

Italian Politics at the Crossroads: Nationalism, Separatism or Federalism ?

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the politics of Italian regionalism. Today it is unfortunately still a topical subject and leads to a related simple question: "what is separatism ?".

It is possible to give different answers depending where the question is set. In accordance with one of the more common definitions, separatism means: "the character or act of a separatist".

In Italy, thanks in part to the declarations of Northern League leader Umberto Bossi, there is much confusion between separatism, federalism, fiscal federalism, or even nationalism. Indeed, there is not always a clear distinction between these terms. That is to say the politics of Italian regionalism that still exists even now and the politics of local government, working unofficially but in parallel with the national government, have set the pace and have helped define the shape of Italian change since the early 1990s, when the political structure was renewed under the constant pressure of the Magistracy¹. There is nothing to indicate the formation of a sub-national political class, except perhaps in the thoughts of some pro-localist political actors, but even here there is a wide variety of pro-localist voices ranging from Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna on the one side, to the Veneto on the other, which in the latter case has become the 'ideal type' of a regional economy. Frequently the social base that results, grows because of the opaque bureaucratic systems it puts into place. Fundamental to an understanding of any political system is a knowledge of its history and after that of its institutions and groups, the formal policy of the political game². In Italy today we need to ask who is playing the game?

We need to remember the whole history of Italy and not only that aspect of Italian political culture that relates to other Southern European political systems. This requires us to start "further back" to the period of Cavour (where I shall periodically return); when a few hundred thousand lira were enough to buy rum for all the admirals, generals, artillery officers and the naval cadets he needed³. In order to be objective we need to affirm with clarity and courage that what the Northern League calls the "padanian system" (padania refers to the plain of "Padania"⁴, the geographical area that Bossi and the activists of the Northern League define as North Italy, widening in effect the geography of its actual political constituency) operates in a similar way.

The Northern League was founded in March 1982, by Umberto Bossi as the Lombard League⁵ and the name was subsequently changed to Northern League. Bossi has been very triumphant in promoting an agenda which is pro-business, calls for an end to subsidies for Southern Italy, deregulation, a halt to illegal immigration, an end to corruption and most controversially dividing Italy into three federalist

¹ Italy lived through a dark period in its history: the bribes scandal known as "Tangentopoli" (Kickback City) that sadly involved a large number of senators and deputies of the Republic including the statesman Bettino Craxi, symbol of the new course of the left, as he continued the socialist politics of Pietro Nenni. This symbol of a bad political custom was founded on tangente (kickback). For Italy that time was a time of process and change at their most heightened pitch, and this attempt at analysing a radically shifting national landscape is something like trying to analyze the effects of a social and political alteration to normal life. "Tangentopoli" signed the practical passage from the "First" to the "Second Republic". This time started also with the League project, that exploited the judicial campaign to demoralise public life. The parabola of the Northern League was from federalism to separatism and back to a federalist project. See Figus, Alessandro, *Le "système Italie": transformations et interprétations*, Diffusion ANRT, Lille, 2001 and Cazzola, F. *L'Italia del pizzo. Fenomenologia della tangente quotidiana*, Torino, Einaudi, 1992 and Di Scala, Spencer. *Renewing Italian Socialism: Nenni to Craxi*. New York: Oxford University Press 1988.

² See Koff, Sondra Z., and Koff Stephen, *Italy. From the first to the second Republic*. Routledge, New York, 2000.

³ See Header, Harry. *Cavour*. London, Longman, 1985.

⁴ Padania is the macro-region in the North of Italy. The attempt to base the League movement on a linguistic form of ethno-nationalism was a dead end after the first phase of growth. Dialects are based on cities and their hinterlands, not on regions, and the "Padano" language or, better, dialect. only exist in regional dialects: Piedmontese, Lombard, Tuscan, etc. between Lombards and Venetians and Piedmontese.

