

## Federalism and the Extreme Right in Italy

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The two Italian political parties that are generally catalogued as belonging to the extreme right, the *Lega Nord* and *Alleanza Nazionale*, have a drastically different approach to federalism. The *Lega Nord* profiles itself as a nationalist movement of northern Italians, «Padanians» according to its lexicon. Even though it has alternated proposals for a federalist reform of the Italian state as a whole with claims for the independence of «Padania» in particular, for the *Lega* (as it is colloquially called) federalism stands for the self-government of the North. The *Lega*, although notorious for its political oscillations, has nevertheless consistently defended the devolution of power from the national to the regional level. It has itself played an important role in putting federalism on the Italian political agenda. *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN), the post-fascist heir of the neo-fascist *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI), belongs on the contrary to a strongly centralist political tradition. Although it has incorporated federalism in its programme, this acceptance is limited by its emphasis on a strong central executive and the priority it attributes to reinforcing Italian national identity and patriotism.

In recent years, federalism has undoubtedly acquired an important place in Italian politics. The renewal of interest in federalism has coincided with the major crisis the Italian political system has undergone in the early 1990s. This crisis was a consequence of the disclosure (a process which started in 1992) of the large-scale corruption of the governmental parties, especially the dominant Christian democrat and socialist party. It led to the disappearance of these parties and to a majoritarian reform of the electoral system in 1993. In this new political constellation, the extreme right parties *Lega Nord* and *Alleanza Nazionale* have entered the central government first in 1994 and once again in 2001, in alliance with Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* and small Christian democrat groups. As a result of the political upheavals of the early 1990s, both parties were in a very short time span promoted from marginal and extremist outsiders to partners in the national government coalition. Italy thus became the first European country where after WWII far right parties entered a national government.

The prominence «federalism» has acquired in the Italian public debate is undoubtedly a consequence of the secessionist challenge of the *Lega Nord*. Many commentators have argued that federalism is used in a strictly instrumentalist way, a slogan deployed each time the *Lega* booked electoral successes, to regress into the background when the *Lega* faced political setbacks. Since the early 1990s, however, federalism has started to live a life of its own, and has informed projects for constitutional reforms advanced both by the previous centre-left and by the present centre-right government. As a consequence of the crisis of the Italian political system, the issue of federalism has acquired political visibility. In this context, federalism in the first place expresses critiques of the strongly centralized Italian state and its authoritarian and oligarchic features. Proposals for federalism are also informed by the growing role of regions within the European Union, and aim to adapt the Italian political system to this evolution. Federalism often also includes neo-liberal critiques of the welfare state and its redistributive policies. Within the Italian context characterized

by the important economic divide between the richer North and the poorer South, federalism may also involve the reduction or even the elimination of interregional transfers from the North to the South.

Mainstream opinions on federalism undoubtedly interact with the way the Lega Nord and Alleanza Nazionale position themselves on the issue. Both parties, however, also articulate a specific vision on the issue, and it is important to raise the question of the measure in which the extreme right background of these parties influences their position towards federalism. Both parties, in fact, are strongly concerned with the issue of cultural identity. In the case of the Lega Nord, its defence of federalism is related to ethnonationalist visions of a Europe of regions based on exclusive regional identities.<sup>1</sup> In the case of Alleanza Nazionale, its conversion to federalism may be understood in relation to its discourse highlighting the importance of a national Italian identity.

The particular context of Italian politics in the early 1990s enabled both parties to become part of the central government only very shortly after having been recognized as acceptable political partners. As a consequence, for neither of them integration in regional governments has played a significant role in their acceptance at the national level. With the exception of Friuli-Venezia Giulia, the Lega did not participate in regional governments until 2000, when it entered regional governments in Piedmont, Lombardy, the Veneto and Liguria as a partner of the centre-right alliance (Berlusconi's *Casa delle Libertà*). Alleanza Nazionale, a partner of the same alliance, has participated in regional governments since 1995. As yet, there is no systematic research on the role of the Lega Nord and Alleanza Nazionale in regional governments. In the absence of such research, I will limit myself to some preliminary observations on the policies developed by these parties in regional governments.

In this article, I start by outlining the main characteristics of the mainstream debate on federalism in Italy, the issues it deals with, and the sometimes contrasting ideologies that sustain federalism. I then highlight the respective positions of the Lega Nord and Alleanza Nazionale. For both parties, I will foreground how their views of federalism may be related to mainstream discourses on this issue, but also how they reflect both each party's specific political tradition and extreme right ideologies. In the conclusion, I outline what the Italian case reveals about the relation between federalism and extreme right parties.

## **Federalism in Italy**

The idea of federalism has acquired political prominence in Italy as a consequence of the crisis of Italy's political system and of the secessionist challenge of the Lega Nord. Federalism is certainly by no means the only answer to this crisis, nor does it attract unanimous support. Critics of the Italian political system have often been concerned about the weakness of its governments, and are therefore more interested in reinforcing the central government, than in introducing federalist-inspired reforms that according to them would weaken it. The centrality given to a reform of the electoral system from a proportional to a majoritarian system was certainly a consequence of this concern for stronger and more stable governments. Gianfranco Pasquino, a political scientist strongly involved in this reform, has argued that the creation of a strong and democratic central government would eliminate the need for federalism.<sup>2</sup> The importance of creating a strong government was according to him only reinforced by the Lega's challenge, since the Lega encouraged centrifugal tendencies.<sup>3</sup>

Alleanza Nazionale is traditionally among the most outspoken supporters of strong central

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governments - in keeping with the dirigism of fascism. But the centralized state has apologists both from the centre-right and the centre-left. They argue that the deleterious features of Italian institutions are more present at the local and regional levels, and that as a rule its central bureaucracy has behaved more correctly.<sup>4</sup> From a progressive viewpoint, centralism is defended as a guarantee of equal rights for all citizens.<sup>5</sup> More in general the central state is perceived as an emanation of the nation, as the expression of collective interests and a civil conscience that go beyond private and local interests.<sup>6</sup>

