

# Regionalism, federalism and minority rights: The Italian case

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## I. Introduction

Most domestic and foreign observers have usually emphasized Italy's cultural heterogeneity and weak national identity. When the country was at last officially unified in 1870, only the 10% most cultivated citizens could use the national language to communicate; over a century later, in the early 1990s, about 14% of the population are, according to some estimates, still restricted to local dialects; of the twenty-eight minority languages identified by the European Union within member states, thirteen are spoken by minorities located within the Italian borders. Altogether, these groups exceed one million people (Lepschy, 1990; De Mauro, 1994; Adnkronos, 1995: 856).

Whether these and other sources of cultural variation - e.g., those reflected in the North-South divide - are big enough to result in open cultural fragmentation within the country is however another question. Many claim indeed that shared mentalities and lifestyles nonetheless provide Italians with a relatively homogeneous culture and identity (Romano, 1994). This view is apparently supported by recent figures about feelings of national identification. In spite of recent successes of political organizations advocating a drastic reform of the unified state, and occasionally threatening its dissolution, Italians still overwhelmingly conceive of themselves as fellow nationals in the first place, while only tiny minorities regard regional (Venetian, Lombard, Piedmontese, etc.) origins as their major sources of collective identity<sup>1</sup>.

Rather than from strictly cultural reasons, major problems to Italian successful integration have seemingly come from political and socio-economic dynamics, related to nation building. Obstacles have come in fact from the well-known strength and radicalism of the mounting workers' movements. Sticking to the territorial dimension we are most interested in here, elites in the new unified state had to face since the very beginning harsh opposition from local populations that were little sympathetic to the new rulers. Rather than from below, ie, as the outcome of democratic mobilizations, the Italian unification was achieved through a largely elitarian effort. Especially in Southern Italy, the lack of resources to devote to large scale education and socialization processes prevented the new elites

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1 Diamanti and Segatti (1995). Sources of homogeneity and solidarity are not, though, shared civic cultures or commitment to collective goods, rather, individual qualities such as creativity or entrepreneurial skills, or emphasis on familial values.

from filling the deficit of loyalty to the new state by democratic procedures. Rather, they found it more convenient to obtain support from the backward-looking pre-unification elites in those regions. The favourable conditions for the spread of patronage politics, familism and corruption, and later for the distorted use of welfare policies, were thus set. So were those for the consolidation of overcentralized state apparatuses, willing to concede little or no autonomy to local representative bodies. This led in turn to a drastic reduction of opportunities for economic growth and social development. Ironically, the absence of a strong civil society, particularly though not exclusively in the Southern regions, may also have contributed to the lack of regional conflicts along 'internal colonialism' lines in what could definitely be seen as the most colonized and deprived areas of the country (Zincone, 1992; Putnam, 1993; Keating, 1988; Palloni, 1979). This in spite of a few exceptions, especially in Sardinia (Petrosino, 1992).

The fascist regime further strengthened the already high centralization within the public administration (Voci, 1994). It also pushed very far the process of forced 'Italianization' of cultural minorities. In the recently annexed South Tyrol, as well as in the Aosta Valley and in other peripheral areas, use of local languages was banned, and names of both sites and people were translated into their supposed Italian equivalents (Salvi, 1975).

Therefore, discussing the center-periphery relationships and the protection of cultural minorities implies referring to processes that are well rooted in the country's recent (and not so recent) history. Here, I focus on major events of the last fifty years, and relate minority and territorial mobilizations with broader developments in territorial and devolution policies.

The center-periphery cleavage has surfaced in three different phases at least since the end of World War II and the collapse of fascism. The first phase corresponds to the secession efforts launched just at the dawn of the new republic in areas as different as Sicily, Aosta Valley, and South Tyrol. The second phase consists of the re-awakening of cultural and linguistic minorities in the contentious phase of the late 1960s-early 1970s. Finally, the third phase can largely be located in the late 1980s-early 1990s, in correspondence with the sudden rise of the Northern League. Each time, claims have been made on behalf of deprived and aggrieved populations, whose rights have been purported as denied and/or threatened by the central state. Each time, however, the specific traits of the regionalist, anti-centralist initiatives have been different. Extreme variation may indeed be found in the major goals supported by each mobilization wave, in the definition of the actors involved in the conflict as well as of its stake, in the structural and political context.

In particular, conflicts related to the regional dimension have largely exceeded the boundaries of conventional minority rights politics. Throughout the last fifty years, regional mobilizations have run parallel to reform attempts undertaken by national parties and/or by the central government. Policies meant to protect regional minorities' distinctive cultural traits have been started with some regularity since the 1960s on. Recently, efforts have been made to extend the autonomy of local governments and increase citizens' participation to local politics, eg by passing a new act on local autonomies (142/1990) (Voci, 1994). However, the most substantial effort to deal with the regional dimension in domestic politics has consisted of the devolution process, that resulted in the institution of regional councils in 1970. The oppositional PCI were obviously interested in extending the autonomy of local governments, given their strength in some important areas of the country, especially in central Italy. As for the Christian Demo-

crats, special attention to territorial issues was paid by those regional branches who were under pressure from ethnoterritorial parties, like in Sardinia or Trentino. Strong commitment to devolution processes also came from areas where the most progressive sections of the party had a say, like in Lombardy (Putnam, 1993).