⁵ See Mannheimer, Renato, (a cura di) *La lega Lombarda*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1991.

states, with Padania being the northern most state⁶. Today, given the atmosphere that reigns at the level of the political class, it is federalism that has risen to the top of the policy agenda. Bossi's version of federalism, which he describes as an effective federalisation or devolution of power, will only serve to differentiate more and more the North from the South. Since the time of the succession of the Piedmontese Sabaud monarchy to the throne of Italy, the north has enjoyed a tacit advantage when the national family budgets are allocated, a process that has always been accompanied by northern interests thrusting their hands into the cash drawer of the national treasury⁷. For more than a century the national state has turned a blind eye to this practice, but let me now attempt to bring the story up to date.

At present Italy is undergoing one of its periodic disavowals of nationalism - that is the recognition of a shared common language, culture, and history. In the mid-nineteenth century many of the component states opposed the unification of Italy because they did not want to give up their power to one central government. Despite the fact that the liberal revolution took place at the same time as the national revolution, it was the values of conservative nationalists rather than liberal federalists that became institutionally embedded by the late nineteenth century. Many of the debates surrounding the claims of nationalism, federalism and separatism were first formulated in the period of Italian history known as the "Risorgimento"⁸, a fundamental period for the construction of Italian national identity.

If we wanted to identify this period with a historical figure it would be that of Giuseppe Garibaldi. Even though Garibaldi's greatest contribution to unification may have been as that of a catalyst for more pragmatic state builders - most notably the Sicilian liberal nationalist Crispi. Although Crispi has not received the same attention as Garibaldi, Crispi's entire political life was dedicated to nation-making. Of course Crispi's nationalism was a product of his own political allegiances and the peculiar circumstances surrounding Italian unification. In his early career this was expressed above all in the primacy he gave to political unification, if necessary even under the crown of Savoy. But from the start this already expressed an innate and continuing pragmatism that went beyond calculation and seems at times almost instinctive, so deeply rooted in his character was it. After participation in the Sicilian revolt of 1848 against the repressive rule of Ferdinand II of Sicily, Crispi went into exile to Piedmont, then to Malta, and eventually to France, prior to which he spent some in England where he met Giuseppe Mazzini⁹. There are early examples in his cautious handling of Mazzini and his affectionate and handling and manipulation of the indispensable Garibaldi. Crispi returned to Italy and joined Garibaldi in his expedition to Sicily, which resulted in the proclamation of the kingdom of Italy

in 1861. Their idea was that it was essential to create a nation, but their nationalism had a popular content.

Today it is appropriate to revisit this episode in Italian history for without the popular consensus Crispi and Garibaldi engendered in the nation-building project, as well as aspects of Mazzini's republican ideology¹⁰, it would not have been possible to achieve the Italian nation since those who desired an Italian nation had little on which to build and many obstacles in their way¹¹.

Therefore in order to clearly understand the creation of this new country we need to study the careers of the three most important heroes of the Risorgimento: Giuseppe Mazzini, a political writer, militant and ardent nationalist, Giuseppe Garibaldi, an explorer and military leader, who remains perhaps the most popular of all Italian heroes of the Risorgimento, and a great revolutionary hero in the Western world, and Camillo Benso, Count of Cavour, one of the most important statesmen of Italian history and also a remarkable diplomat.

Mazzini wrote and worked for a united independent Italy, and his ideas, extraordinary for the epoch, inspired a new interest in politics especially among the young.¹² Mazzini also inspired the legendary Garibaldi who tried to turn his ideas into a practical reality. Every educated person knew that Italy existed before there was an Italian nation, but it was easier to build a united Italian state than to create nationhood. Much of the later story is about the antagonisms of state and society and the consequent

⁶ See Bull, Cento, Anna and Gilbert, Mark, *The Northern League and Northern Question in Italian Politics*; Palgrave, St. Martins Press, 2001.

⁷ See Mack Smith, Denis. *Italy and Its Monarchy*. Yale University Press, 1989.

⁸ The Italian national unification movement it is known as the Risorgimento, which means the recovery of the nation. Nationalism was the most successful political force of the 19th century.

