



## **Ethnoregionalism: The Intellectual New Right and the Lega Nord**

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This article focuses on one of the most contested issues in current European politics, the enlargement of regionalism and the ensuing weakening of the nation-state. This outcome has been received enthusiastically by several liberal scholars and politicians who believe that the strengthening of regional identities guarantees more democratic accountability and liberal rights and will protect against narrow nationalism. This article attempts to challenge this view, by highlighting two particular expressions, one ideological and the other political, of the new politics of regionalism. One fact is striking: not only democrats but some of the most sophisticated and theoretically demanding anti-liberal, radical right groups in Europe are enthusiastic about the idea of a post nation-state Europe and supportive of a regionalist 'Europe des peuples'. This claim in itself does not mean that regionalist policies are necessarily anti-liberal; however, it raises some questions as to the motives behind the right-wing strategic shift from nationalism to European ethnoregionalism. The issue this article wishes to examine is how an ethnoregional strategy contributes to a right-wing exclusionist vision of a culturally homogeneous, immigrant free and economically strong Europe. In order to examine this, I will focus on the ideas of two different but complementary political movements: the French New Right, which fulfilled a leading ideological role in France and Europe during the 1980s and early 1990s, and the Italian regionalist movement the Lega Nord (Lipset 1981: 472).

The New Right is an intellectual group dedicated to a cultural strategy rather than to politics. Its goal is to recreate and adapt the intellectual legacy of the old radical right and fascism to a post-industrial Europe. The Lega Nord is a federalist, autonomist or separatist (depending on the political situation) movement that could be ranked as one of the most politically important regionalist movements in Europe. In this article I trace the Lega Nord's evolution, from its demands for cultural autonomy to exclusionist ethnoregional populism, while pinpointing the New Right's direct ideological inference in the unfolding of this political thought. Several studies have focused separately on the New Right and the Lega Nord. Most of these studies, however, have not dealt with the two in an integrative manner, nor have they linked these two currents of intellectual and political praxis together. This omission is due to their different beginnings; one rooted in totalitarian origins and the other appearing as an anti-totalitarian, European, anti-nation state political movement. The New Right is an intellectual supporter of a new type of European national-socialism and the Lega Nord, is a pragmatic political movement representing local economic and political interests. I propose a different vision to previous analysis. I suggest that an examination of the New Right ideology helps us grasp how radical nationalist ideas of the past are reproduced nowadays into the post nation-state ethnoregional phenomenon. Consequently, an examination of the Lega Nord's political evolution provides us with an example of how the New Right's sophisticated neo-fascism is silently permeating and shaping the political ideology of what could at first sight be defined as a non-fascist regionalist movement. In sum, I suggest that the New Right and the Lega Nord reflect a new type of European ideological and political exclusionism. I suggest that rather than a narrow nationalist response (Le Pen's style), to the political shortcomings of the European Union, a new type of non-liberal regionalism will establish the new framework of 'resistance' to Brussels' 'bureaucratic elites' and the great European state.

The logic behind the New Right's celebration of regionalism is the claim that the ethnic region is the 'natural' framework upon which to redefine the basis of citizenship, be it civic or ethno-cultural. It also enables the raising of elegant cultural rather than bureaucratic barriers against immigrants. In an ethnic-region, political practices are

more populist than liberal. Finally, a federation of ethnicities united by a common foundational myth, as aspired to by the New Right, will constitute the basis for a new anti-liberal Europe free of immigrants. This would be a new type of European ethnic federation, an alternative to the liberal union elaborated in Maastricht, which according to the New Right serves the interests of American cultural and economic imperialism. In other words, the New Right's regionalist criteria are first and foremost a tool to redefine the parameters of exclusion from and inclusion in the community. Secondly, the redefinition of an ethno-cultural community implies the construction of an ethno-communitarian economic identity, an alternative to the universal welfare state and global liberalism. Finally, as I shall prove, the model of economic development proposed by the Lega Nord fits the ethnoregional post nation-state project raised by the New Right.

I suggest that this analysis will contribute towards the understanding of a new political tendency in the discourse of the radical right at the regional rather than at the national level. While the former portrayed a new type of modernist 'right-wing resistance' to liberalism, the latter are typical of old style nationalism.

### ***The New Right: From Nationalism to Ethnoregionalism.***

As noted by Perry Anderson, whereas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the idea of regionalism in politics was condemned by most contemporaries as leading to a regressive politics; things have changed in the last fifty years. The European Parliament has adopted a 'Charter of Regionalization' formally encouraging member states to institutionalize regional identities within them. In recent years, few political entities have become as respectable as regions.<sup>1</sup> From a post-modern perspective, some theories claim that regionalism contributes to cultural pluralism and finally represents a rebellion of 'concrete geographical identities' against the superimposition of the unified map of the (liberal) nation (Said 1989). With similar criteria several left-wing intellectuals and political groups have been prominent in criticizing the 'totalitarian' characteristics of the republican state, in the name of a more pluralistic and democratic regionalism.<sup>2</sup> A different perspective on the 'pluralist' values of regionalism, is presented by Roberto Dainotto, who claims that the new regionalism represents a metaphor for an old desire for authentic identity that nationalism can no longer represent (Dainotto 2000: 21).

The shift from a civic to an ethnoregional identity implies more than any other thing, a shift from liberal to corporatist institutions and an attempt to redefine the parameters of political exclusion. This seems to be the logic followed by the New Right, an intellectual proto-fascist movement in France, which shifted from the defense to that of narrow nationalism to ethnoregionalism. Originally, during the 1960s, the New Right was rather a reactionary group, an old style nationalist unit supporting the West's struggles in Angola, Rhodesia, and South Vietnam<sup>3</sup>. Guided by Alain de Benoist, the New Right's

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<sup>1</sup> For more information see Walker (1992), Piccone and Ulmen (1999) and Anderson (1994).