## II. Postwar separatism and regional reform policies

Italian minorities and territorial political organizations tried to exploit the opportunities, created by the reintroduction of democracy in the country, and the uncertainty which came along with it. They also tried to take advantage of a drastically modified international context, where the drawing of new state borders was in many cases highly controversial.

Admittedly, not all secession attempts undertaken in the aftermath of the war were equally rooted in international conflicts. These had no impact in the case of the Independentist Sicilian Movement (MIS - Movimento Indipendentista Siciliano), active in Sicily for a few years following the Allied Forces' occupation of the island in 1943. They obtained in the beginning some support from both large and petty landowners, as well as from the American occupants, in their claims for secession from the Italian state. Yet, this was far more an attempt by traditional land proprietors to guarantee their hold of power, rather than the expression of minority groups' attempts to gain increasing recognition and power (Ginsborg, 1990: 59). In Sardinia, the effervescence of the first postwar years also facilitated the revitalization of the Sardinian Action Party (Partito Sardo d'Azione - PSdA). An autonomist party established in 1921, they dropped their profile as a patronage, *notables* party, for a more explicit perspective of democratic federalism (Petrosino, 1992; Settembre, 1994).

The international dimension played an explicit role in Aosta Valley, where the autonomist movement had strong roots in the anti-fascist opposition<sup>2</sup>. In May, 1945, demonstrations demanding regional autonomy - and also threatening secession to France - turned into riots. To be fair, support from across the border was at least officially rather cool, and the cultural affinity between France and Aosta Valley was actually quite tenuous (as a matter of fact, local dialects bear little similarities to the French language) (Salvi, 1975). Still, the proximity to France provided nonetheless local autonomists with a valuable political opportunity. It was in South Tyrol that regional grievances became a truly international question. The South Tyrol people's Party (SVP - Südtiroler Volkspartei) was established already in 1945 as an ethnic party with a strong subcultural integration capacity, primarily oriented to the preservation of the German speaking group. They started off by asking for a referendum, which should have sanctioned their return to Austria. Indeed, the backing of Austria to South Tyrol largely contributed to assign this issue a prominence, rarely attained by other minorities' mobilizations. Already in 1946 a pact signed in London by the Prime Ministers of the time, Mr De Gasperi and Mr Gruber, committed the Italian government to provide effective protection of the German speaking group's rights. The long and often troubleso-

2 Its leaders had in fact been among the promoters of the so-called *Chivasso charter*, a joint document drafted already in 1943 by representatives of cultural minorities involved in the resistance movement, advocating autonomy for peripheral regions once freedom had been obtained. See Salvi (1975) and Canciani and De La Pierre (1993).

me implementation of this agreement has represented the underlying thread of South Tyrol politics and policies in the last fifty years <sup>3</sup>.

In this context, the first moves towards decentralization on the part of national political actors were largely reactive in nature. They were mainly meant to prevent secession threats in the peripheral regions in a risky and uncertain phase of national life, when national unity had to be reasserted after divisions originated from the 1943-1945 civil war. Already in 1945, in the aftermath of the May riots, a royal decree recognized Aosta Valley's right to autonomy; in 1948, the Autonomy Statute granted among other rights bilingualism and financial autonomy. In South Tyrol, the already mentioned 1946 De Gasperi-Gruber agreement was similarly followed by an Autonomy Statute, where the German-speaking province of Bozen was associated with Trento in a special status region. By 1949, four special status regions with high degrees of political autonomy had been established in Sicily, Sardinia, Aosta Valley and Trentino-Alto Adige (the latter being the Italian name for South Tyrol), while Friuli-Venezia Giulia had to wait for a similar status until 1964. As for the Slovenian minority in north-east Italy, its claims for rights were dealt with in the context of the long-lasting negotiations between Italian and Yugoslavian governments on the redefinition of national borders (from the signature of the pace treaty in 1947 until the final Osimo treaty in 1975).

It has to be acknowledged that early decentralization moves were in many respects disappointing from the point view of both the ethnic minorities and the advocates of decentralization within national parties. In Sardinia, decentralization plans and, later, policies were largely controlled by the locally dominant Christian Democratic party. For example, proposals that were put forward from PSDA when the regional autonomy statute was being drafted were not even discussed in the consulting committee constituted to that purpose (Settembre, 1994). In South Tyrol, the provincial council was actually granted substantial capacities only in a few areas, including culture, professional training, craftsmanship, trade. Moreover, as they were associated with the more populated, Italian speaking province of Trento, German-speaking representatives were by definition minoritarian in the regional council.

As for supporters of decentralization within national parties, they had not conceived of it only as a means to meet cultural minorities' demands. Rather, decentralization had to be a decisive step towards a more substantial form of democracy, able to overcome the undue centralization of both the fascist regime and the pre-war liberal state, and to respond to citizens' rising demands of democratic participation. The 1948 constitution indeed referred explicitly to the introduction of regional parliaments elected by citizens. With the exception of the somewhat 'troublesome' regions that were granted special status, the implementation of regional governments proved however fairly difficult. Opposition came in fact from both the state bureaucracy and the majority of the Christian Democratic party. Being firmly in hold of national power after the 1948 general elections, DC feared that regional autonomy could grant the Communist Party further opportunities for action (Putnam, 1993: chap.2).