The centralist viewpoint is informed by the vision of a virtuous central authority. Its basic weakness is the historic inability of the Italian state to implement this ideal. Critiques of the Italian state point to the immobility and the inefficiency of its administration, which is at the same time notorious for its intrusiveness. The Italian state has a well-entrenched tradition of exercising control on society, of centralizing authority in its hands, and it is also an economically interventionist state, which has built up a state industry on a much larger scale than most other Western European countries. While the state centralizes authority, however, it is at the same time strongly conditioned by private interests in its decision-making processes.<sup>7</sup>

Students of the Italian state have pointed out how it was originally organized following an absolutist logic.<sup>8</sup> This absolutism and the adoption of a highly centralized structure after Unification (1860-1861) expressed the intention of the Italian political elite to control the newly unified country, against reluctant or hostile local notables (particularly the pro-Bourbon South), and against democratic subversion from below. Notwithstanding later reforms, and particularly the creation of the post-War republic, this logic has survived. The central state has always neutralized and absorbed instances of autonomy, especially local governments controlled by the opposition. This has also been the case with the regional governments established after 1970. Nonetheless, while they remained subordinated to the central state, their existence and their activities created autonomist dynamics that have weakened the dirigism of the central state. The whole set of reforms introduced since the early 1990s, moreover, have created a «minimal federalism», an at times confused set of reforms that have nonetheless decentralized authority and reinforced local and regional governments. As yet it is unclear whether these reforms will effectively put an end to a situation where the autonomy of regions (but also, partly, that of local and provincial authorities) have remained conditioned by the policies of the central government.<sup>9</sup>

Articulations of federalism are based on widely shared critiques of the deleterious features of the bureaucratic centralism of the Italian state. Adherents of federalism also insert their proposals for institutional reforms in a broader context, the European Union and economic globalization. They consider them as applications of the European practice of multi-level governance and of the principle of «subsidiarity», as sponsored by the European Union. This principle attributes to the central state a «subsidiary» function whereby it only exercises those functions that lower levels of governance are unable to fulfil effectively. Its application in Italy would imply that regions, but also municipalities and provinces would be given more authority. Following the principle, the state is also envisioned as «subsidiary» to community and private initiative.<sup>10</sup>

Federalism is also frequently related to economic globalization. Within Italy, proposals for federalism base themselves on the specific process of economic development that has emerged since the 1970s in peripheral northern Italy (the so-called Third Italy).<sup>11</sup> This process is based on local industrial districts, specialized in producing goods for the international market. Federalism is understood as creating institutions better able to respond to the reality of this model of development. One may

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speak of a new regionalism, whereby decentralizing authority is seen as adapting institutions to a unified market supposedly dominated by the rules of competitiveness and economic rationality.<sup>12</sup>

Federalism is frequently coupled with neo-liberalism, in the formula of *federalismo liberista* («neo-liberal federalism»). Programmes of economic liberalization and flexibilization are opposed to the universality of the welfare state and its nationally guaranteed labour rights. As an alternative to this centralized model, federalism would introduce regionally negotiated forms of labour protection, and would re-introduce regional wage differentials (*gabbie salariali*).<sup>13</sup> Within the Italian context, this would imply a dual system of social security, with labour more protected and better rewarded in the North than in the South. Although such proposals never explicitly endorse the punitive rhetoric of the *Lega*, they nevertheless intend to weaken national solidarity and the national welfare system. They express the centrality given in the 1990s, as a consequence of the *Lega*'s challenge, to the so-called «Northern Question», the (real or imagined) grievances of the population of northern Italy against the Italian state and the South. From this viewpoint, the problems of southern Italy are understood as resulting from the inability of the South to adapt to modernity (a view enhanced by large scale corruption and the prominence of organized crime in the South in the 1980s and early 1990s).<sup>14</sup> With the perspective of the «Northern Question» as a starting point, such proposals for a federalist reform that weakens redistributive mechanism are based on a belief in the taumaturgic virtues of a neo-liberal cure for the South.

Against the welfare state and its redistributive policies, neo-liberal adherents of federalism also propose the introduction of *federalismo fiscale*, «fiscal federalism».<sup>15</sup> The meaning of this concept is ambivalent, and it sometimes simply refers to allocating more resources to the regions, and diminishing the tutelage of the central government over their expenditure. It is, however, frequently understood as full fiscal autonomy for the regions, i.e. the possibility for each region to keep its income entirely for itself. In this radical formulation, it implies the abolition of interregional financial transfers. Proposals for fiscal federalism largely aim to free the North from contributing for the South, thereby adopting the political agenda of the *Lega*. There is little doubt that the full implementation of this principle would deepen the economic North-South divide, since most southern regions would immediately be faced with serious financial problems. They would be obliged either to raise more taxes or to diminish drastically their welfare expenditure. It is highly probable that fiscal federalism would aggravate North-South differences in standards of living and economic performance. Because of the centrifugal effects fiscal federalism would reinforce, most defenders of its principle are in fact very cautious about its application. They propose an uneasy balance between their intention to abandon the principle that, to guarantee the equality of Italian citizens, redistributive policies should be based on an equal regional per capita spending capacity, and the preservation of some mechanisms of interregional redistribution.<sup>16</sup>

The fear of the centrifugal tendencies of fiscal federalism or of federalist models based on the competition between regions explains why proposals for federalism balance their liberalism with affirmations in favour of national solidarity and interregional co-operation. Proposals for federalism from the centre-left are particularly concerned about interregional cooperation, especially between southern and northern regions.<sup>17</sup> Neoliberal models of federalism are frequently critiqued for their social egoism, for the centrifugal dynamics they may engender, and for the anti-redistributive radicalism of the principle of «fiscal federalism» that does not exist in any other federal system abroad. These critiques of the liberal model of federalism do not, however, necessarily imply the rejection of federalism as such. Even relentless critics of neo-liberalism may support federalism,

out of the awareness of the defects of the inept absolutism of the Italian state, especially when federalism is interpreted as a democratic reform enhancing local autonomy and subsidiarity as participatory democracy.<sup>18</sup> Even in southern Italy, after an initial phase of perplexity if not hostility, federalist reforms have started to attract interest from scholars and intellectuals, as a means to transcend the clientelism the centralist state has systematically engendered in the South.<sup>19</sup>

The public debate on federalism raises a multiplicity of issues, and expresses a marked plurality of concerns and ideological positions. First, it is concerned with the reform of the inadequate institutions of the Italian state. Such a reform may be motivated by the intention of adapting the Italian institutions to the European Union, or by the desire to make the Italian state more democratic and closer to its citizens. Second, it is sustained by economic motives. These are generally formulated from a neoliberal perspective, with the intention of dismantling the welfare state and diminishing national redistributive mechanisms, and creating a «federalism of the rich» whereby the North would be liberated from the alleged burden of the South. However, the reluctance to adopt in a systematic way such reforms reveals how their logic is in practice neutralized by an awareness of their centrifugal effects in the context of Italy's economic divide, and an understanding that national unity implies national economic and social solidarity. Third, federalism is understood as making institutions more responsive to local societies and in particular to their economic capacities. It implies accepting the cultural diversity within Italy without, however, assuming that the articulation of local identity should lead to the rejection of Italy's national unity.