<sup>2</sup> One of the most prominent detractors of the republic was Georges Sorel. Sorel saw the whole democratic movement as one that strengthened state power. The spirit of syndicalism, in contrast was to free itself from its Jacobin tutelage. Sorel advocated administrative decentralization and the resurrection of communal and provincial life. During the 1930s another critique was advanced by the federalist/personalist tradition, associated with the names of Alexandre Marc, Emmanuel Mounier, and Denis de Rougemont. Influenced by Proudhon and Sorelian sources they drastically opposed the nation-state. Their concept of federation of communities was compatible to their quest for a 'third road' between capitalism and Marxist socialism, and for a personalist rather than liberal democratic form of political rule. Currently, the journal *TELOS* is raising the banner of left-wing support of regional populism.

<sup>3</sup> As an intellectual movement, the New Right made its debut with the foundation of GRECE (*Groupement de Recherche et d'Etude pour la Civilization Europeenne*) by Alain de Benoist, Jacques Bruyas, and Jean Jacques Mourreau, with the collaboration of Claude Valla and Dominique Venner. GRECE was the logical alternative for young French nationalist militants after the dissolution of the movement *Jeune Nation* in 1958, the dissolution of the OAS, and the defeat of the *Rassemblement Europeen de la Liberte* (REL) in the 1967 legislative elections. Basically a French right-wing group, the New Right spread across Europe, especially in Germany, Belgium and Italy, where



unquestionable leader (to the extent that his ideas until the early 1990's could be totally associated to the French New Right), the movement attempted a U-turn in terms of ideology. During the 1960s the New Right was an indirect partner of Le Pen's National Front through one of its intellectual satellites, *Le Club de l'Horloge*, a group that influenced conservative politicians and economic elites. However, since the 1980s the New Right has reoriented itself towards a new type of 'right-wing communitarianism' which led to the rupture with Le Club. Indeed Benoist attacked L'Horloge's liberal ideals in the name of organic society, which, he said, should rely on principles of social justice in order to survive (de Benoist 1990). The question that effected a right-wing communitarian such as Benoist, in contrast to right-wing economic liberals, was how the 'nation' could exist without national solidarity, a situation incompatible with economic laissez-faire.

The second rupture occurred with the National Front (Gottfried 1994). This rupture was the result of most of the New Right's members' awareness that the old nationalist rhetoric was out of order in a post nation-state Europe. This trend alienated French and European nationalists hitherto associated with the movement, and permitted Alain de Benoist to flirt with partisans of the left<sup>4</sup>. Since then, Benoist and friends from the European New Right have supported cultural and political anti-colonialism. Through several publications like *Nouvelle Ecole*, *Elements*, and *Krisis*, the New Right has addressed the necessity of redefining the role of the right in Europe and addressing new issues of current political theory, such as immigration, the crisis of the nation-state, and the question of European citizenship. Several left-wing observers applauded this shift from right to left of the New Right. However, in reality the shift from its early emphasis on human inequality, generic determinism and European paganism, to 'cultural relativism' and a critique of liberal capitalism, the West, and universal ideologies, is paradigmatic of a new discourse of cultural exclusion, which the ethno-regional element plays a central role. The idea is that a culturally assertive and anti-liberal Europe should be an ethno-regionalist Europe emancipated from the legacy of the nation-state. One thing that has to be taken into account is that for Benoist and the New Right, ethno-regionalism is an ideological tool for redefining the parameters of inclusion to the community, and therefore, it is politically constructed. An ethno-communitarian ideology, which Benoist nowadays relates to the region, provides a total response to what he defines as liberal cultural colonialism and republican integrationist ideology. The basic idea is that the politics of cultural exclusion are more human than the republican politics of integration whose underlying goal is to integrate and at the same time repress 'ethnic cultures'. In order to provide sociological backing to this ideological claim Benoist argues that this ideological construction is the outcome of objective developments resulting from the decline of the nation-state.

As noted by de Benoist (1994: 95) in a lecture delivered at GRECE's 24th National Congress

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different institutes, seminars and publications spearheaded a new, whole European, right-wing ideology. A wide number of European intellectuals had been prominent in shaping the ideology of the New Right, however, none has been more dominant than Alain de Benoist. The New Right proliferated in Europe since the 1980s. In Germany the *Thule Seminar*, (whose name is peculiarly reminiscent of the *Thule Society* which had strong links with the early Nazi party) led by Pierre Krebs and Armin Mohler contributed to the rehabilitation of the German Conservative Revolution's blend of nationalism and socialism. In Italy, the New Right was associated with Pino Rauti, one of the ideological leaders of the *Movimento Sociale Italiano/Alleanza Nazionale*. In Belgium, Robert Steuckers, the editor of *Vouloir*, and an admirer of the German Conservative Revolution, compared Europe's current political and social situation to the social and spiritual chaos of Weimar 'between the wars', with the only solution being a national-socialist association of ethnic groups in Europe. In England, the *New Right* is associated with the name of Michael Walker and the journal *Scorpion*.

<sup>4</sup> See the case of the liberation journalist and CGT unionist Jean Paul Cruse and Marc Cohen, editor in chief of L'Idiot International and a member of the French Communist Party.

The nation is challenged both from above and below ... From below by new social movements: by the persistence of regionalism and new communitarian claims...From above, the nation is challenged by often weighty social phenomena which mock national frontiers.

However, accompanying the socio-economic developments advancing the end of the nation-state, de Benoist explains that the 'nation is not the only type of communitarian organization', and obviously not the most important (de Benoist 1992: 6). The nation is not as political a form as others:

It is specifically modern... The nation, in the modern sense of the word, and nationalism as a distinguished form of patriotism are historically linked with the value of individualism. The nation is precisely the type of global society that corresponds to the kingdom of individualism as a valor (de Benoist 1992: 3-5).

Obviously, de Benoist is referring to the model of the French republican nation in which the value of the individual was represented by his condition of citizenship. The idea of citizenship was interpreted as a universal virtue, which everybody could access, regardless of race and culture. In other words, attacking the idea of individualism meant also attacking the idea of the republic and its concept of citizenship.