⁹ See Hearder, Harry. *Italy in the Age of Risorgimento, 1790-1870*. Longman, 1983.

¹⁰ The ideology of Giuseppe Mazzini (mazziniana), start with the nationalism and against the monarchy. He was the father of the "Republicanesimo", an Italy united and republican.

¹¹ See Salvemini, Gaetano. *Mazzini*. Stanford U. Press, 1957.

¹² See Mack Smith, Denis. *Mazzini*. Yale University Press, 1994.

lack of political legitimacy of the tint of the "Risorgimento", or later the liberal or Fascist eras, as the historian Alberto Banti has recently suggested. The idea of "Italy" as it emerged after 1796, an idea with the power to drive young men to conspiracy, to the barricades, and to death was largely the work of writers, musicians and artists infusing Romantic nationalism with such traditional and largely autochthonous themes as honour, redemption, revenge and martyrdom. Between the 1820s and 1840s artists and writers such as Francesco Hayez, Alessandro Manzoni, Massimo d'Azeglio and Francesco Guerrazzi mined the Middle Ages and the Renaissance for "patriotic" topics and managed to give localized episodes such as the Sicilian Vespers of 1282 a national reading. The elevation of Dante into a political as well as a cultural national icon through the advocacy of patriots such as Alfieri, Foscolo, Mazzini and De Sanctis is considered by Andrea Ciccarelli, while Giuseppe Verdi has long been acknowledged as a vehicle and sounding-board for nationalist sentiment from the 1840s onwards.

These were not the only poets and writers that devoted themselves to the "nation Italy", many others sang the praises of it. Among these it is important to remember both Piero Gobetti and Antonio Gramsci¹³. In their critical analysis of the Risorgimento these authors wanted to unmask some forgeries of nationalism that were hidden behind false cultural idols. For this iconoclasm they fell victim to the fascist regime. Particularly Gobetti in the work "Risorgimento without heroes" wanted to explode a myth of patriotism and the distortions to which the Risorgimento had been subject. Gobetti wanted to bring back morality and political ethics into the concept of nationalism¹⁴. While Gramsci, especially in his essay on the historical materialism of Italy's 'passive revolution' sought to affirm the demand for a national-popular literature. He wanted contact to be re-established between the people and the intellectuals, and to ensure that the nation was not internally divided between a ruling elite and the popular classes. The problem, it was evident, was fascism, which hid behind a forged nationalism, an ideology that went against the moral principles of Catholics and Italians. Unfortunately around 1930, Fascism was beginning to look like "the hope of the world"¹⁵. Initially Italian fascism succeeded in deluding many people with its appeals, especially the young. But by the end of the regime the majority of Italians understood that the spirit that animated it was not shared by the nation, patriotism dressed up in a flag was not what Italians desired. Also the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, precursor¹⁶ of Mussolinian-style authoritarian populism, was chastened by the experience of fascism in practice, and became antipathetic towards the regime as did his fellow Italians¹⁷.

Having briefly considered how Italian nationalism was viewed in the literature, I want now to turn to music, because music has always had an important relationship with Italian nationalism. In particular we need to rediscover the hidden meaning that inspired Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901). Giuseppe Verdi wrote one of his most important operas, Nabucco, in 1842. In effect the "Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves", (*Va Pensiero*), from Nabucco attained great political significance. *Va Pensiero* became the Italians' song of liberation, for in the oppressed Hebrews, they found a symbol of their own longing for reunification with Lombardy, which was then occupied by Austria. The unison chorus (one of the few *da capo* choruses in all opera) became the underground "national hymn". And the composer's name became V.E.R.D.I., a slogan meaning Vittorio Emanuele Re d'Italia ("Victor Emmanuel, King of Italy") - a reference to the sole native dynasty in Italy and the focus of nationalist hopes for unity.