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<sup>3</sup> Even the cuts to the regional budget, proposed by Mr Berlusconi in Fall, 1994 in the context of the widely contested Legge Finanziaria (General Budget Act), have been opposed by South Tyrol MPs by threatening a global revision of the agreement and the call for Austria support once again!

### III. The protection of minority rights and regional devolution policies 1960 to 1980s

During the 1950s and early 1960s minority parties sometimes managed to play some role in the political arena, like in Sardinia. Other times, they combined tactic, occasional threats to secession with pragmatic cooperation with national parties. This applies for instance to the Aosta Valley, where the ruling parties within the autonomist movement (Popular Democrats first, Union Valdotaïne later) got involved from time to time in alliances with both right- and left-wing parties. This resulted in a patronage politics style that has marked autonomist forces in the area ever since, sometimes leaving way to political corruption. While electoral support has been preserved to date, little efforts have instead been devoted to develop an ethnonationalist approach, capable of revitalizing local culture and traditions and of denouncing the external financial groups' grip over local economy<sup>4</sup>.

Evidence of consociational relationships to national parties may be found in South Tyrol, too, in spite of the above the average levels of contention there. On the one hand, conflicts kept developing on the issue of the real implementation of the 1946 agreement, of the need for greater independence from Trento ('loss von Trient' was in fact a major slogan of the time); radical positions in favour of secession to Austria maintained substantial influence. At the same time, though, South Tyrol representatives in the national Parliament sided with ruling Christian Democrats virtually on all issues but those referring to regional conflicts.

The political situation changed drastically since the mid-1960s, when an unprecedented wave of political and social unrest put the polity members under severe challenge (Tarrow, 1989). In this context even regional and territorial conflicts were revitalized and reshaped. Growing overlaps and integration could actually be detected between minority mobilizations and other, often class-based, struggles. Similarly to what was happening in other Western countries, even in Italy a new generation of minority activists emerged. They had been in many cases socialized to political activism within the urban protest movements active in the core regions of the country. This allowed them to overcome the classic notion of ethnonationalism, focusing on the defence of traditional culture, in favour of a more political, anti-capitalist view<sup>5</sup>. The notion of peripheral regions as 'internal colonies' gained increasing popularity.

The shift was particularly impressive in Sardinia, where new political organizations like 'Su populu sardu' (The Sardinian people) were established. They identified themselves as an anti-colonialist movement ('movimentu contra su colonialismu') in the first place. Campaigns were launched against NATO bases and military training camps in the island; against the industrialization attempts, controlled by continental business and the Rome government; against luxurious tourist resorts. Traditional banditry was given new attention and appreciation as a

<sup>4</sup> Autonomist parties still polled over half of the vote in both the 1993 regional and the 1994 national elections, with the dominant Union Valdotaïne totalling 37% and 38% respectively (Adnkronos, 1995: 418 and 435).

<sup>5</sup> The distinction between old and new ethnonationalism is elaborated in Diani (1983). It goes without saying that new currents do not displace more traditional ones, rather, they coexist with them, in a changing context where all actors in the political arena tend to redefine to some extent their approaches.

peculiar example of people's protest action. Even long established organizations like PSDA adapted their strategies and belief systems to the new context by picking up and reframing, from a more moderate and interclassist perspective, themes which were part of the 'anti-colonialist discourse'. Unprecedented emphasis was therefore placed upon struggles against cultural and economic domination. Alliances with left-wing parties were built up, after years of poor communication. This trend was to continue in the 1980s, when separatist and ethnonationalist approaches would have increased their strength within the party, although electoral success would have come only in the 1984 European elections (13.4%)<sup>6</sup>. Analogous, although politically less influential, developments might be found in both Slovenian and Occitane areas in northern Italy, where internal colonialism approaches overlapped with actions meant to revitalize local traditions, consistently with contemporary trends within European ethnonational movements (Canciani and De La Pierre, 1993; Smith, 1981; Keating, 1988).

Protest waves usually come along with reform waves (Tarrow, 1989 and 1994). Cultural minorities politics in Italy are no exception to this pattern. To be fair, actions promoted in this policy area should not be automatically seen as a by-product of the context which led to massive radical protest movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Still, a number of acts were passed between the 1960 and the 1980s, although no systematic legislation has been introduced yet<sup>7</sup>. Between mid-1970s and mid-1980s spaces opened up within public institutions for several forms of minority cultures, to complement the use and teaching of Italian language. Slovenian culture and language have gained for example increasing - albeit still poor - protection, following a series of acts introducing the use of their language in local public media and in the education system, although independent schools were not created<sup>8</sup>. Altogether, however, such opportunities have apparently been seized far more often by private, or semi-public, cultural associations and research centres - sometimes, by some university departments - than by public schools (Canciani and De La Pierre, 1993: 38-39).