The high school manifesto *Manifeste de la classe 60'*, issued at the beginning of the 1960s, already highlighted what future New Right intellectuals had determined to be their creed: that the '...French ethnic group...is the fundamental basis of our national existence...' (Algazy 1984: 198). Furthermore, the idea was that ethnic France represented a barrier against global society and the value of individualism, which are the foundational characteristics of the contractual and civic concept of French republican nationalism. As a result of this conviction, the New Right's plan for France, was not precisely the same as De Gaulle's idea of the 'hexagon', or Le Pen's concept of France as a nation-state. The 'Republic -- one and indivisible -- would be replaced by a federal republic of French peoples', which would be absorbed into an ethnic federation of European peoples (de Benoist 1993: 52). Paradoxically thus, the federation of France would save France's 'real' identity, as expressed in the spirit of its provinces, and Europe, as a strong, dominant, and productive conglomeration of peoples. The most important point, however, is that an assertive conglomerate of cultural identities would not need to raise bureaucratic barriers against foreigners.

The European regions -- Normandy, Brittany, Catalonia, Flandes, and so on -- constitute the identity framework in which the concepts of legal citizenship and liberal democracy can be deconstructed. For the New Right then, an ethno-cultural 'organic citizenship' provides an assertive but 'non-racist' solution to the question of immigrant integration into European society. It sets a 'positive' barrier against immigrants' integration. In other words, the liberal state would be able to set legal limitations to immigration, as long as it had the support of parliament and public opinion. However, political discussion in an open society, aggregated to legal bureaucratic procedures, turns the process of political 'decisionism' into a tedious rationalist 'non-authentic' procedure. The ethnic region, in contrast, does not expel foreigners with draconian laws. It raises impenetrable cultural barriers even against those who are willing to integrate into the national polity, because it links the concept of participatory citizenship to cultural roots.

The striking point of the New Right's ideas on ethnic exclusionism is that they do not indicate that the New Right disavows other cultures. A key argument advanced by the New Right, is that the liberal capitalist state is responsible for the arrival of foreign workers. The French republican state is also responsible for assimilating them and this way Europe's authentic cultural identity would be damaged. However, the New Right also



claims that this process of integration into modern European society also damages foreign cultures.

Benoist adopts the idea that Europe and the Third World are common partners in their struggle against global capitalism because it causes immigration. Therefore, in order to stop immigration, the New Right should be critical of:

...The capitalist logic, and we should aid Third World countries to break with the views of 'development' as [exposed] by the World Bank and the IMF. This implies the recognition that the first victims of immigration are the immigrants themselves, and that because their identity is being menaced. In this sense the immigration problem should make us reflect on the defects of the French model of Jacobinean inspiration, which integrates individuals and makes them renounce their cultural roots (de Benoist 1993a: 53).

Once again, Benoist clearly attempts to link republican nationalism with integration, capitalism and racism. He alleges that the republican democratic state, which responds to the political power of the bourgeoisie, is responsible (despite bureaucratic attempts to impede it) for the integration of immigrants into the polity. However, de Benoist's solution is not to reform French republicanism. The solution is cultural assertiveness of both Europe and the Third World. Therefore, the same ideological arguments used to support the Third World's cultural emancipation are used to advocate Europe's cultural renaissance as a culturally pure entity unscathed by immigrants. As a prominent French intellectual has said, '...here we are confronting a right-wing that is not for colonization, nor for the nation, nor for the West -- for Europe, certainly, but a Europe returning to its roots' (Domenach 1981: 80) The authentic European roots are embedded in Normandy, Catalonia, the Basque countries, etc. In other words, what the New Right advances is 'the organic culturalism' of Europe's regions, which upholds a response to global capitalism and to the liberal state.

From a cultural 'libertarian' point of view, Benoist's solution is more radical and more just than the one propounded by liberal multiculturalists, who according to Benoist, advance cultural ghettos and a loss of cultural identity, both for the integrated immigrants and for the integrating society. An ethno-regional identity thus produces two interrelated processes. It serves as the basis for a new type of exclusionism without relying upon old style racist nationalism. At the same time, this ethno-regionalist process represents the first step to the elaboration of an alternative idea of Europe totally contrasted to the liberal Europe of Maastricht. The question of European sovereignty, thus, is associated with cultural sovereignty, and that can only be sustained under the regionalization of large continental ensembles (de Benoist 1996: 136).

#### ***'Europe des peuples': Between Maastricht and Mitteleuropa***

A theoretical distinction must be made between the spirit of a liberal Europe embodied in the idea of Maastricht federalism, and right-wing types of federalism. Liberal supporters of the European Union argue that the contractual and individualistic basis of liberal society is projected on a national consciousness basis.

Theoretically, the national idea requires a reference beyond itself. This reference need not be something as abstract as 'man', but merely the notion of Europe, defined by Montesquieu, as a community of nation-states (Mosher 1993). By this criterion, Europe could develop from a Europe of nation-states into a political and economic union resting on the same philosophical basis that sustains both the autonomy of the individual and the nation-state, which is theoretically posited on the primacy of the individual.

The New Right is critical of this approach, and in some elements its critique resembles that of the left-wing critiques of liberal assimilationism in the name of the politics of

identities. For the New Right, the idea of a European federation is not based on the nation-state but on the idea of *'Europe des peuples'*. However, in contrast to the left, for the New Right the idea of *'Europe des peuples'* represents the dream of an ethnic Empire. In a 1970 article in *Le Monde*, for example, the New Right historian Pierre Vial wrote that, by 'fighting for a cultural renaissance, GRECE intended to help establish a founding myth: that of a sovereign, liberated Europe, facing an imperial destiny' (Vial cited in Duranton-Crabol). After this first tentative attempt to define Europe's political path, Benoist provided a much more elaborated view of the meaning of a federal-empire solution to Europe:

What distinguishes the empire from the nation? First of all, the fact that the empire is not primarily a territory but essentially an idea or a principle. The political order is determined ... by a spiritual ... idea. ... What is important is that the emperor holds power by virtue of embodying something, which goes beyond simple possessions. ... He represents a power transcending the community he governs (de Benoist 1994: 84).