Verdi is used here to illustrate Italian "triumphalistic" nationalism. The opera *Aida* was written in 1871, exactly 30 years after *Nabucco*, and we can hear a change in nationalism. It was written to celebrate the opening, in Egypt, of the Suez canal, and became the model for later choral operas. It is a *work* in the luxurious style, a simply tragic love story set against a war between Ethiopia and Egypt. The "triumphal act" represents the victory of Egypt over Ethiopia. In *Nabucco* the trumpets are very long and specially designed for this opera. Verdi was a great composer, and at the same time a famous liberal. This is the reason why the triumphal element emphasises the underlying nationalism. In this opera, nationalism is no longer expressed as cultural freedom but as triumphalism, in the exaltation of one people's superiority over another.

¹³ Gobetti was liberal and Gramsci was communist, but here we don't want to make a political judgement but to match literary aspects to the love for the country and for the nation.

¹⁴ See Pazzaglia, Mauro, *Antologia della Letteratura Italiana*, Zanichelli, Bologna, 1984.

¹⁵ In Pavese, Cesare, *Ieri e oggi*, Einaudi, Torino, 1950.

¹⁶ Gabriele D'Annunzio brought forth the idea of a super Italian nation, an idea that goes over the nationalism and that it flows in the imperialism, comfortable alibi for the political managing class, that it hid the true problems of the new unitary State.

¹⁷ See Pazzaglia, Mauro, *Antologia della Letteratura Italiana*, Zanichelli, Bologna, 1984.

These references to literature and music might appear strange were it not for the fact that the same reference drew the leader of the League¹⁸ Umberto Bossi to the small town of Pontida¹⁹, where "Va pensiero", from Verdi's opera Nabucco, would blast out at the assemblies of the green and white uniformed 'padanian' nationalists. The "leaguers" sing the "images" of Giuseppe Verdi and not the "Song of Italians", which is the national hymn by Goffredo Mameli. In fact Mameli's hymn has been at the centre of a vigorous debate that has involved even the players of the national football team, who were accused of a lack of nationalism, because they did not sing the hymn during the ceremony that precedes the official meetings of the national squad team. At times, especially in Italy, football can become a very serious matter! This 'problem' was even addressed personally by the Italian President of the Republic, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi.

The 'national anthem' continues to be a live historical controversy. Mameli was born in Genoa in the autumn of 1847 in that climate of patriotic fervour that stimulated the war against Austria. The immediateness of the verses and the impetus of the melody not only became the most beloved song of the unification during the season of the "Risorgimento", but also in the following decades. In 1862 Giuseppe Verdi wrote his hymn to the nations, having been asked to create a song that would symbolize Italy. The quality of the hymn equalled the other European national hymns among which we include the more famous "God save the Queen". In effect The 'Song of Italians' was adopted on October 12th 1946²⁰, as the national hymn of the Italian Republic. At Pontida, by contrast the "people of the League" sing Giuseppe Verdi's verses and not the hymn of Mameli, provoking the spontaneous is this folklore or politics? Joke or reality?

Pontida is transformed into a big theatre where the Italian nationalists play and where Bossi plays hide-and-peek in a dance to a Verdi rhythm. The League people yell "Padania Libera" (Free Padania) and clap one's hands²¹.

Traditionally in Verdi we see Liberal nationalism, such as that associated with the Italian leader Giuseppe Mazzini, who sought to establish liberal states based on a "nation". Italian nationalists assumed that the "nation Italy" existed in some different way. In practice the leaders had to work hard to create a national logic with a common culture. But is Bossi imagining some oppressive external force when in Pontida they sing "Va pensiero" ? or is it simply an attachment to folklore? The "Va pensiero" we have seen when speaking of Mazzini, is an expression of liberal nationalism, but then Bossi is also a nationalistic liberal, and being also an admirer of Mazzini, also a republican. We seem to be playing with contradictions, unless 'the Bossi project' is not a problem of racism so much as an opposition between North and South.