## The Lega and Federalism <sup>20</sup>

Within the panoply of European extreme right parties, the Lega Nord takes a special position. In the course of its short existence, it has displayed a considerable ideological volatility, which makes its classification arduous and controversial. Its main programmatic continuity is undoubtedly its articulation of a northern Italian, «Padanian», national identity. The Lega Nord has its origins in regionalist movements in northern Italy, such as the *Lega Lombarda* and the *Liga Veneta*. These movements, however, displayed from their origins some features of extreme right ideology, especially in their hostility towards outsiders (southern Italians and non-European immigrants). In the early 1990s, when the Lega seemed for some time the most important non-leftist alternative to traditional governmental parties on the verge of disappearance, it toned down the extremist features of its programme, especially its anti-southern and anti-immigrant rhetoric. It profiled itself as a party from the centre, and carefully presented a liberal democratic image. After 1994, when it became clear that Berlusconi's Forza Italia competed for the moderate and conservative vote in northern Italy, it reprofiled itself, first by defending secessionism, and in more recent years mainly through its anti-immigrant stance. At present, its ideology - particularly its exclusivist definition of «Padanian» identity, its radical anti-immigrant stance, its penchant for conspiracy theories in which communists, multinationals, the United States and Islamists plot against Europe in general and the Padanian nation in particular - clearly enables its classification as a far-right party.<sup>21</sup>

The Lega's central concern nevertheless remains its nation-building programme. This focus on Padanian identity is sustained by the awareness of the weak legitimacy of its claim to represent a nation. The Lega has skilfully made use of a well-entrenched opposition between northern and southern Italians to construct a «northern» identity, but it has at the same time been confronted with the unwillingness of the majority of northern Italians to consider this «northern» identity as exclusive and opposed to Italian identity. The Lega itself has not been able to give a straightforward

definition of this northern identity.

«Padania» at times indicates the regions included in the Italian statistical categories Northwest and Northeast, and at other times all the regions north of Rome or all the territories inhabited by Padanians (whereby Padanians are defined ethnically, in the first place by the linguistic characteristics of their dialects).<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the Lega argues that the North is an aggregate of regional peoples, generally defined as corresponding to the official Italian regions. In this context, the issue of institutional reform plays a crucial place in its political discourse, as it creates and/or reinforces territorial entities that supposedly correspond with «natural» nations, but it remains at the same time problematic, because of the overlapping and unstable definitions of these entities.

The Lega nevertheless gives centrality to the concept of federalism. For the Lega, federalism is more than merely a model for institutional reforms: it is a system of thought with philosophical, anthropological and economic dimensions. The Lega considers itself the heir of a long-standing philosophical tradition of federalism.<sup>23</sup> It pays much attention to federalist experiences abroad, and to theories of federalism. The content of its proposals for federalism has, however, varied widely over the years. While the Lega is clear about the principle of federalism, the Lega Lombarda and later the Lega Nord have experienced considerable difficulties in translating the principle into a coherent programme. Initially, the Lega Lombarda (the most important predecessor of the Lega Nord) only intended to give the region of Lombardy the same status as Italy's special-statute regions. In the early 1990s, the programme of the Lega Nord proposed the division of Italy in three macro-regions.<sup>24</sup> A later proposal, from 1995, divides Italy in 9 states and 21 regions.<sup>25</sup> For many commentators, this confusing multiplication of proposals for institutional reform reveals the political volatility of the Lega and its limited political seriousness. This panoply of proposals can, however, also be interpreted in relation with the Lega's difficulty to reconcile its various and often contradictory definitions of northern identity (regional, based on the presently existing regions; «Northern» ; or «Padanian»). After its endorsement of secessionism in 1996, the Lega even refused to support a precise programme of institutional reform, with the argument that institutional arrangements should be postponed until Padanian independence.<sup>26</sup> After reintegrating once again into the centre-right, it prefers to speak about devolution, without specifying the exact content of this term. References to «devolution» enable the Lega to accept relatively modest programmes of reform (as yet only discussed, not implemented) while suggesting at the same time that such reforms may lead to a future northern independence.

In its proposals for federalism, the Lega skilfully combines themes that echo mainstream views on this issue with its own sometimes very specific viewpoints. The Lega's federalism starts from a systematic critique of the Italian state. Like mainstream discourse, it relates the defects of the Italian state to its centralized structure. The Lega also articulates a more general critique of the «Jacobin» centralized nation-state, accused of supporting aggressive forms of nationalism and authoritarian cultural homogenization that violate the natural cultural homogeneity of regional communities like Padania.<sup>27</sup>

The Lega formulates its discourse following mainstream considerations on the so-called crisis of the nation-state, i.e. the transformations nation-states are undergoing in the wake of globalization and European integration. Certainly in the early 1990s, before it endorsed a more explicit secessionist stance, the Lega highlighted how its federalist programme was embedded in the process of European unification, the growing role of regions in the European Union and the application of the principle of subsidiarity. Against a Europe of centralized nation-states, the Lega envisions its federalism within a Europe of regions based on the peaceful coexistence of its peoples. Although it

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emphasizes the importance of the European context, the Lega is at the same time very critical of the institutions of the European Union, whose bureaucratic centralism is perceived as threatening the autonomy of European peoples, and in contradiction with the principle of subsidiarity it professes.