Ironically, although the Italian Constitution is among the few to point explicitly at minority protection as a fundamental task for the country (Pastori, 1995), and in spite of some legislative innovations, minorities within Italy largely owe their rights - if any - to extra constitutional factors. The most important one is still the legacy of international treaties following the Italian defeat in World War II. Indeed, most protection has been obtained by minorities leaving on the borders, like the Germans in South Tyrol, the 'French' in Aosta Valley, the Slovenians in the provinces of Trieste and Gorizia. The counterproof comes from the Ladins, who are split between South Tyrol, Veneto and Friuli. While the 30,000 living in South Tyrol can for example be taught in their own dialect since 1973, this is denied to the 700,000 living in Friuli. Similarly, Slovenians living in Friuli do not enjoy specific protection, while those living in the neighbouring provinces of Trieste and Gorizia do (Canciani and De La Pierre, 1993: chap.1). Policy responsiveness in this area may also be encouraged by catastrophic events. The

6 A short history of PSDA may be found in Petrosino (1992) and Settembre (1994).

7 Proposals for a global act regulating the whole issue ('Norme in materia di tutela delle minoranze linguistiche') were actually discussed in parliament both in 1987 and in 1991, but they failed in both cases to be finally approved before the end of the legislature (Canciani and De La Pierre, 1993).

8 See Acts 308/1956, 1012/1961, 933/1973. See also Settembre (1994).



first chair in Friuli's language and culture was indeed created at the University of Udine in 1977, ie, in the aftermath of the 1976 earthquake <sup>9</sup>.

South Tyrol is definitely the area where minority rights have been dealt with by Italian governments in the most systematic way. In 1969, agreement was reached about a comprehensive set of measures (137 altogether), covering virtually all issues of relevance to the protection of the German group. The implementation of the so called 'pacchetto' (literally, 'package') has represented a major source of argument and contention in the last decades. In 1971, the new Autonomy Statute was passed. It assigned greater autonomy than usual to provinces, through the relocation of power and competences from Trentino-Alto Adige regional offices to Bozen province institutions. High degrees of independence were reached, in areas including, among others, education and justice; the choice of language, with full bilingualism being awarded; public budget; etc. All major policy areas came largely under the control of provincial, German-speaking bodies.

One might even argue that in many respects the label 'minority problems' in South Tyrol has more and more frequently applied to locally minoritarian groups (the Ladins to some extent, but especially the Italians) in their interaction with the German group. One major contentious issue has been the rigid system of 'ethnic proportionality', according to which access to public jobs and to social services is strictly regulated by one's affiliation to any of the three language groups in the region. This has resulted in significant shares of Italian or Ladin speakers, identifying themselves as Germans on the occasion of the National Census, in order to increase their opportunities for jobs and provisions <sup>10</sup>. The dominance - be it real or presumed - of the German group has fuelled opposition from both the right and the left wings of the political spectrum. On the right, the neo-fascist and overly nationalistic MSI (now turned into the post-fascist Alleanza Nazionale: Ignazi, 1994) has long become the best option among Italian speakers, mostly concentrated in the bigger towns. On the left, new social movements and alternative organizations have opposed the increasing pillarization of South Tyrol society, claiming for peaceful interaction and coexistence, rather than for separation, between the different groups (Barozzi, 1994; Langer, 1983).

What about relations between minority rights and regional devolution? All in all, it seems possible to argue that the institution of regional councils has opened up more opportunities for minority protection than the state has managed to create. Among ordinary status regions, Veneto, Piedmont, Calabria, Molise, and Basilicata include among their official goals the protection of minorities. However, conflicts on this level, have regularly developed with central authorities, claiming that the Constitution reserved this role for the state (Voci, 1994). In fact, several regional laws have been ruled off on this ground. In the 1980s, however, the Constitutional court has finally ruled illegitimate the state monopoly over this policy area <sup>11</sup>.

Even the implementation of the regional reform taken as a whole has not been devoid of problems and obstacles, though. The act, regulating regional elections, was passed only in 1968, against heavy opposition from conservatives, and

9 Act 546/1977. See Canciani and De La Pierre (1993: 36-37).

10 The 1971 Census registered for instance, out of 414,000 residents, 260,000 Germans, 128,000 Italians, 26,000 Ladins. On the following censuses, held in 1981 and 1991, estimates have been done that about 10% of members of the non-German groups have modified their ethnic affiliation.

11 Sentences 312/1983 and 289/1987. See also Canciani and De La Pierre (1993: 40).

in the favourable context created by the mounting wave of participatory politics of that time. Although elections took place in 1970, only two years later did the government actually transfer some powers to the newly established regional councils. The devolution of power, responsibilities and resources has actually been very long and complex. One important step were the 616 decrees by which over 20,000 offices came under control of regional administrations in 1977. Substantive policy area that were submitted to territorial devolution included health and social welfare, urban planning, economic development (Voci, 1994; Putnam, 1993:28).