In other words, the Empire '...is never a closed totality, as opposed to the nation...' (de Benoist 1994: 97). At first glance it appears that there is a contradiction between the idea of cultural and ethnic ties and the spiritual fluidity of the Empire. As explained by Benoist, 'The Empire's frontiers are naturally fluid and provisional, which reinforces its organic character'. The new Europe should develop out of a plurality of authentic European cultural ethnic groups. Flanders, Catalans and Padania differ from one another, however, according to the New Right, their differences rely on a common European constitutional myth. In this sense, an ethnoregional federation represents a multicultural European world, with a great internal fluidity but which excludes the non-European. However, it is not only non-Europeans that are excluded. An economically developed review of Europe's boundaries would only include the technological, developed and wealthy regions of central Europe. At the geopolitical level, the idea is to reconstruct a 'third Europe' a *Mittleuropa* centered on Germany. *'Mittleuropa ... alone can create simultaneously, in the East and in the West, the conditions in which it would be possible to give a ... [new] ... political form to the European continent'*, based upon the most technologically developed European region (de Benoist 1989: 17). From the ideological point of view, the aim of *Mittleuropa* is to reconstruct the idea of Europe as a 'third way'. That means, '...to install, opposite Paris, London, and Moscow [the bourgeois representatives of European cosmopolitanism], a 'third Europe''. It strives to form '...around Germany an anti-imperialist front able to break up the order instituted by the Treaties of Versailles and Saint Germain...' (de Benoist 1989a: 22). As noted by Benoist, this is an idea that most French nationalists have been unable to assimilate, because in countries like France, 'the historical model makes it difficult to understand that for the Germans, national-identity and the state unit do not necessarily go together' (de Benoist 1989a: 22). The New Right wants us to believe in the possibility of a peaceful and commonly agreed annexation in which the ethnic peoples of central Europe unite spiritually under a common foundational myth. Unlike the Maastricht political and juridical union, which attempted to bring Germany back into the fold of liberal Europe, a new Europe, free of liberal and universalistic ideologies, leads the New Right's vision of Germany. For Benoist, the surrender of French sovereignty to an ethnic Europe, not only provides the basis for a cultural renaissance, but also sets the basis for the development of a technological, political and economic unit of considerable strength, superior to the Maastricht political and juridical union.

In order to create itself, Europe requires unity in political decision-making.. [which] cannot be built on the national Jacobian model ... and it cannot ... result from the economic supra-nationality dreamt of by Brussels technocrats (de Benoist 1994: 97).

A liberal Europe loses its authenticity and creates a market favorable to the United States. 'The paradoxical result is that the creation of that single market of 320 million



inhabitants with their strong purchasing power will favor first of all not the Europeans, but their competitors', (de Benoist 1989b). Although the idea of Maastricht takes cultural autonomies into consideration, and is designed to strengthen Europe's economic power *vis-a-vis* the United States, economic and political union is predicated on an economic and juridical state that is merely a transformation and enlargement of the bureaucratic-state. Under the Maastricht conception, the market creates economic identity, which in turn is the basis for 'European identity'. In the *Mitteleuropa* conception, on the other hand, the ethnic federation of peoples not only makes its own market but also places ethno-cultural priorities over economic ones. Since a federated European union of this kind would include only the industrially developed peoples of Central Europe (the 'Indo-European' stock, with its innate industrial and technical gifts), the possibility of economic independence seems much better founded than if an undeveloped region were contemplated. While liberal Europe surrenders to the United States, the interests of a national-socialist Europe diverge and contrast with those of the United States (de Benoist 1994a: 201).

Summarizing the logic of Benoist's argument, only an ethno-cultural Europe sets the basis for popular participation, and would be emancipated from liberal constraints in the political and economic realm. It sets an alternative productivist ideology against bourgeois individualism and liberal globalization. Finally, it promotes ethnic diversity within a federation of European ethnicities, banned to non-Europeans and to those considered to be non-productive Europeans. Next I shall analyze to what extent the Lega Nord politically expresses the New Right's ethnoregionalism.

### ***The Lega Nord and Ethno-exclusionism.***

The Lega Nord, like other right-wing populist movements in Europe, portrays itself as a democratic alternative to bureaucratic 'etatism'. In some cases it meets the criteria of participatory democracy propounded by left-wing intellectuals such as the group *Telos*, which praised the idea of regional populism. However, such populism in reality constitutes 'islands of prosperity' that can be protected only by a radical type of ethnic 'populist' democracy, in which the principle of 'liberal productionism' is pitted against that of 'political democracy'. In this section I would like to trace the *Lega Nord's* evolution from a compound of small regional movements demanding cultural autonomy within the Italian nation-state to a movement that supports the New Right's ideas of promoting a whole exclusionist European ethnoregionalism. This ideological evolution resulted from new strategies adopted to deal with the changing conditions in post-war Europe, characterized by a decline of class voting and political polarization. However an important input that has to be taken into account, is also the intellectual effect on the Lega Nord leadership by Gianfranco Miglio, one of the most prominent twentieth century Italian intellectuals and one of the most enlightened interpreters of the New Right's political ideology in Italy. Miglio and the New Right provided the theoretical and ideological framework to the socio-economic changes that permitted a shift from the limited politics of dialectic to European ethnoregionalism.

In 1979 The *Lega* was born in Veneto in northern Italy as the *Lega Veneta*. In 1984 it became the *Lega Lombarda* and finally the Lega Nord, which since 1991 has incorporated all the northern leagues of Italy. Unlike other regional or separatist movements in Europe, the *Lega* does not protest against long-standing foreign rule but against what could be defined as the common interests of the Italian bureaucratic state, the political class, the underdeveloped South, immigrants and big business (Poche 1992: 75). Thus, it is not accidental that underlying the Lega Nord's political success has been its ability to convince northern voters that the centralization of political authority and economic resources has both disregarded and harmed northern regional



interests and identity<sup>5</sup>. Its success is also due to the parallels between the grievances addressed by the *Lega* and those identified by the media in Italy.<sup>6</sup>

The original northern leagues, which later endorsed the *Lega Nord*, struggled for cultural autonomy and defended local traditions. However, a shift of strategy was necessary in order to become a political power. Indeed, during the first half of the 1980s in Lombardy, 'regional belonging' was not a sufficient base for a political movement. There was no autonomous Lombard culture grounded in a specific language and particular traditions. Local dialects were spoken only in peripheral areas and varied from place to place. The way the *Lega* populist leaders could reach the Lombard population was by the elaboration of a 'second language' in which the autonomist argument was broadened and transformed so as to express the 'common people's' resentment against internal enemies. In this way, collective identity could be used against political obstacles that impeded economic and social benefits to a specific population. As explained by Umberto Bossi himself, the creation of the *Lega* coincided with a shift from the politics of dialect to that of ethnicity and economics. 'What triggers change in states are self determination and the globalization of markets. Ethnic consciousness is very strong in the North...and the basic problem is that those of the North know that they are.. very different [in terms of identity]' (Tambini 1996: 168). Bossi understood that an ethnic consciousness was an invention. However, he also understood that the idea of the Italian nation and its democratic inclusionist identity was the product of an invention of different socio-economic interests.

