent inquiries seem to confirm and even to accentuate such evidence.

Two surveys carried out among the delegates of the XVI and XVII National Congress (January 1990, January 1995) points out the presence of a continuity with the past in the political culture of the MSI and AN cadres. Anti-system attitudes and a strong feeling of alienation with respect to all other parties prevail over a bargaining and coalitional propensity. The inclination towards radical, even violent, protest is still widespread. Discontinuities with the traditional neofascist culture also depart from the typical values of the Right: no relevant support is given to militarism and clericalism, while in foreign policy anti-americanism is the prevailing attitude, even if the experience of the conservative governmental alliance seems to make it decreasing (Ignazi, 1993: 86-92; Vignati, 1995: 138-174). At the same time, though, a few traces of biological and cultural racism have still been identified, although certainly far less important than in other Extreme Right european movements, especially the French Front National (see Ignazi-Ysmal, 1992).

The profile of the MSI-AN voter, as emerging from a study carried out in 1994, is characterized by different psychological and cultural features. This voter declares a higher than average satisfaction with the working of the political system, gives priority to personal economic welfare, success and pleasure, favours a strong government, "law and order" policies, capital punishment, industrial development, free initiative, and optimistically believes in the upward trend of national economy (Calvi and Vannucci, 1995: 50).

A temporal gap of four years separates the survey realized among the delegates of the XVI MSI national congress and the analysis of the MSI-AN voters. This could bias the comparison, but, as we have seen before, AN members in the year 1994 totally overlapped with those of the MSI, and three quarters of them had joined before 1991. Hence it can be assumed that their basic orientations have remained unchanged, at least until the 1994 elections (analyses of 1996 voters are still not available). Clearly, considerable differences persist between the militant's and the voter's motivations. While the first is attracted and driven into political engagement by an anti-systemic and vaguely revolutionary ideology, moderated at most by some embryonic libertarian "temptations of modernity", especially among the youngest (Ignazi, 1994c: 87), the second reveals typical features of modern conservatism. He/she adopts individualism and a kind of social darwinism, and emphasizes the problems linked to personal and collective security.

To reconcile such different expectations will not be an easy task for the party leadership.

### B. "Post-fascism" strategy and systemic preconditions

The systemic context which offered to the Italian Extreme Right the chance of a previously unthinkable success, thereby stimulating its transformation, seems to be heading towards consolidation. Unless a proportional electoral law is again implemented, it is unlikely that the attempts at reviving a strong Center will be successful<sup>6</sup>. The enduring of a bipolar competitive dynamics strengthens the coalition and blackmail power of the Alleanza Nazionale, because of both the Lega Nord's defection from the Polo delle Libertà, which caused the fall of the Berlusconi's cabinet after only eight months of government, and the organizational weakness of Forza Italia at the local level.

Consequently, the reasons for the "post-fascist" evolution imposed to the MSI under the leadership of Gianfranco Fini in order to exploit the crisis of the centrist parties involved in the Tangentopoli affair, are still valid. The uncertainty about the outcome of future electoral competitions increases AN's weight in the conservative alliance, thus reinforcing its hegemony within the political space of the Right. Its potential competitors are weak: the galaxy of Radical Right groups, very active in the past, is now fragmented and scarcely organized (Ferraresi, 1995); skinhead gangs are no more than lunatic fringes, lacking both political strategies and cultural references (Marchi, 1993). The threat of Rauti's Movimento Sociale-Fiamma Tricolore is more serious, but does not represent, at the moment, an actual challenge to AN strategy. Its score at the regional elections of April 1995 was very poor, below 1%, and the comparative success that the Tricolor Flame's lists enjoyed at the general elections one year later (2.3% for the Senate, with only 165 candidates out of 232 constituencies) seems to express more a reaction against the high number of former christian democrats which stood as candidates for the Polo per le Libertà than an adhesion to the MS-FT programme or ideology<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, this splinter party does not control a sufficient amount of resources as to put up a mass-party structure (in 1995, it claimed 14,236 members and 463 basic units). Hence, up to now, no factors can be identified, which could prevent AN's shift towards the Center. The party could gradually mitigate the fascist features of its ideological identity without the risk of undergoing major defections.