How substantial the budget autonomy of regional councils is represents a highly controversial issue. Here, large differences persist between special status and ordinary status regions. According to some estimates, in the 1980s only 36% of expenses in the former was regulated by state laws, while the share climbed up to 82% in the latter. Moreover, regional councils have rarely proved able to overcome the shortcomings which marred the state administration in terms of degrees of bureaucracy and inefficiency. On the other hand, yet, regional governments have displayed greater persistency and lesser internal conflicts than national governments<sup>12</sup>. Altogether, surveys regularly conducted at different points in time have shown that while Italian citizens have been quite dissatisfied with regional councils' performances, they have been less so than with the national governments'. Discontent with regional authorities has been far stronger in Southern Italy. In northern Italy, in contrast, and in spite of recent political upsets, people still in the 1980s were globally more satisfied than dissatisfied with their regional institutions and administrators<sup>13</sup>.

Regional administrations have therefore managed only to a limited extent to counter-balance the attitudes of open distrust and criticism of government actors - as well as of political actors at large - that were spreading during the 1980s. Right in the same period it appears indeed that center-periphery tensions within the established political class tend to fade away. In the pioneering years of regional reform, regional politicians had often acted as a 'counterpower' to the central state, arguing that local policies offered the opportunities to develop more responsive, participatory styles of policy making. By the 1980s, though, hostility for state control over regional policies tended to reduce drastically among regional councillors; so did claims for the suppression of prefects, the local representatives of the central state (Putnam, 1993: 53). According to critics, regional politics and policy proved to be in the end largely a replication on a smaller scale of national 'big' politics, to the detriment of any real autonomy (Keating, 1988: 230-234). This contributed to create further spaces for action for those, willing to fuel again center-periphery tensions within the country. This would have taken, however, radically different forms to the recent past.

12 For example, the average length of regional coalitions has been of 700 days in 1985-1990, in front of 250 days for national governments (Putnam, 1993: 49-50).

13 Data refer however to feelings, recorded before corruption scandals emerged and the 'Italian revolution' started off (Putnam, 1993: 58-65).



#### IV. The Northern League's challenge to established parties and "consociational" democracy

The rise of the Northern League has introduced substantial changes on the symbolic level, with respect to the way other, previous minorities' claims and grievances were framed and turned into political messages. This does not mean that the Leagues' communication has not picked up a number of rhetoric forms which are well rooted in conventional self-representations of oppressed minorities. Indeed, the autonomist groups that will later constitute the Northern League started off in the late 1970s-early 1980s as political organizations very close to the ethnonationalist model. Northern Italians were portrayed as colonized by "Roman parties", and invited to take action against their oppressors. However, and in contrast to other wealthy regions like Catalonia, emphasis on ethnonationalist ideas has proved little rewarding in terms of mobilizing capacity. The Leagues have therefore dropped progressively their emphasis on the defence of regional cultural legacy and identities (with the partial exception of *Liga Veneta*). The use of dialect in public offices and the revitalization of regional traditions have actually become rather marginal in these organizations' programs by the early 1990s (Alievi, 1992). What prevails is rather a more confused combination of populism and regionalism. It allows autonomists' political organizers to better stitch together themes and grievances, like anti-state and anti-bureaucratic sentiments, anti-welfare, pro-market options, hostility towards immigrants and Southern Italians, which it would be more complex to fit coherently in a classic ethnonationalist perspective.

By focusing on the hard-working ordinary 'people', without further qualification, it is indeed easier to maximize the distance between the 'us' and the 'them', where the latter includes welfare parasites along with immigrants on the one hand, politicians, trade union organizers, intellectuals, and even big industrialists on the other (Biorcio, 1991 and 1992; Diani, 1996). The Leagues' discourse shares many traits with neo-conservative currents in other countries, critical of welfare arrangements and consociational politics. However, in spite of a recurring emphasis on the importance of democracy, the Leagues' populism has differed from Thatcherism or Reaganism in its unusually high contempt for democratic practices and procedures. A conception of democracy as a conflict-mediating activity which requires specific competences, mutual understanding between conflictual parties, and the recognition of the plurality of interests at stake in the political arena, has been largely missing - at least until the 1994 National elections. While these themes have recently gained some attention, due to the Leagues' vital need to differentiate themselves from Mr Berlusconi's managerial approach, in their basic representations of politics deep mistrust for current Italian politicians has often turned into global anti-political attitudes. The success of the Leagues has in fact occurred at a political phase when the capacity of traditional cleavages to structure political conflict are not the only feature of established politics to come under contestation; rather, public criticism addresses more and more frequently the legitimacy of political actors and of political procedures based on rational discourse as such (Diani, 1996).

What is the linkage, if any, between the Leagues' approach and minority rights issues? A point of convergence could be found in the importance given to local autonomy. Emphasis on self-government and grassroots democracy has actually been one key theme for new social movements in recent times (Dalton and Kuechler, 1990; Dalton, 1993). According to one senior League politician, "autonomy is to be the ruler of yourself at home; decentralization instead is just doing at home

what the state has decided you should do. While autonomy necessarily requires a federal state, decentralization can be implemented even in a centralized state like the Italian state"<sup>14</sup>.