From a socio-political perspective, the invention of a Padanian collective identity was formed to oppose three forces. The first was the bureaucratic class and existing politicians. The second was big capitalist interests, whether private, large economic corporations or the welfare state. The last was those who are 'different'. It was based on a hostility towards southern and immigrant workers who were supported by the welfare state. The fundamental argument of the *Lega* leaders is that the South, in collaboration with the parasitic bureaucrats of Rome, has exploited productive northern citizens. Both the dependent south and the politicians are non-productive. Finally, following Miglio's and the New Right's compelling ideas, this Padanian identity would be included within the wider framework of a new European or ethnoregional federalism.

First, we should consider the political and economic order criticized by the *Lega Nord* and the 'new' economic order it proposes. From the very beginning, Umberto Bossi has pitted the productive North against the blend of bureaucrats, parasitic politicians and the unproductive South. As he noted, this situation was bound to lead to bitter political conflict between 'the capital of parasitism and clientelism, which is Rome, and the capital of the economy, which is Milan' (Bossi with Vimercati 1993: 170). Moreover, while the difference between productive capital and parasitic politicians is clear, Bossi feels it essential to also note the difference between the concept of productive capitalism of the *Lega Nord* and economic liberalism. The productive capitalism proposed by the *Lega* needs a regional identity totally linked to ethnic and cultural ties. This means that the *Lega Nord*'s concept of liberal economics contrasts with liberal interpretations of what an open political and economic civil society should be. This 'third productionism' ideal is not properly neo-liberal because it rejects the globalization of markets, products and ideas. In more than one way, a capitalist free market is responsible for materialist acculturation and the invasion of 'other' immigrant cultures (La Padania, 13 March 2001). At the same time and with the same zeal with which it rejects global capitalism for its damaging effect of society, the *Lega Nord* also

<sup>5</sup> Surveys conducted in 1982 among a broad sample of young people in Veneto, for instance, already confirmed this growing importance of a new regional leadership which challenged old establishment parties. See Allum and Diamanti (1986).

<sup>6</sup> For more information see Ruzza and Schmidtke (1991-92 and 1993) and Schmidtke (1993).





attacks the universal nature of the Italian welfare state, which extracts money from the North to subsidize the South. In contrast to both the neo-liberal and the universal welfare state, the Lega Nord proposes an ideological productionist 'third way' a mode of development akin to the historical productive model developed in the northern Italian regions, which establishes a basis for a regional libertarian ideology.

The studies of I. Diamanti and R.M Locke analyze how such a regional liberalist ideology has grown. They claim that certain structural changes contain an objective meaning that support the conscious reflections of citizens experiencing these changes. Beginning partially as a response to the economic crisis triggered by the sudden growth of oil prices in the 1970s and the abandonment of the Bretton Woods monetary agreements, Italy experienced a second economic miracle beginning in the North. Diamanti claims that regions that were 'underdeveloped' economic areas until recently such as Marche, Abruzzi and Molise, owe their remarkable progress in recent years to small factories. These new firms and the type of market they have developed are part of what could be defined as *economia diffusa* (diffuse economy). The characteristic of *economia diffusa* implies a strong and adaptable pre-industrial social environment which appropriates the economic form of modern industrial production and manages to manipulate it without being shattered by it. The residents in areas of *economia diffusa* are self-employed or employed in small-sized firms. They are artisans and shopkeepers living in medium-sized towns that have grown considerably in population and level of income (Diamanti 1993).

In some cases the quality of this labor force and the number of productive firms is related to the inheritance of the labor structure of a sharecropping agricultural system. In such agricultural settings the family was the central productive structure in which roles were clearly assigned on a hierarchical basis, and independence, self-reliance and acquisitiveness were the dominant values, accompanied with an awareness of a shared interest with the 'landowner'.

Some observers have stressed the contradictory, intertwining forces in a market of this type. Although it is highly competitive, they claim that cooperation among local firms and the sharing of information and services are also essential<sup>7</sup>. In other words, the development of this social or ethnic market paradoxically encourages competitiveness at the same time that it promotes high levels of cooperation. What is clear to most observers is that in this type of social market, the community is not enslaved to the exigencies of the super-capitalist financial market.

Since the mid-1970s, this new economy has become an alternative both to traditional big business capitalism and to an underground economy of cheap immigrant labor. It is a particular Italian phenomenon (Locke 1995: 27-64). For example, in 1983, with an industrial sector contributing 24.7 percent of the GDP, which was more or less the OECD average, Italy had the lowest level of salaried employees of all OECD countries. In contrast, by 1986, 90.6 percent of Italian firms with less than ten workers absorbed 40.3 percent of the Italian labor force; 91.3 percent of the European Union firms were of the same kind but employed only 26.9 percent of the total labor force (Nanetti 1992: 13).

Can the development of this type of *economia diffusa*, which especially developed in the North, be translated into electoral success for the Lega Nord? Basically, the two blocks of regions where the *economia diffusa* is dominant are labeled the 'white' and the 'red' referring to the local subcultures. Veneto, Friuli, Trentino and the eastern provinces of Lombardy were traditionally the strongholds of the Christian Democratic Party in the

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<sup>7</sup> For more information see Rayneri (1988).