Now, we still face two problems which have a possible relationship with Bossi and with his separatist idea: the southern question and the religious question. Are these two issues not perhaps tied to the politics of Bossi and his League ? On 13 May 2001, Umberto Bossi and the Northern League set out once again to become a full governing partner in a new Centre Right coalition led by the media entrepreneur and serial defendant Silvio Berlusconi. In fact, the first time around, in 1994, Bossi, for little more than seven months, was a partner in Berlusconi's government. The League expected to be given the presidency of the lower house of parliament (Irene Pivetti, today is a TV host, and is not a joke) and an important ministry, while Bossi himself could have been named deputy prime minister. But instead Bossi became the architect of his own demise by pulling his party out of the government and leaving the way clear for the appointment of yet another technical government²². Returning to power in 2001 as minister in charge of devolution, Bossi submitted a constitutional law that would allow regions to legislate for exclusive control of health, education, law and several other subjects²³. On the face of it, the Centre

¹⁸ The League was born in 1989 on the basis of the Lombardy League, the analogous present movements in Venetia (Liga Veneta), Piedmont, Liguria, Emilia and Tuscany. In the beginning the Northern League proposes a federalist revolution from the indefinite characters that however, in the following year introduces a project of constitution of three Republics of the North, of the Centre and of the South. See Vandelli, Luciano, *Devolution e altre storie. Paradossi, ambiguità e rischi di un progetto politico*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2002, p.21.

¹⁹ Pontida is a village in the North of Italy, exactly in the Lombardy Region, where the "League people" gather annually

²⁰ For coincidence it was also the day of the anniversary of the discovery of America by Cristoforo Colombo, Genoese as Goffredo Mameli.

²¹ See Poletti, Filippo, *La carica dei 40mila: «Padania libera subito, in La Padania*, 4 June 2007

²² See Figus, Alessandro, *Le "système Italie": transformations et interprétations*, Diffusion ANRT, Lille, 2001 and Lazar Marc and Diamanti, Ivo, *L'Italie une nation en suspens*, Complexe, Bruxelles, 1995.

²³ Biorcio R, *La Padania promessa. La storia, le idee e la logica d'azione della Lega Nord*, Il Saggiatore, Milano, 1997.

Right's proposals could, in themselves, have fuelled a slide toward separatism. It was said that the real test would come early, when the left-leaning Government of Giuliano Amato, the Prime Minister, tabled its own "limited" version of devolution in the Senate. The League opposed this 'false' devolution preferring instead to procure a 'real' devolution on its return to power²⁴. Ever the party of contradictions, its differences with Berlusconi and Fini now forgotten, the League turned out to be a typical 'veto party', using its king making powers to force policy concessions and ministries from Bossi's senior coalition partners.

Today the League continues to be a member of the national government - a government that it claims always helps the South to the detriment of the North. According to the League, the South should become more independent and self-sufficient. It believes the northern region is the only area that contributes significantly to the national economy. When not calling for a separate "Republic of Padania" the League has put heavy emphasis on the creation of the federal system, in which the regions are semi-autonomous or independent²⁵. There is also a problem of tax control and that Bossi would like to call the "deregulation", and sometimes the "devolution"²⁶.

Italy may really one day become a "true nation" through a representation of popular nationalism. Today Italy is still a young nation; the 1950s, when the mass emigration from the "Mezzogiorno", the Southern part of Italy, to the industrial centres of the northern cities is not distant²⁷. It was the most important emigration inside Italy after the Second World War. Today Italy lives with the fear of immigration from the southern Mediterranean littoral and South-eastern Europe. Connected to the North-South divide is the League's attention to the so-called 'religious question'. This issue has been given fresh impetus with the phenomenon of immigration from other countries (especially from outside the EU), an issue that obviously does not affect Italy alone. In general the League is anti-immigration, and anti-Islamic. League supporters intensely deny they are racists, but if you put the question to Bossi, the answer will be simply that the League are only against *illegal* immigration and the crimes that these *illegal* aliens commit. Caution is especially required when interpreting flows and stocks of immigrants across countries. Furthermore, the analysis presented here deals primarily with legal immigration, although illegal migration is thought to account for a significant proportion of migration flows. There is another incongruity - the fact that Bossi is calling for a peaceful division of Italy on the Czechoslovakian model, a division that the Pope has condemned. It is important not to forget the power of the Pope in Italy, still a strongly Catholic country, who has rushed to defend the unity of the Italian nation²⁸. Thus the fiery Umberto Bossi is an even more uncomfortable ally for moderate Catholics. He has renounced his former commitment to separatism for the north but he remains an aggressive opponent of European integration and of uncontrolled immigration²⁹.