This important exception notwithstanding, the Leagues' programs do not pay too much attention to minority rights issues, nor to issues of 'rights' in the broader sense of the term. This is partially dependent on the fact that in recent times new social movements have mobilized on rights which are more or less connected to the redefinition of welfare entitlements and provisions. While social movements have often been critical of welfare policies, they have never challenged their legitimacy, rather, they have devised alternative ways to provide for social needs, or to define standards of access to welfare goods. The Leagues' approach is different. They do not aim at granting full citizenship rights to culturally specific populations which were previously excluded from them. Rather, they tend to expand the rights of majority groups that are already full members of the system - for example, their rights to lighter fiscal pressure - by excluding, or at least restricting, citizenship entitlements to groups that they judge unworthy of special social support. These range from Third World immigrants to most Italian citizens currently on welfare. Arguments behind these proposals underline the unusual, clientelistic expansion of access to welfare provisions (in the form of generous early retirement schemes, fake disabledness pensions, and so forth) which has marred Italian welfare in the last decades.

One should also notice that social movements' action on rights in recent times has not been restricted to expanding access to a given set of citizenship rights. They have also emphasized the importance of cultural pluralism, ie, the importance of redefining rights in a way which took ethnic, gender, cultural differences into account. No traces of these debates may be found in the Leagues' perspective. Their reference is the 'people', that they see as a naturally homogeneous entity, which one can either assimilate to or deviate from. On several occasions, Leagues' prominent figures have shown little interest in, if not contempt for, cultural pluralism, and denied the need to support the cultural diversity of groups which for some reasons have been historically deprived<sup>15</sup>.

All in all, the Leagues get their support from social sectors that are in most cases supportive of more right-wing views than the general Italian population. Surveys conducted among electors in Lombardy and Veneto demonstrate for instance that Leagues' voters are more racist than their fellow residents in their attitudes to both Southern Italians and Third World immigrants<sup>16</sup>. Similar data emerge even from social milieus, like volunteers in nonprofit organizations, that are

<sup>14</sup> Lombardia Autonomista, 21.10.1989, cited in Allievi (1992: 23).

<sup>15</sup> Examples may range from some local administrators' appeals to women to stay home as a means to fight unemployment, to the macho language adopted by national leaders, to the opposition many local chapters have mounted against the construction of non catholic, mostly muslim, places of worship in their neighbourhoods.

<sup>16</sup> About 50% of the Leagues' voters regard favourably limitations to Southern Italians' capacity to move around northern Italy (vs 26% of the total populations in those regions), while 72% see non-white immigrants as potential sources of trouble and problems (vs 58% in the general population) (Diamanti, 1993: 103).

supposed largely hostile to the Leagues<sup>17</sup>. Their proposals are therefore unlikely to link up with other political organizations' action on the expansion of rights; here, the Leagues' attention is actually restricted to the question of territorial autonomy, and more specifically of the federalist transformation of the Italian state.

## V. The debate on federalism and local government reform

Loudly voiced claims of federal reform by the Northern League have attracted most media and public attention in the last years. In practice, however, similarly to what happened in previous phases, issues of devolution and local autonomy have been taken up from several perspectives. A number of actions have been undertaken by parliamentary and governmental actors, in order to counteract citizens' growing disaffection for traditional parties and public institutions. In this perspective, devolution has been mainly seen as an opportunity to improve the quality of the linkages between citizens and institutions: in local offices and agencies both communication with, and control by, citizens may in principle be expected to be easier.

A major achievement on this ground has been the 'local autonomies act', passed in 1990. Opportunities for citizens' involvement in local policy making have been enlarged, introducing city-level referenda on local issues, making it easier to access administrative documents, or designing procedures to involve public interest groups in more regular interaction with public authorities. The new act has also affected relationships between city and regional councils, introducing the principle that regional planning should be based on regular city councils' consultation<sup>18</sup>. In 1993, the national associations of cities (ANCI), provinces (UPI) and regions (CINSEDO) proposed the adoption of a Charter of Regions (Carta delle Regioni). Following the German example, it aimed at introducing in the Constitutional Charter the notion of subsidiarity (Pastori, 1995; Piraino, 1994). In 1994, the Minister for Institutional Reforms of the Berlusconi government, Francesco Speroni of the Northern League, chaired the "Study group on institutional, electoral, and constitutional reforms". As its name suggests, the committee's tasks covered a large spectrum of potential institutional innovations. A similar advisory board, the "Study group for regional and local autonomies reforms", was chaired in the second half of 1994 by another prominent figure of the League, Roberto Maroni, then in charge as Minister of Internal Affairs<sup>19</sup>. However, these bodies never managed to formulate organic and systematic plans for reform (Pizzetti, 1995: 245-249), also because of the quick dissolution of the right-wing majority in December 1994. Even earlier, the collapse of the traditional party system, following corruption scandals, had similarly vanished the work of what some regard as the most systematic attempt at institutional reform to date. The "Joint Senate and Chamber of Deputies Committee for Institutional Reforms", establis-

17 On the occasion of a project on new public interest groups in Milan city in 1990, data on 165 members showed for example that even there, relatively more authoritarian orientations were positively correlated to relative sympathy for the Northern League (they actually accounted for 25% of variance). This evidence has not been published to date. For additional information on the project, see Diani and Lanzalaco (1990). For details on the authoritarianism index, see instead Diani (1995: chap.6).