The centrality the Lega attributes to the principle of autonomy and self-determination (in the Lega's vocabulary, the meaning of these terms coincides) distinguishes its federalism from mainstream proposals. The Lega understands federalism as political and economic liberty, as the right to self-government. This principle also conditions its proposals for institutional reforms. These proposals see the state as based on a freely established association whose parties maintain the right to dissolve it at any time.<sup>28</sup> The Lega has always understood federalism as a project that would enable the (according to its viewpoint) different peoples within Italy to live together, but with the possibility of a consensual divorce.<sup>29</sup>

In fact, its use of rhetoric that resembles mainstream proposals for institutional reform conceals the drastically different content of the Lega's proposals. They assume a geopolitical vision whereby nation-states and sub-national entities are considered to be equal partners, and where the relation between institutional entities follows a contractarian logic.<sup>30</sup> This interpretation of federalism is clearly inspired by the writings of its one-time member (he left the party in 1994) and prominent ideologist, the political scientist Gianfranco Miglio.<sup>31</sup> In Miglio's «neo-federalist» vision, federal systems are based on private contracts than can be dissolved at will. This contractarian vision is combined with a neo-liberal perspective on society and the state, thus leading to the rejection of redistributive mechanisms. Consequently, the Lega understands northern self-government as based on neo-liberal federalism.<sup>32</sup> The Lega proposes a liberal state, which is non-interventionist and only functions as a tutor of the rules and as a guarantor of the rights of citizens.<sup>33</sup> Following this liberal profession, the Lega's federalism attributes only limited powers to the central government (foreign affairs, high justice, defence, navigation, coinage), and mainly envisions it as the tutor of democratic guarantees and individual rights.<sup>34</sup> Its reforms intend to give regions, understood as communities of interest, responsibility for the economy. In fact, federalism crucially implies fiscal autonomy: tributary power should be attributed to the regions, which would only have the obligation to reserve a fixed percentage for the central government.<sup>35</sup> The Lega's federalism is clearly intended to be anti-redistributionist, even though the Lega sometimes attempts to underplay this fact by arguing that such redistribution could continue when drastically reformed.<sup>36</sup>

The Lega's economic liberalism, however, contrasts with its defence of «Padanian» welfare. While hostile to the Italian welfare state, it clearly defends welfare provisions for Padanians. It does not limit itself to articulate a programme of regionally differentiated social protection, a «federalism of the rich», like mainstream versions of federalism. Within northern Italy, it also defends ethnically differentiated social protection, intended to exclude outsiders from such provisions as jobs and housing, an example of the welfare chauvinism characteristic of many extreme right parties.<sup>37</sup> The Lega is not consistent also in its definition of outsiders - the programmes of its regionalist predecessors even defended giving preference to the autochthonous inhabitants of the region in the attribution of welfare allocations and social services. Non-European immigrants are clearly considered to be outsiders, and the Lega's anti-immigrant stance has only been moderated in the early 1990s. The Lega has not always been systematic about the place of southerners in northern society. It sometimes argues that those who are assimilated into northern culture may be accepted as members of the community, although it tends to remain diffident towards southerners in socially prestigious positions.

The Lega's programme of ethnic exclusion is, in principle at least, cultural rather than racial. As such, it is related to another important characteristic of the Lega's federalism, its emphasis that it should correspond with the existing cultural diversity within Italy. For the Lega, federalism is a means to create territorial entities with some form of social, cultural and economic cohesion. This vision of federalism is itself related to mainstream discourses that relate federalism to a model of local development based on cultural resources, but the Lega attributes much more importance to this cultural dimension. During its short existence, however, its understanding of regional cultural particularity has undergone frequent changes. Initially strictly regional, often localist and with xenophobic tones, the Lega evolved in the early 1990s towards a more pluralistic understanding of cultural particularity. In the early 1990s, it defended the creation of a northern macroregion by highlighting its economic specificity. At that point, the Lega explicitly rejected the creation of ethnically homogeneous regions or federal entities, acknowledging the cultural plurality of northern Italy and more specifically the irreversibility of immigration from southern Italy, and professing at least a certain tolerance towards non-European immigrants.<sup>38</sup> After its pro-independence turn, it has become more outspoken in its defence of «Padanian» cultural specificity, more and more understood in exclusivist terms, with a language that has become increasingly racist.

The Lega's discourse consistently relates cultural differences to economic performance, and northern identity to the entrepreneurial cultural traditions of the northern regions. Following Gianfranco Miglio it deploys a neo-Weberian framework, distinguishing the cultures of the protestant North and their rule by impersonal law (which are deemed superior), from the Catholic South and its personalized rule. Within Italy, this cultural divide separates the North from the South, and hence legitimizes a federalist reform whereby each part of the country would be able to establish institutions according to its assumed cultural specificity: the rule of law and the market in the North, clientelist institutions in the South. Miglio's neo-Weberian framework implies, however, a moral hierarchy according to the degree of economic success of regions. It legitimizes the Lega's framework of inclusion/exclusion, whereby outsiders may be accepted according to their degree of modernity. Non-modern nations are considered outsiders, a category that includes all non-Western immigrants but particularly Islamic ones. Southern Italians may also be categorized as non-modern, but their position nevertheless remains more ambiguous, because the Lega also emphasizes the importance of European culture, and although southern Italians are in its discourse sometimes rhetorically identified with Africans, their exclusion from Europe is more problematic. This affirmation of a European identity, clearly related to the Lega's neo-Weberian classification of cultures, integrates additional features, namely the reference to a common European tradition (especially Europe's Christian past) and to well-rooted cultural identities in contrast with the American melting pot or other models of multiculturalism.

The affirmation of a Padanian identity within a European context explains its attitude towards outsiders. Northern Europeans and «modern» minorities within the North (e.g. the South Tyrolians) are acceptable partners. The Lega frequently refers to a pan-Alpine or Middle-European culture, although it also sometimes voices its distrust of the overbearing strength of some northern nations (e.g. the German «Krauts»). The defence of cultural specificity, and more in general its focus of Padanian nation-building has also influenced the Lega's views on institutional reform, especially in its elaborations of a future «Padanian» state. It has on the one hand proposed a contractarian-individualist interpretation of the Padanian state as a confederation whose members (the presently existing Italian regions) would have the right to leave it at will. It has, on the other hand, offered an alternative institutional vision of Padania, as a federation based on a common identity, where the



exercise of the right to secession would be rendered extremely difficult.<sup>39</sup> These contrasting visions of state-building mirror the different political traditions the Lega's political discourse incorporates. Its economic liberalism and individualism is translated into a contractarian view of society, while its cultural exclusivism results in the vision of a culturally homogeneous nation understood as a perpetual community.