This brief, but intense, trip inside Italy, attempts to understand what lies behind the League phenomenon, and what lies at the heart of Italian nationalism and secessionism. I hope to have succeeded in making you understand that nationalism in Italy, as a nation and as a unitary country, exists. The Italian nation is young (if we use the Risorgimento as our starting point in 1861), in comparison with other European countries, such as England for example, but it exists and it has been consolidated. 'Separatism' is now regarded as a joke that the party of Umberto Bossi repeated only in its protest phase. There is sometimes a consensus behind some of Bossi's stock phrases, but they are only stock phrases. Italy does not resemble the picture drawn by Bossi.

The Northern League's strategy is simply aimed at preserving power by the mobilisation of protest, and by exploiting the malcontent of certain economic classes in northern Italy. Bossi intends bringing the tragedies of Eastern Europe to a founding member of the European Union³⁰. No one in Italy is thinking seriously about separatism, even in the valleys of the North of Italy, where support for the League has always been high. Italians regard Bossi's calls for secession as a joke, but they should not assume that this joke will be understood or appreciated by those outside Italy. Clearly without the necessary cultural

²⁴ See Owen, Richard, *Berlusconi ally raises spectre of separatism*, in The Times, 30 October 2000.

²⁵ See Koff, Sondra Z., and Koff Stephen, *Italy. From the first to the second Republic*. Routledge, New York, 2000, p.49.

²⁶ See Vandelli, Luciano, *Devolution e altre storie. Paradossi, ambiguità e rischi di un progetto politico*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2002.

²⁷ The typical movement was the peoples moved to Turin specially to work in the car factory FIAT.

²⁸ It was not always this way. In the 1860 Pope Pius IX used French troops and Swiss Guards to fight the troops command by Garibaldi. During the Risorgimento the Pope was the most formidable obstacle to Italian unity.

²⁹ See *Berlusconi near to power*, in FT.com, Financial Times, 17 November 2000.

³⁰ It is possible a comparison with the Czechoslovakian way (where separatism is often a source of violence). The tragedy of ex-Yugoslavia started with the secession (separatism) of Slovenia.

or historical basis, a separatist movement will have no possibility of realization and secession remains a joke of the rebellious, as Bocca declares "In this game contortionist Bossi has reached the height of the rebellious... the League doesn't have believable projects, it is out of the great games of politics, from those European as well as from those Atlantic, from the technological revolution, as well as from the struggle of terrorism, from the raising of the economy as well as from the crisis of the social State"³¹. Now everybody understands why I spoke about a joke, for Bossi everything is a joke. Bossi is a "tragic joke". Peter Popham, a correspondent in Italy of The Independent, related some words made by this tragic joke Bossi in Pontida, at the annual League festival: "I'm fairly well," Mr Bossi said, "in the sense that I'm not dead." He went on: "It would be better if I didn't have all this stuff [his illness] and the pain that goes with it." Then straight down to business: "For me, it would be better to postpone Pontida. I would like to be there; it's my festival." In Pontida at its annual meeting in June 1996, Italy's Northern League theatrically declared the northern half of Italy "independent", in suspended animation for the annual congress, or better a festival³². Only those participating understand well the joke.