North, while Emilia Romagna, Tuscany, Umbria and Marche were the strongholds of the Democratic Party of the Left (the former Communist Party). Ideologically, Christian Democratic voters have been characterized by belonging to the Catholic subculture, which competed with the Communist subculture for the ideological hegemony of the country in the aftermath of World War II. Historically, both parties courted the lower classes of sharecroppers, artisans and later factory workers. However, only in areas where Christian Democracy dominated has Lega Nord activism become increasingly meaningful. In the regional elections of 1990, the *Lega* obtained 1,200,000 votes in Lombardy (18.9% of the electorate) and became the second most popular party behind the Christian Democrats. In 1992 it won 23 percent of the vote in Lombardy and gained 81 seats in Parliament. In 1993, anti-establishment parties were the big winners in municipal elections. The Democratic Party of the Left was successful in the North but especially so in Rome and Naples, and a *Lega* candidate became mayor in Milan. However, as noted, the *Lega* was prominent in the North especially in the areas dominated by Christian Democrats. In the areas traditionally dominated by the Communists, the Democratic Party of the Left successfully adapted to new social and economic conditions. In the areas dominated by Christian democracy, a large part of the public was critical of the Christian Democrats' mismanagement. As the works of Trigilia proved, the 'red' regions, especially Emilia Romagna, responded to the new demands by supporting all small firms (Triglia 1986). It may be that a belief in a more 'interventionist' economic policy prompted regional operators to be more active than in regions where a free-market orientation prevailed. Obviously, this implies intervention from the regional power rather than the central state, which was associated with bureaucratic stagnation rather than productionist interventionism. Paradoxically, the Christian Democrats were associated with the central state. During the seventies, as a result of the success of leftist coalitions in provincial, municipal and regional levels, the central government dominated by the Christian Democrats had eliminated all fiscal autonomy of local bodies in the northern and upper central areas of the country. Since the Christian Democrats planned to limit regionalization to mere administrative aspects, while revenues and taxation remained concentrated in Rome, the party was associated with central government and the infamous inefficiency characterizing the Italian central state. While the left succeeded in adapting to socio-economic changes and kept its influence in the areas of the Northeast, the middle classes felt betrayed by the central state and became ripe for a new type of political organization which combined efficiency and ethnicity and provided a middle road between left socialism and liberal Thatcherism. What might be concluded is that the left partially adopted itself to regionalism and became the most direct challenge to the Lega Nord. This partially explains the Lega Nord's tactical endorsing of Berlusconi's governing coalition.

The ensuing question is whether the existence of a strong regional economy is the main factor behind the rise of a strongly ideological federalist movement and whether economic factors are the basis of a new ideology that purports to interpret a *weltanschauung* antithesis to the identity of the modern nation-state (Gobetti 1996: 71). We must also inquire whether there is an inherent link between this new type of ideology and voting for the Lega Nord.

I endorse D. Gobetti's assertion that people in these areas reject a pure administrative version of the federation of regions as planned by the Christian Democrats. The latter advanced this type of regionalization in an attempt to resolve a purely organizational problem at a time when the people of the North had already developed their own ethnoregional identity (Gobetti 1996: 70-71).

If the issue at stake was simply more efficient administration and the reduction of state intervention, then the political identification of the North should have been with a leader like Berlusconi. If, on the other hand, the North prioritized Italian nationalism, it would



identify with the questionable fascist, but surely nationalist *Alleanza Nazionale*. But this was not the case, and despite the strategic alliance with the *Alleanza* in the Italian magnate Silvio Berlusconi's coalition, the Lega Nord's ethno-regionalist ideology was hardly compatible with Berlusconi's liberalism or with the *Alleanza's* nationalism. For some analysts, however, there is some logic behind the coalition of the right, composed especially of anti-system populist parties not involved in *tangentopoli*<sup>8</sup>, which shared a common neo-corporatist line.<sup>9</sup> I claim, however, that these neo-corporatist elements are not sufficiently compelling.

While the *Alleanza* believes in the possibility of transforming the Italian state and Berlusconi's interests are defended by a liberal state<sup>10</sup>, Bossi understands and promotes the end of the nation-state. While Berlusconi's productivist capitalism needs the favors of the liberal state the *Lega's* productionist 'third way' demands the withering away of the liberal state. As clearly manifested in the last election of 2001, the most urgent commitment in present times is the defeat of the republican national left. The *Casa delle Libertà* (The Home of Freedom, Berlusconi's coalition) 'defends traditional values....The left is still enclosed by communist methodology, proposes a model of society which does not work and that will hinder our identity' (La Padania, 11 May 2001). Evidence of the short term common interests among the members of the coalition is the fact that despite Berlusconi having no need to include the Lega Nord in his cabinet, Bossi was nominated Minister for Institutional reforms. Together with the leader of the *Alleanza*, Gianfranco Fini, Bossi elaborated a plan to impede the entry into Italy of foreign workers without legal contracts with Italian firms. The idea shared by all members of the coalition was that the previous law of residence would not protect unemployed foreigners. However, this tactical union cannot conceal the fact that the synthesis of the cultural and the economic (or the cultural backing of the economic) turns the *Lega* not only against the republican left but makes it a potential opponent of Berlusconi's type of corporate capitalism and mass media acculturation.

How is it possible that a particular body politic which have enjoyed political, military and economic blessings of the liberal revolution, have failed so miserably on the social and cultural levels. Why have...local communities in these bodies politically squandered their freedom and...let themselves be decapitated by the pitiful quality of mass culture, chaotic consumerism.... (Bossi 1997)

In other words, the liberal state and the economic tycoons of globalization (Berlusconi is one of them), have 'succeeded' in destroying the cultural identities of local communities. At the same time, the liberal state has not been strong enough to create a cultural identity because it is directly connected with the ideas of liberal citizenship and modern capitalism.

Finally, as some scholars observe, this economic 'third way', based in ethno-regionalism may also be valid for other developed countries in Europe.<sup>11</sup> They claim that the 'ethnicization' of the market, conceived to protect it from liberalism, the welfare state and immigration, is a process that has appeared in several right-wing movements, especially in central Europe. This claim exactly fits Benoist's concept of Europe's ethnic federation of the most developed regions. According to Benoist, these are the countries of

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<sup>8</sup> This a nickname meaning, literally, kickback city, which underlined the gap between the idealized image of Milan in the 1980s and the corrupt reality, especially from the Christian Democrats' point of view.