The emphasis on Padanian specificity, affirmed more explicitly since the mid-1990s, has clearly lowered the tolerance towards outsiders, and has enhanced economic and cultural «Padanian protectionism». The Lega intends to defend the right of the Padanian community to elaborate its own economic policies, independently even of the rules and regulations of the European Union. After having proclaimed the end of the nation-state, it redefines Padania in a way that suspiciously resembles these nation-states. It is clearly bent on creating a sovereign Padanian nation, going not only against its allegedly artificial incorporation within Italy, but also against the consequences of the process of European integration, which has supposedly damaged the rights of the Padanian community. The Padanian community should have this sovereignty because it is a natural cultural entity. Ultimately, «Padania» thus becomes very similar to the culturally homogenous and sovereign nation-state decried by the Lega. And while the Lega denounces the artificiality of nation-states and their «authoritarian» politics of cultural homogenization, its image of a Padanian nation as threatened by outsiders creates similarly homogenizing dynamics, bent on silencing internal deviance and dissent.

The Lega has had limited opportunities to apply its policy viewpoints at the regional level. It gained access to regional government only in 2000, as a partner of Berlusconi's Casa delle Libertà-alliance but in a context where its electoral setbacks weakened its bargaining position. On one issue it has clearly been able to orient northern regional governments (at least those of the centre-right). Most of these governments are now clearly involved in articulating and reinforcing regional identity. For example, one of the Lega's most prominent intellectual adherents, the political scientist Ettore Albertoni, has been appointed councillor for culture, identity and autonomy in the Lombard regional government. These northern governments of the centre-right tend to interpret regional identities in a localist and ethnocentric sense. In the case of Friuli-Venezia Giulia this implies supporting the «autochthonous» Friulian culture, and adopting a discriminatory attitude towards the Slovenian minority.<sup>40</sup> However, the Lega has been less successful in imposing its radical anti-immigrant agenda upon these regional governments. In the case of the Veneto, the regional government (of which the Lega is part) adopted on the issue of immigration a critical stance regarding the Bossi-Fini law limiting immigration (a law strongly favoured by the Lega). Because of the important need of immigrant workers in this region, the regional government unsuccessfully lobbied for measures that would enable it to co-determine the number of immigrant workers that would be allowed in Italy every year.<sup>41</sup> This incident revealed how the Lega, notwithstanding all its rhetoric against the centralized state, was itself quite prepared to use the central government to realize its political programme, over the head of regional governments.

The Lega's defence of federalism thus includes a variety of (sometimes contradictory) options. It systematically distinguishes itself from mainstream versions of federalism by taking the right to autonomy of the North as a starting-point, a right based on a contractarian vision of federalism. This contractarianism reflects a geopolitical vision of undefined «peoples» as equal partners of the international community, but also a radical neo-liberal outlook on institutional arrangements and a worldview of global competition of regions, an economic struggle for the survival of the fittest. At the same time, however, this neo-liberalism is countered by a strong vision of community as

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a culturally homogenous entity, where social relations are non-utilitarian and where community solidarity based on common values prevails. These neo-liberal and communitarian visions may ultimately be reconciled, since the strong and exclusive identitarian vision of community implies a mutual diffidence between communities that parallels in fact the logic of neo-Darwinian economic competition.

## **Alleanza Nazionale and federalism <sup>42</sup>**

Alleanza Nazionale's endorsement of federalism is to be understood in light of the particular characteristics and historical tradition of this party. Alleanza Nazionale is confronted by the tension between its professions of liberal democracy and the affirmation of its identity that remains rooted in the fascist tradition. The transformation of the former neo-fascist MSI in Alleanza Nazionale has undoubtedly been accompanied by the adoption of a public discourse in which the adherence to democratic values has become more explicit, and references to the fascist past more critical. Through this transformation of its public discourse, AN has been able to convince mainstream public opinion in Italy of its democratic credentials. The party has at the same time profited from a wave of anticommunist intellectual revisionism in the 1980s, sponsored by the socialist party, bent on discrediting the communist party. This revisionism partly rehabilitated fascism, while the Resistance, particularly when communist, became the target of ideologically motivated critiques. The rediscovery of patriotism in the 1990s, and particularly the debate on the so-called «Death of the Fatherland», the alleged crisis of the idea of an Italian nation and of Italian national identity after September 8<sup>th</sup>, 1943 (the fall of Mussolini) likewise favoured the rapprochement of AN to mainstream positions.

At present, it is difficult to categorize AN straightforwardly. In its public discourse and official statements, it is very careful to avoid extremist and racist language, and its statements on national and European identity are difficult to distinguish from conservative or moderate mainstream opinions. Within the present centre-right government, it often tends to defend more moderate positions than the Lega or even Berlusconi. At the European level, it maintains its distance from extreme right parties, and prefers to cooperate with French Gaullists. At the local level and within its rank-and-file, however, more extremist tendencies and nostalgia for fascism are clearly still present.

The transformation of the MSI in Alleanza Nazionale undoubtedly expressed the dominance of its more moderate tendencies. From its post-war origins, the MSI had been divided between a moderate current, ready to insert itself in whatever space the political system left open for the party, and more radical currents bent on a revolutionary transformation of society based upon fascist principles. The political divide also tended to be a geographical divide, since the former tendency, originally incarnated by former notabilities of the regime, characterized the party in the South. The radicals, generally supporters and activists of the Repubblica Sociale Italiana (RSI), Mussolini's fascist puppet state set up in the North with Nazi support, were generally northerners. While the latter were frequently the more militant group, the former tended to dominate the party, if only because in the post-War decades the bulk of the votes for the MSI came from the South (while the party remained marginal in the northern regions).