This does not mean that the current developments can not be reversed, or that in Italy Right-Wing populist Radicalism will not have a future. The MSI's change from an old-fashioned neofascist movement to the legitimate representative of die-hard conservative public opinion has been fostered, as we have seen, by some specific conditions: decline in social tensions, collapse of the moderate Center, generalized disaffection with corrupted professional politics, adoption of a plu-

6 Even if the April 1996 general elections show the success of at least three Centrist lists: "Per Prodi" (2,555,082 votes gathered in the p.r. system election of one quarter of the Chamber MPs) and "Lista Dini" (1,627,191), linked to the Center-Left coalition "L'Ulivo"; CCD-CDU (2,190,019), linked to the Center-Right cartel "Polo per le Libertà. The real challenge to bipolarism comes from the Lega Nord (3,777,786 votes, 10.1%, 59 deputies, 27 senators).

7 The score of the Movimento Sociale-Fiamma Tricolore was indeed not so good for the Chamber of Deputies (p.r. share), where the voters had to choose between its candidates and those of the Alleanza Nazionale. The lists of Rauti's party (which had been presented only in 19 out of 26 constituencies) polled in this case only 338,721 votes (0.9%). It should be also noted that the only senator of the MS-FT was elected in a constituency (Avola, in the Sicily) where the Polo per le Libertà had not presented its own candidate, as to favour the candidate of the allied Lista Pannella-Sgarbi.

rality electoral system, lack of competitors on the Right. The vanishing of whichever of these conditions could hinder the process.

In this perspective, given the experiences of other European countries, a major place should be assigned to the topic of immigration and xenophobia and to their impact on the growth of social tensions in Italy. Until today, racism has not been a relevant problem in Italian politics. Anti-immigration protest has not become a factor within the electoral market, due to the high costs it would have entailed in terms of image (Chiarini, 1993). Nevertheless, on some occasions the temptation to use xenophobia as an instrument of propaganda has been followed not only by the MSI but also by the Lega Nord and the PRI. As a matter of fact, social discontent with mass immigration from extra-European and Eastern European countries is growing in the country, and the issue has been already put back on the governments's agenda. Since the link between collective insecurity and xenophobic reactions has considerably favoured the rise of "postindustrial" Extreme Right parties in several European countries, it is likely that even in Italy such issue will become a political warhorse. If the Alleanza Nazionale will give in to this temptation, following the urging of some sectors of its rank and file, it will be re-absorbed within the limits of its past extremist *cliché*. If, on the contrary, it will abstain from that, in order not to challenge its recently acquired legitimacy, it will leave some room of manoeuvre on its Right. The recent contacts of Rauti's Movimento Sociale-Fiamma Tricolore with Le Pen's Front National, with the announcement of future common anti-immigration meetings, show that such challenge is a concrete option.

Another important topic is related to the change of the Italian political system in itself. As many recent developments have shown, the closed, consociational, cartel-type, clientelist, partitocratic system which had aroused in Italy a widespread dissatisfaction with the working of democratic institutions has not been completely dismantled by the proclaimed birth of a "second Republic". The ruling political class is still largely formed by the leaders of the old parties, now under new labels. Has the system changed enough to avoid an enduring lack of legitimacy, or at least will it be able to do it in the future? The outbursts of anger by some interest organizations (artisans, shop keepers, small entrepreneurs), the recurring menaces of a "tax strike", the success of the Lega Nord's calls to secession of the Northern part of the country, as well as the electoral growth, on the Left side of the political system, of the neo-communist party Rifondazione Comunista, reveal that the Italian society is still suffering a great deal of discontent and asks for an open anti-establishment protest. Will be the policies of Prodi's Center-Left government able to improve the performance of both the civil service and the national economy and so to reabsorb this unrest?

The future developments of the Italian Extreme Right will largely depend on the answer to this question.

### *Abstract*

*The position of the extreme right within the Italian political system has been modified since 1993. A larger political space became available to the right-wing parties when some of the pillars of the "First Republic" governmental coalitions collapsed. The most representative party of this area, the MSI, is experiencing an ideological and organizational change which started by the assumption of the new label "Alleanza Nazionale". In this article we try to explain why the shape and logic of the clientelistic and partitocratic Italian system can be held responsible for the success of the MSI and to discuss some organizational, ideological and political aspects of its change into the AN. We also analyze the chances of success for the movements of the populist Radical Right, whose strategy is mainly related to the emergence of the immigration cleavage, in a country where the dissatisfaction for the working of democracy is still widespread.*