<sup>9</sup> Gobetti (1996: 75) claims that Berlusconi's corporatist elements are manifested in the transformation of his employees into the leader's followers. The corporatist elements in the *Alleanza* are part of their fascist heritage, and the neo-corporatist face of the *Lega* is embedded in the conviction to determine who is and who is not endowed with a Northern identity.

<sup>10</sup> On the antinomies between the *Alleanza* and the *Lega* see Sznajder (1995).

<sup>11</sup> For more information see Hueglin (1986).

Mitteleuropa that represent the European alternative to American capitalism and cultural liberalism. Bossi expresses the ideological concept synthesized in the confrontation between two world conceptions and types of political organization. The nation-state, expressed in its bureaucratic, democratic, welfare or neo liberal capitalist form, would be confronted by a new type of political organization defined as federal ethnoregionalism, which is productivist and ethno-pluralist. As Bossi notes,

'the game will be played on the one side by the 'welfarist' logic which is favored by the bureaucracy and big finance, and on the other, federalist liberalism functional to the society of small producers, of producers and workers.... [T]he *Lega* is convinced that this is the winning logic' (Bossi with Vimercati 1993: Chapter 6).<sup>12</sup>

The next point to examine is how this 'winning logic' is adapted to a new idea of organic European regionalization. This new ideological configuration that would have an impact at the European level, coincides with the Lega Nord 's adaptation of the ideological path of the New Right introduced to the *Lega* by Gianfranco Miglio since 1989.

### **G. Miglio, the New Right and the Federalization of Regions:**

Gianfranco Miglio, one of the most recognized Italian intellectuals of the twentieth century, has recently died. In the tradition of neo-Machiavellian Italian political theory, he was the inspiration and promoter of the current federalist ideology that synthesized nationalism with an anti-state ideology. From the late 1980's his impact on the Lega Nord and especially upon Bossi was so compelling that he was included in the *Lega's* list to the senate, where he served in the last three terms of the senate and was active in various attempts to launch a deep constitutional reform in Italy. In 1994, the close relations between Miglio and Bossi led to a showdown, which resulted in Miglio's resignation from the party. Miglio criticized Bossi's political opportunism after he yielded to Berlusconi's pressures not to nominate Miglio as minister for constitutional reforms. Berlusconi's objections to Miglio stemmed from his stance against the unity of the Italian nation. Indeed, he had always been generally critical of the nation-state and of Italy in particular. He was a remarkable intellectual influenced by Carl Schmitt, as were several of his peers at the Catholic University in Milan. However, during the 1990's, without abandoning his decisionist authoritarian position, usually associated with nationalism, he endorsed anti-national federalism. We might wonder how these two positions can harmonize. Indeed, Miglio, like Benoist and other younger intellectuals of the New Right, was critical of the Weberian concept of the impersonal or neutral state, which legitimizes the capitalist 'meritocratic' order. Although not an actual member of the New Right, Miglio holds similar beliefs. For example, he claims that there is a contradiction between the political state and the democratic state. Similar to other New Right intellectuals, Miglio contends that the nation-states in Europe have not been created by 'nationalities', namely cultural and ethnic regions, but by 'the authoritarian exercise of political power which has hegemonized those who were governed and made them into an [artificial] nation' (Miglio 1990). This modern nation-state is contrasted to the collective identity unfolding in smaller regions, since in the latter it has evolved naturally and has not been forced by state pressure. The regional nation is authentic and authentically represents the interests of its citizens. Miglio, similar to others in the New Right, believes that a new Europe should be divided into macro regions, which could establish the basis for a new type of federal Europe.

The position, defended by the Lega Nord since the early 1990's, is anchored in the New Right and Miglio's concept of regional federalism. Bossi conceives a federalist system which grants governing powers (such as for military and foreign affairs) 'to higher levels

<sup>12</sup> The basic idea is that while great capitalist firms were similar to the welfare system in the sense that they were subsidized by the state and therefore support the political establishment, small and medium-sized business were detached from the state aid.



of the body politic which, at its pinnacle, form an efficient, well disciplined state... capable of protecting local communitarian freedoms (Miglio 1990). 'The community of Padanian citizens ... retains the right to establish regulations aimed at preventing the deterioration of their ethnic and cultural heritage' (The Padanian Citizens Bill, Article 6). This new federal state would be Europe but a Europe very different from the idea of a liberal European union or the German idea of a federation that permits inclusion of economically non-developed European regions. The 'Lega Nord has no interest in passing from a group of classical nation-states to a new European super-State... All those who... promote this historical development limit themselves to simply wanting to produce 'modern' institutions of a State... already outdated' (The Padanian Citizens Bill, Article 6).

The federalist-autonomist drive of the *Lega* is based on the concept of fiscal *residualism*, and the idea of *devoluzione*, implying very clear rational economic and organizational demands. The *Lega's* demands that the Italian return its political and economic prerogatives to the regions are shifted to the European framework. These demands are compatible with a European spirit promoted by the New Right because the *Lega's* demands are parallel to the aristocratic, highly developed European regions. Indeed, the idea of an aristocratic productivist Europe is conflated to the idea of a bourgeois liberal and open Europe. 'The *Lega* has rescued elements of the productive world ... and blended them with the deepest values of Europe.' This blend of nobility and populism that characterized the noble 'Padano-European' peoples could never be destroyed by either a rich aristocracy or by politicians (La Padania, 16 March 2001). Indeed the concept of 'productionism' is embedded only in the type of 'noble aristocracy' representative of Europe, rather than of the nation-state. The underlying idea is that while the nation-state and the liberal European Union represent the blend of interests of a rich aristocracy, a servile bureaucracy and corrupt politicians, a regional Europe relies upon a productionist aristocracy rooted in the deepest organic values of a European communitarianism. Even the underlying subtitle, *Mitteleuropa*, of the Lega Nord 's periodical, La Padania, hints at the New Right's Europeanist trend within the *Lega*. Indeed, the Lega Nord 's concept of a 'Europe of the Regions' and the hundred flags is pitted against the idea of a liberal union, based on arguments similar to those raised by the New Right. The cultural nation, namely the region rather than the old nation-state constituted the central entity of European union. In the '...ethnic union a number of present-day States will experience the phenomenon of separation (the ones composed of different ethnicities)...' in order to reintegrate into a different organic European union (El Pais, 10 May 2001). The Italian state, for instance, would be reconstructed into three republics: Padania, Etruria and a Republic of the South.