Through its roots in fascism, Alleanza Nazionale belongs to a political tradition that has always strongly favoured strong central authority and defended a centralist and authoritarian views on

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institutions, following the fascist model of government. AN nonetheless officially endorsed the principle of federalism at its founding congress in Fiuggi in 1995.<sup>43</sup> This endorsement certainly reveals the strong impact of pro-federalist arguments even on political movements traditionally hostile to it. The shift towards the acceptance of federalism coincides with the change in public discourse that the founding of AN implied, and particularly the acceptance in principle of the tenets of liberal democracy. In the programmatic document voted at Fiuggi, the necessity of federalism is argued by pointing out how the negative experience of partitocracy was related to a highly centralized political system dominated by a small oligarchic elite. This argument corresponds in fact with broadly voiced critiques of the political system. Taking into account the roots of AN in an authoritarian political tradition, its defence of federalism as a counter measure to such abusive concentration of power is itself revealing of its intention to change its public discourse. This conversion to federalism also implies for AN a rereading of Italian history, which foregrounds the existence of a federalist tradition within Italy, embodied for example by the Risorgimento democrat Carlo Cattaneo. It also argues that federalism is appropriate as an expression of Italy's internal cultural diversities and its strong local traditions. Implicitly, this latter argument for federalism is also a critique of the centralism of fascism, and of its denial of cultural differences within the country.

Like mainstream discourses, AN locates its defence of federalism in a European context, and defends it by arguing that Italy cannot afford to remain the last centralist country in Europe.<sup>44</sup> AN does not share the Lega's highly critical position towards the European Union, and like mainstream opinion in Italy it is soundly pro-European. Like the Lega, it highlights the importance of a European cultural tradition, although it perceives European identity less in the confrontational terms of a «clash of civilizations». Against the Lega's vision of a Europe of peoples or of regions, AN highlights the centrality of the nation-state in the process of European Unification. This emphasis on the nation-state and the defence of its sovereignty implies a critique (admittedly less outspoken than in the case of the Lega) of the central bureaucracy of the European Union, and a vision of the European Union in which nation-states continue to play a prominent role. Against the anonymous and rootless technocracy of the European Union, nation-states are founded on a national identity, based on a commonly shared culture and spirituality.<sup>45</sup>

Within Italy, AN is strongly concerned to counter the possible centrifugal dangers of a federalist reform. At the institutional level, therefore, it counterbalances federalism by reinforcing the central government, a stance that corresponds with many mainstream proposals for federalism, included those from the centre-left. By defending presidentialism, AN adds its own particular touch to such proposals. Its preference for a presidentialist system offers a convenient compromise (already defended by the MSI) between its authoritarian tradition and its professions of democracy, and by associating presidentialism with the Gaullist example it gives it democratic and anti-fascist credentials.

This concern with national unity also explains why AN's proposals for federalism are based on an uneasy combination of the acceptance of the principle of neoliberal federalism and appeals to *federalismo solidale* (a formula, loosely translatable as «federalism based on solidarity», that is also frequently used by the centre-left). Its political mainstreaming has clearly implied the acceptance of the tenets of neo-liberalism, and the rejection of the «statalist» tradition of economic interventionism, characteristic of Mussolini but also of democratic Italy. AN also endorses neo-liberal critiques of the welfare state, although it adds to these critiques a communitarian touch through its defence of the welfare community. AN is certainly concerned about the possible centrifugal effects

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of a federalist reform, especially when it implies the abandonment of redistributive mechanisms. According to AN, federalism should be based on the principle of national solidarity, which expresses the principle of the indivisibility of the Nation. Both the degree of regional financial autonomy in application of the principle of subsidiarity, and the degree of financial reequilibration, in the name of solidarity should be derived from this principle.<sup>46</sup>

Alleanza Nazionale's statements on federalism express a delicate balance between its economic liberalism and its concerns about national unity, which favour redistributive policies that run counter liberalism. This balance also expresses the attempts of AN to make its programme acceptable to both northern and southern constituencies. Since Alleanza Nazionale and its predecessor MSI have traditionally attracted more votes in the southern regions, the party is clearly concerned with defending specifically southern interests. Its southern background certainly explains its support of redistributive policies and its cautious stance with regard to double-track federalist reforms starting in the North. As a party with a nationalist vocation, however, AN has a clear interest in reinforcing itself also in the North, where its appeal has been restricted by historical memories of the repressive policies of Mussolini's republic of Salò. The insertion of federalism in the party programme was explicitly meant to make the party more attractive for northern constituencies.<sup>47</sup> AN has nevertheless consistently refused to adopt the anti-redistributive radicalism that has characterized federalist rhetoric. It has also never endorsed the anti-southern rhetoric that invaded mainstream discourse in the early 1990s, and it has remained very critical of stereotyped representations of southern Italians.<sup>48</sup> Its diffidence of the

«northern discourse» and its attachment to the principle of redistributive politics, despite its neo-liberal economic programme, undoubtedly expresses the party's distrust of the centrifugal tendencies of the anti-redistributionist reforms the «northern» viewpoint would favour.

In many ways, the vision of AN on federalism strikes one for its moderate outlook. Its particular concern to please its southern constituency undoubtedly explains its hostility towards dismantling central redistributive politics. This moderately pro-redistributive stance is, however, also motivated by the importance AN attributes to patriotism and national identity. It clearly assumes (an assumption also shared by its adversaries of the left) that a national community should be based on at least some forms of national economic solidarity, particularly between the stronger and the weaker regions. Because of the obvious problems involved in reconciling its economic liberalism and programmes that preserve national social solidarity, the formulas AN uses to describe such solidarity are characteristically vague and abstract.