18 Act 142/1990. See Voci (1994), Piraino (1994) and Pitruzzella (1994).

19 Pizzetti (1995) provides a systematic assessment of all the major reform proposals put forward in this area in the last few years, including those elaborated by the Speroni and Maroni committees.

hed in 1992, was abruptly terminated by the conclusion of the legislature in early 1994 (Pizzetti, 1995; Pastori, 1995).

All the above mentioned projects reflected the recurrent tensions between reform plans emphasizing the role of regions, and reform plans aiming in contrast to revitalize the role of all different levels of local government, including city and provincial councils (Pizzetti, 1995: 250). However, both 'regionalist' and 'localist' approaches would have been of small scope and breadth in comparison to what the Northern League has long claimed to be its major political goal, ie, the constitutional changes meant to turn Italy into a federal state. To be honest, an articulated definition of what the Leagues meant by 'federalism' has been largely missing thus far. The idea of federalism has rather been used as a metaphor and a rhetorical device in political debates (Pizzetti, 1995; De Siervo, 1995; Diamanti, 1994). The first project the Leagues ever rendered public was a very succinct, ten-articles project for a federal constitution, presented by their ideologue of the time, Professor Gianfranco Miglio, at their national conventions of December, 1993 and February, 1994 (Frattolin, 1994). It envisaged the preservation of the five special status regions, plus the merging of the others into three Macroregions or Cantons, corresponding respectively to northern ('Padania'), central ('Etruria'), and southern Italy ('Sud'). The highly residual role of the state, the string cantonal control over budget and taxation policies, the opportunity for single regions to secede, rendered this project very close to a federation of virtually independent states. After it was presented, one major line of criticism was that differences in resources between the different areas would have inevitably led the strongest macroregions to break away from the others <sup>20</sup>. To survive, the new federation would have had to rely upon the unifying powers of charismatic figures <sup>21</sup>.

Widespread negative reactions resulted in the quick dismissal of the project as a 'provocation' by the leaders of the Leagues themselves. However, even though Mr Miglio left the party just after the formation of the Berlusconi's cabinet in Spring, 1994<sup>22</sup>, his views still affected the more systematic proposal that the Northern League presented at a convention in Genoa in November, 1994 <sup>23</sup>. This project envisaged the creation of nine new states, whose size was more comparable than that of those in the original 'macro-regional' scheme. It was a highly complex constitutional design, in as much as it maintained the current twenty regions, albeit in a more marginal position (Pizzetti, 1995: 238-241).

From a different perspective, a systematic proposal of regional reform has come from a study, promoted by the Agnelli Foundation. In contrast to Miglio's plans, merging of current regions into bigger units is inspired by practical - in particular, economic - considerations, rather than by cultural and historical homogeneity (De Siervo, 1995: 58). Twelve regions are proposed, with smaller ones either joining neighbouring, bigger ones (this would be the case for example of Liguria and Aosta Valley joining Piedmont), or merging together to constitute a bigger unit (as in the case of Marche, Abruzzo and Molise). The rationale behind mer-

20 For an example of an historically grounded argument along these lines see Romano (1994).

21 See Pizzetti (1995: 244-245, 251); De Siervo (1995: 30).

22 The League leaders' uncertain commitment to this project was apparently among the factors which convinced Mr Miglio to resign (Miglio, 1994).

23 A modified version of this project was later presented in the Senate in January 1995 as a parliamentary proposal for constitutional change by Mr Speroni and other MPs (Pizzetti, 1995: 240-241).

gers is to create twelve units not too different in terms of economic and infrastructural resources. This should result in a system where a) each region is strong enough to sustain its own autonomous policies, but at the same time b) no region is stronger than the others to the point of being tempted by the idea of secession (Pacini, 1994; Fondazione Agnelli, 1994).

However, the real question is how many chances has any of these projects to be really implemented. With the obvious exception of the Northern League's, none of them is backed by organized political actors. And even the League would need a coalition to support their plans. Whether political opportunities are favourable to such an outcome is however uncertain. Among public opinion, interest for federalism seems to be relatively low: according to a survey conducted in 1994, the Leagues' proposal of three macroregions was the best type of state structure reform for 5% only, while federalism with existing regions was supported by 15%, versus one third who preferred the status quo and about one fourth who advocated devolution of powers to either regional or city councils. Even in northern Italy, the macroregional reform got only 6% of support, while federalism was chosen by 21% of respondents - definitely a higher share than in central or southern Italy (10% each), but still lower than those standing for no changes (25%) (Diamanti and Segatti, 1994). One year later, figures showed no substantial changes but for the further increase of supporters of the *status quo* (Diamanti, 1995: 817).

In the light of this evidence, the macroregional option seems to be hardly feasible for the Northern League. And yet, the persistence of territorial issues in the political agenda should not be automatically ruled out. While its chances for coalition building on this ground may be tiny, the League has nonetheless a clear interest in revitalizing debates on territorial reform, and in radicalizing them, at least in rhetorical terms<sup>24</sup>. Federalism and decentralization could in other words represent once again *the* issue 'owned' (Gusfield, 1981; Schneider, 1985) by the League. This would allow the League to differentiate itself from both the center-right and the center-left coalition<sup>25</sup>. However, that this might turn into real secessionist politics seems, in spite of speculations that secession could be an "unintentional consequence" of the interplay between the League's tactics and changing external conditions (Diamanti, 1995: 818-819), highly unpalatable.