Which of these Italian regions would endorse a new Europe of the regions? In principle it seems that only the Community of the Padanian peoples would be federated with the Scottish, the Danish, the German and the Flemish, etc. Echoing the New Right and Miglio, the Lega Nord maintained that the northern regions of Italy were gravitating towards *Mitteleuropa*, while the Center and the South were closer to their Mediterranean neighbors. In other words, the productive peoples are part of *Mitteleuropa*. Members of the new federal European state could be those relatively 'small' nation-states, such as Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Austria. The other members could be regions such as Catalonia, Scotland and Bavaria. This means that the wealthy ethno-states or ethno-regions are to be included, into this new type of multicultural regional federalism, conceived as the only barrier against integration of non communitarian immigration and non-productive regions.

Critics argue that the *Lega's* main objective was less to put an end to the established political system than to put an end to Italy itself. In their view, the Lega Nord 's vocation was 'not that of a federalist but that of a secessionist type. They promote a generic Europeanist ideology only to hide the fact that they prefer the German (or

Austrian) to the rest of the Italians' (*La Repubblica*, 6 October 1992). I claim that these criticisms are flawed. Bossi does not prefer Germans to Italians. From different perspectives, neo-fascists like Benoit and right-wing ethnoregionalists like Bossi have arrived at the conclusion that the ethnoregionalist idea is more than a simple redefinition of nation-state frontiers. It represents a new type of productionism and a new type of 'populist democracy' in which an ethnic mythology is constructed in order to radicalize the difference from the others. An interview held by Damian Tambini with Bossi demonstrates that Bossi echoes the New Right's political philosophy.

Bossi notes that the government uses immigration to make sure that the parliament is not made up of citizens but of residents, people that do not care. It enfranchises these people because it knows that immigrants support a centralist state. Immigrants vote for a strong government out of fear. What causes this fear is discrimination from local communities. When asked whether local communities are naturally xenophobic, Bossi's response was that '...local communities know they cannot evaporate. They resist, [because] [t]hey have local traditions' (Tambini 1996: 268). Obviously, Bossi implies that local traditions are a natural barrier against foreigners, and his concept of citizenship is what Benoit and the New Right would define as an organic-cultural citizenship. The only real political participants in local communitarian democracies would be ethno-cultural citizens. These ethno-cultural roots might be invented or revitalized. However, the basic goal is that they should be useful to establish a cultural identity sufficiently impermeable to alien foreigners. Without a doubt, the Lega Nord sees itself not only as protecting its own market and culture but also as pioneers of a European resistance to global liberalism. Only a courageous minority during an era of '...liberal-Marxist woes, and a third-world demo-egalitarian uprising, can raise the banner of Europe resistance' (*La Padania*, 14 February 2001). Thus, by serving the interests of the North, the Lega Nord is not promoting national emancipation, but it is serving the interests of a broad anti-liberal ethnoregional Europe.

### **Conclusion**

Analysts of the New Right correctly stress the ideological links between proto-fascist movements like the Italian MSI and the New Right as the basis of their common cultural fascist background.<sup>13</sup> Some of them stress the economic liberalism and democratic Europeanism of the Lega Nord, and disentangle this movement from the ideological ethnoregionalism of the New Right. I claim, however, that the Lega Nord is precisely the movement that provides the political and economic content to the new discourse of cultural exclusion of the New Right. Rather than 'laissez faire' capitalism, the New Right promotes a 'third way' between Marxism and liberalism, a communitarian capitalist 'third way', between economic liberalism and state social-democracy. In this sense, the Lega Nord's concept of social market should be seen, (despite the Lega Nord's tactical alliance with Berlusconi), as contrasting to the ideas of corporate capitalism as well as to welfare socialism. In other words, the Lega Nord can be bracketed as a type of right-wing populist movement that fosters a significant shift in economic thinking from Keynesianism to 'liberal-productionism' and should be considered in a similar vein with the New Right (Betz 1994: 103). Moreover, the Lega Nord's struggle against the Italian republican state epitomizes the New Right's theoretical criticism to French republican nationalism. Finally, the Lega is clearly intending to follow a strategy of consolidating a federation of ethnic regions, based in the New Right's vision of Europe far-removed from the liberal type of European union.

In this article I have attempted to prove that the New Right and the Lega Nord are two different but complementary faces of the new sophisticated right-wing ethnoregionalist

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<sup>13</sup> Piero Ignazi finds the footprints of the New Right in the MSI, especially in his ex-leader Pino Rauti and the intellectual Marco Tarchi. See Ignazi and Ysmal (1992: 115).



ideology, the basis for a new discourse of exclusion. As explained, an ethnoregionalist ideology covers two goals. It sets a new basis for organic identification, deeper and more authentic than the nation-state, and is the most propitious framework for the raising of populist anti-liberal elites. It justifies segregation of foreigners, however, with clean hands, and sets the intellectual basis for a new European union, anti-liberal, and culturally homogeneous.

An analysis of the New Right and the Lega Nord thus forecasts new strategic paths of the anti-liberal right in Europe, regardless of its political strength during different periods of times. As noted, the New Right is not a political movement so it does not search for popular support. The Lega Nord has seen its political strength severely reduced in the last Italian elections of May 2001. While in 1996 the Lega Nord achieved a 10.1 per cent of the votes for the parliament, in 2001 it reached only 3.6 per cent. This decline in popular support, however, did not prevent Berlusconi from nominating Bossi as minister of Institutional reforms. As explained, despite strategic differences in the long run, the right-wing members of the government coalition coincided in a common tactical approach against the left, against the idea of a welfare state, while displaying a harsh attitude against illegal as well as legal immigration. I sustain that this uneasy coalition will not hold for very long; while the Lega Nord represents the identity politics of the future, Berlusconi is firmly attached to the ideas and style of the old populist Right and corporatist capitalism.

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