Alleanza Nazionale's support for federalism seems in many aspects contingent, and the issue certainly does not appear to be one of the party's political priorities. In light of its ideological background, it may be assumed that national politics have priority over regional ones. Its Italian nationalist outlook also implies that it does not share the Lega's interest in regional culture, although as a participant in regional centre-right governments in the North AN has not opposed the elaboration of policies affirming regional identity. As a matter of fact, within northern Italy AN's predecessor, the MSI, has for a long time only exercised an appeal in the context of ethnic confrontation, as the defender of Italian identity against the German-speaking majority of South Tyrol and the Slovenian presence in Friuli-Venezia Giulia. In the latter region, the programmes of the centre-right regional government favouring Friulian identity and discriminating against the Slovenian minority continue to express at least partly the ethnic antagonism that has traditionally been sponsored by the MSI.<sup>49</sup> As a whole, however, AN has been more lukewarm than the Lega to develop policies based on confrontational identity-building. This is also revealed in its position

towards immigration. The particular historical tradition of Italian fascism is nationalist rather than racist, and although its rank-and-file does display racist attitudes, the official rhetoric of the party avoids the racism of the Lega.<sup>50</sup> AN does relate the issue of immigration with problems of security and criminality, but is careful to avoid the cultural stereotyping of immigrants.<sup>51</sup> Certainly at the regional level, AN has not been particularly involved in anti-immigrant policies. In southern Italy, where AN is strongest and participates in several regional governments (Sicily, Sardinia, Calabria, Puglia, Molise, Abruzzo), these governments (like those of the centre-left) have all been very cautious on the issue. This caution is perhaps a consequence of a traditional southern Italian diffidence against racist ideologies (since they have themselves often been victims of racial stereotyping), and more in particular of the Lega Nord's racist discourse.

An exception to this ideological and cultural low profile of AN at the regional level may be found in Lazio, the region around Rome, governed by the centre-right since 2000. Its governor, Francesco Storace, is a prominent member of AN and belongs to the current within the party most attached to its fascist tradition, the so-called *destra sociale* (the «social right»). Its regional assembly has created something of a scandal by voting a motion against the allegedly biased history books used in Italian high school, accusing them of being too positive about the Resistance and too negative about fascism.<sup>52</sup> This polemic exemplifies how AN's insistence on patriotism and national identity is related to the culture wars over the interpretation of Italian history, and is concerned with giving new legitimacy to its own historical tradition, and with rendering its own interpretation of this history hegemonic. It reveals the contradiction between AN's professed post-fascism and its intention to rehabilitate at least partly (its most brutal misdeeds and its race laws are certainly not vindicated by AN) the fascist past.

Alleanza Nazionale's conversion to federalism, then, is undoubtedly related to its transition in its public discourse and particularly its endorsement of democratic values. Implicitly, at least, federalism implies a critique of the centralist and authoritarian tradition of fascism. The support of federalism is clearly also intended to attract a northern audience. AN is, however, cautious and somewhat reluctant in its acceptance of federalism. This caution results from a fear of the centrifugal effects of a federalist reform in the particular Italian context of a strong internal economic divide. This caution, however, is also related to its vision of a nation united by patriotism, which also implies a rereading of Italian history that integrates the fascist experience, while its preference for a strong central government is a residue of its «authoritarian» past. AN's presidential federalism thus reveals the continued tension between professions of democracy and nostalgia for more authoritarian institutions that characterizes this party.

## Conclusion

The viewpoints on federalism of the Lega Nord and Alleanza Nazionale are related to mainstream criticism of the Italian political system, in particular its authoritarian and inefficient centralism. The discourse of both parties reflects widely voiced opinions on the necessity of reforming the Italian state, making it more democratic, and creating institutions that would be able to integrate the country in the European Union and its developing system of multi-level governance. For both parties, but particularly for Alleanza Nazionale, defending federalism is also a way of affirming their democratic credentials.

Both parties also accept at least some of the tenets of neo-liberal federalism. Alleanza Nazionale is,

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however, hostile towards the anti-redistributionist consequences of a radically implemented fiscal federalism, and distinctly moderates its neo-liberal premises by references to the need for national solidarity. The Lega Nord's view is more outspokenly antiredistributionist, and in can rely on a more general «northern» rejection of such policies. The Lega Nord effectively defends a «federalism of the rich», an institutional reform that should free richer regions from their responsibilities towards poorer regions, and it has succeeded in making such reforms acceptable to mainstream opinion in the North. This programmatic difference is undoubtedly related to the regional constituencies of both parties: a southern pro-redistributive one for AN, a northern anti-redistributive one for the Lega.

Both parties, however, give a specific interpretation of neo-liberal federalism and the reform of redistributive mechanisms, which expresses their particular political tradition. In the case of AN, the defence of national solidarity is related to its emphasis on national identity and national unity, an emphasis which explains why federalism is for this party an issue of secondary importance, a necessary adaptation to the spirit of the times more than an enthusiastic conversion. For the Lega Nord, instead, federalism is related to creating communities based on «authentic» ethnic identity, in contrast with the artificiality of the national Italian state. Federalism as an instrument of community-building means protecting the community from the impact of the processes of globalization, hence the Lega's economic and social protectionism and its welfare chauvinism that run counter its professions of neo-liberalism. In this sense, the Lega offers its particular interpretation of federalism, as creating closed communities, based on exclusive identities. The Lega has always defended federalism in the context of a Europe of regions, but its discourse has affirmed more and more strongly the importance of attributing sovereignty to the «natural» communities within Europe (initially Padania, but now that the Lega is a partner in the national government, it even defends Italian sovereignty). Ultimately, the Lega shares with Alleanza Nazionale this defence of a national community: both parties only differ in their dramatically opposing definition of this community. The imagined community of the Lega is even more exclusive than the one envisioned by AN, but in both cases the elaboration of a national identity is based on the creation of a common culture grounded in diffidence against «Otherness» and dissent.

## Notes

- 1 LUVERA (B.), *I confini dell'odio. Il nazionalismo etnico e la nuova destra europea*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1999, p. 144.
- 2 PASQUINO (G.), *La transizione a parole*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2000, p. 96.
- 3 PASQUINO (G.), «Reforming the Italian Constitution», *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, vol. 3, n° 1, 1998, p. 42-54. See p. 46.
- 4 GALLI DELLA LOGGIA (E.), «Le malefatte della periferia», *Federalismo & Società*, vol. 2, n° 2-3, 1995, p. 209-212.
- 5 LOSURDO (D.), *La Seconda Repubblica. Liberismo, federalismo, postfascismo*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1994.
- 6 Interview with Silvio LANARO, in: SABELLA (M.) & URBINATI (N.) (eds), *Quale federalismo? Interviste sull'Italia del futuro*, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1994, p. 131.
- 7 CASSESE (S.), *Lo stato introvabile. Modernità e arretratezza delle istituzioni italiane*, Roma, Donzelli, 1998.
- 8 For a history of the Italian state, see ROMANELLI (R.), «Centralismo e autonomie», in: ROMANELLI (R.) (ed.), *Storia dello stato italiano dall'Unità a oggi*, Roma, Donzelli, 1995, p. 125-186; TARROW

(S.), *Between Center and Periphery. Grassroots Politicians in Italy and France*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 1977.