## VI. Conclusions

By combining differences in regional mobilizations and policy reform attempts we have been able to identify three analytically distinctive dynamics, albeit often overlapping in practice. In each of these dynamics, regional policies have been seen as peculiar responses to different challenges to established political actors,

<sup>24</sup> It is less clear, though, whether they are really willing to pursue this goal in a consistent way. Professor Miglio's recent conviction is for instance that the League leaders have never been interested in federalism, nor have they ever been intellectually equipped to the task; rather, they would have used it as a pure propaganda device (Miglio, 1994; see also Diamanti, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> As these notes were finally amended in November 1995 there was no chance to incorporate any discussion of the last National election and the Prodi's government proposals for regional reform in the present paper.



coming from territorial-based opposition. The first dynamic focuses on efforts to prevent secession moves in peripheral areas in the aftermath of World War II, and on their interplay with the regional reform. Here, regional policies may be mainly conceived of as moves in conflicts, largely shaped by the relevance of the international politics arena. Although this dimension has gradually lost its relevance, traces may still be found among the more radical fringes of South Tyrol nationalism.

The second dynamic relates instead demands for recognition coming from cultural and linguistic minorities to broader attempts to secure larger access to citizenship rights for lower status groups. Here we come closest to a classic "minority rights" problem, where territorial movements mobilize in close interaction with other social movements committed to participatory notions of democracy, to the expansion and redefinition of welfare entitlements, as well as to more identity-oriented issues. 'Autonomy' themes are strongly related to broader 'social justice' frames. This pattern could be most frequently found in the contentious 1960s and 1970s, when the ethnic revival spread across Europe and the 'internal colonialism' approach to territorial conflicts emerged. Themes close to this perspective may be found nowadays among some Occitane or Sardist organizations, or among the South Tyrol new left groups trying to increase communication between the different linguistic groups in the region.

The third major dynamic reverses to a large extent the previous approach to territorial issues. Autonomy is still emphasized here, yet disconnected from, and often in explicit opposition to, social equality ideas. Territorial and cultural dimensions rather legitimize claims for new mechanisms of social closure, rather than inclusion as in the previous model. Opposition to redistributive mechanisms is in fact mounted upon this basis. In this perspective, freedom and rights are still advocated. Yet, they are mainly functional to the defence of regional interests and do not have high status *per se* in the territorial political discourse.

The Northern League has actually drawn upon grievances related to economic power and status, rather than upon cultural, ethnonationalist ones. Admittedly, a number of features of the Leagues' approach is compatible with previous frames emphasising self-government; they have also picked up a few rhetoric devices from the internal colonialism approach. Still, the core of the Leagues' challenge lies in their deep criticism of the political arrangement, according to which the strength of the ideological divide between the major political factions of the country was at least partially balanced by a fairly loose access to welfare entitlements - no matter the evaluation one may give of both the quality of welfare provisions and the long-term consequences of these agreement.

By standing for free market principles and for the drastic reduction of welfare policies, the Leagues' challenge is at least as much, and possibly more, anti-systemic than those posed by the other two dynamics I have just mentioned. At the same time, though, a break can be found in this case with respect to "classic" minority rights approaches to territorial politics. In the Belgian case (Van Dyck, this issue), substantive cultural differences have long overlapped with economic and status inequalities. Thus, they have provided the basis for the development and consolidation of neat political cleavages. However, the political elites have managed to design various forms of institutional (and in particular, constitutional) innovation. These seem to have in turn - at least, thus far - facilitated pacific settlements of intergroup controversies, and prevented the potential for disruptiveness and fragmentation within Belgian society from fully developing. In Italy, in contrast, ethnic and cultural differences within the country have been tradi-



tionally rather weak. However, potential tensions, originating from regional differences within the country, and from the unsatisfactory performances of largely centralized institutions, have been successfully merged by the Northern League in an appealing and (at least apparently) coherent quest for radical federalism. That this was the case, it seems largely due to the traditional political leaders' failure to appreciate the pervasiveness and seriousness of demands for change coming from Italian society - of course, along with politicians' recent appalling record in terms of public morality. It is on the spread of broader anti-politics and anti-elites sentiments that the League's populist message has in the last analysis capitalized.

### *Abstract*

*Three distinctive dynamics may be identified in the post-war developments of territorial and minority rights politics in Italy. The first focuses on secession attempts in peripheral areas in the aftermath of the world war, and on their interplay with the regional reform. The second peaks in the late '60s-early '70s, and relates territorial minorities' demands for recognition to broader protest movements and 'internal colonialism' perspectives. The third consists of the recent success of regional Leagues in the North, and largely reverses previous approaches to territorial issues. Autonomy is still emphasized here, yet disconnected from, and often in explicit opposition to, social equality ideas. 'Minority rights' are largely replaced with a peculiar version of territorial populist politics.*