9 MARIUCCI (L.), «L'elezione diretta del Presidente della regione e la nuova forma di governo regionale», *Le istituzioni del federalismo*, vol. 20, n° 6, 1999, p. 1149-1164, at p. 1163-1164.

10 This doctrine has its origins in social Catholicism, and played a role in the Italian Christian democrat party in the early post-War years. Cf. ROMANELLI, *op. cit.*, p. 163. See also CAMMELLI (M.), «La sussidiarietà preso sul serio», *Il Mulino*, vol. 49, n° 3, 2000, p. 447-455. See also the interview with Augusto Barbera, in: SABELLA & URBINATI, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

11 The Third Italy includes the regions of northern and central Italy that are not part of its so-called industrial triangle Milan-Turin-Genoa: Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Trentino-Alto Adige, Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Umbria and Marche.

12 PERULLI (P.), «Stato, regioni, economie di rete», *Stato e Mercato*, n° 44, 1995, p. 231-260.

13 CACCIARI (M.) & CARRARO (M.), «Dialogo sul Nord-Est», *MicroMega*, n° 4, 1997, p. 17-25. See p. 24. Interview with Massimo Cacciari, in: SABELLA & URBINATI, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

14 HUYSEUNE (M.), «Imagined Geographies: Political and Scientific Discourses on Italy's North-South Divide», in: COPPIETERS (B.) & HUYSEUNE (M.) (eds), *Secession, History and the Social Sciences*, Brussels, VUB Brussels University Press, 2002, p. 207-226.

15 See e.g. BORDIGNON (M.), «Federalismo fiscale? Riflessioni in merito alle recenti riforme in Italia», *Il Mulino*, vol. 49, n° 2, 2000, p. 323-331; BOSELLI (F.), «Federalismo fiscale: da dove cominciare», *Federalismo & Società*, vol. 2, n° 4, 1995, p. 53-55; RAGAZZI (G.), «Federalismo fiscale e questione meridionale», *Federalismo & Società*, vol. 2, n° 1, 1995, p. 29-57.

16 For a critique, see e.g. RAGAZZI, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

17 CHITI (V.), «L'Italia fra federalismo vecchio e nuovo», *Nuova Antologia*, vol. 132, n° 2204, 1997, p. 39-63.

18 CANTARO (A.), «Stato federale, egualianza e diritti sociali», *Democrazia e Diritto*, vol. 34, n° 2-3, 1994, p. 309-323, at p. 316; LOIERO (A.), *Se il Nord. Bossi, Berlusconi e le sirene del «federalismo fiscale»*, Roma, Donzelli, 2001; BETTIN (G.), «Il Re del Veneto è nudo», *Il Manifesto*, 7-11-2000.

19 See the special issue of *Democrazia e Diritto*, Federalismo e Mezzogiorno (*Democrazia e Diritto*, n° 2, 1999): COTTURI (G.), «Federalismo dal mezzogiorno», p. 9-19; CASSANO (F.), «Dal federalismo ben temperato», p. 20-27; MASELLA (L.), «Declino del meridionalismo unitario e centralista», p. 28-36; PETROSINO (D.), «Il federalismo tra illusioni e necessità», p. 37-49.

20 This analysis of the Lega's discourse relies in the first place on the various volumes published by its party leader, Umberto BOSSI (generally together with the journalist Daniele VIMERCATI): BOSSI (U.) & VIMERCATI (D.), *Vento dal Nord*, Milano, Sperling & Kupfer, 1992; IDEM, *La Rivoluzione*, Milano, Sperling & Kupfer, 1993; BOSSI (U.), *Tutta la verità. Perché ho partecipato al governo Berlusconi. Perché l'ho fatto cadere. Dove voglio arrivare*, Milano, Sperling & Kupfer, 1995; BOSSI (U.) & VIMERCATI (D.), *Processo alla Lega*, Milano, Sperling & Kupfer, 1998. Authoritative studies of the Lega include BIORCIO (R.), *La Padania promessa*, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 1997; CENTO BULL (A.) & GILBERT (M.), *The Lega Nord and the Northern Question in Italian Politics*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2001; DIAMANTI (I.), *La Lega. Geografia, storia e sociologia di un soggetto politico*, Roma, Donzelli, 1995; TAMBINI (D.), *Nationalism in Italian Politics. The stories of the Northern League, 1980-2000*, London, Routledge, 2001.

21 CENTO BULL & GILBERT, *op. cit.*, p. 124-135.

22 The official statistical category «Northwest» includes the regions of Valle d'Aosta, Piedmont, Lombardy, Liguria, the «Northeast» Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, and Emilia-Romagna. The Lega sometimes includes the central regions Tuscany, Umbria and Marche in the northern state-to-be (the fourth central region, Lazio, includes Rome, a symbol of the central state, and is therefore excluded from the North). Following the ethnic definition of the Padanian nation, Padania should include all the territories where «Padanian» dialects are spoken. This roughly corresponds with the North, with the exclusion of territories inhabited by linguistic minorities (South Tyrol and Valle d'Aosta), but includes «Padanian-speaking» territories in Switzerland. See ONETO (G.), *L'invenzione della Padania. La rinascità della comunità più antica d'Europa*, Bergamo, Foedus Editore, 1997. It should be noted that the difference between «Padanian» and other Italian dialects is also acknowledged by linguists, but they refuse to recognize «Padanian» as a different language. In practice, the use of standard Italian is generalized in these «Padanian» territories, as in the rest of Italy.

23 BOSSI & VIMERCATI, *La Rivoluzione*, p. 135-136 and 144-146.

24 See BOSSI & VIMERCATI, *Vento del Nord and La Rivoluzione*.

25 BOSSI, *Tutta la verità*, p. 212.

26 BOSSI & VIMERCATI, *Processo alla Lega*, p. 39-45.

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