However, this is not to say that discontent with an over centralist state cannot have a positive impulse, and there are several aspects of the federalist project that still have a serious motivation. At present though the government appears to be behaving in an increasingly irrational manner while the rest of the country is becoming gloomier at the prospects of Italy's long-term future. The only crumb of comfort is that the League focuses exclusively on rightwing populist groups and not on small groups involved in racist and xenophobic violence or terrorism. Today the League remains one of Europe's oddest political contradictions. In a world of global interdependence the only chance of guaranteeing democracy is to found relationships among states on right rather than might, through a federation of the peoples. At least it is possible to say that the Northern League continues to send its representatives to the regional legislatures, it has six cabinet ministers in the national government and has two representatives in the European parliament³³. For the League, federalism guarantees "unity within difference", but its leader continues to flirt irresponsibly with a hypothesis of secession that is entirely opposed to the spirit of a common Italian federalism, without distinction between North and South. How can the League support the idea of a common European citizenship when it does not even believe that the citizens of Italy should have the same rights and entitlements?

Finally, we have come to the end of the debate. The question is not whether Italy will have secessionism, but whether Italy has ever been truly united.³⁴ The history of Italy is also full of contradictions, or better still, of oppositions, especially between North and South. The dominant social classes of the north, who a century ago reaped fortunes from southern Italy, today in the same way that the British regard Northern Ireland - as a poor and increasingly distant cousin. Many northern Italians believe those who 'stole from them' should be excluded from the polity, but as in Northern Ireland, a large part of the population does not want the British to leave. Within the ethno-national traditions of Northern Ireland, disagreement and conflict about fundamental issues is commonplace³⁵. It is an uncomfortable comparison, and most Italians hope to resolve their differences through negotiations towards a federal system. In fact even in Northern Ireland it is possible to speak about common traditions, but in Italy this is simply not practicable. The reality is that the notions of independence for a non-existent historical entity called Padania, replete with worship of the river Po, halved his support, so Bossi reinvented the League by settling for Scotland-style devolution and tacking hard to the right³⁶. The only Italian area where the people really lived the phenomenon of separatism was the Alto Adige or Sud Tirolo (South Tyrol), an area in the far Northeast of Italy that is linked historically, linguistically, and culturally with Austria, and which already enjoys special autonomous rights. Italy successfully dealt with this minor secessionist threat by conceding regional autonomy.

Such a solution could work again in the case of the 'ordinary' regions, but the politics of the League of Umberto Bossi in Italy can be compared only with other European separatist movements if we get to the root of its economic aspects, and not only its political (and cultural) nature. The basis of political

³¹ See *Il commento* by Giorgio Bocca, in Repubblica, 1st April 2004.

³² See *Bossi's dream of independent Padania* by Peter Popham correspondent in Milan on The Independent, 5 June 2004

³³ See Diamanti Ivo, *La Lega, Imprenditore politico della crisi. Origini, crescita e successo delle leghe autonomiste in Italia*, Meridiana, 1993, n.16 and Diamanti Ivo and Mannheimer Renato, *Milano e Roma: guida all'Italia elettorale del 1994*, Donzelli, Roma, 1994 and for a further investigation see also the book of Mannheimer, Renato, (a cura di) *La Lega Lombarda*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1991.

³⁴ We intend the economical point of view.

³⁵ See Little, Adrian, *Multiculturalism, Diversity and Liberal Egalitarianism in Northern Ireland*, London, University Press, 2003.

³⁶ See Carroll, Rory, *Comeback Bossi minds his invective*, in The Guardian International, 11 May 2001.

discontent will always be an economic crisis from which political actors will try to reap some popular support. We need refer not only to extreme movements such as the fascist Vlaams Blok in Belgium, but, for example, the regionalist and separatist parties in the United Kingdom that advocate social democratic policies in order to try and win elections, or movements based on national or ethnic identity with a programme focused on separatism and regionalist ideology. In effect separatism represents the effort to divide the working class in the face of the common class break-up³⁷. What should be a struggle between classes has become a struggle over taxes.

The main conclusion of this paper is that sometimes separatist movements are superficially based upon nationalism or religious fervour. This is not the case in Italy. The northern Italian separatist movement is an example of an almost purely economically based separatist group, but with a special variation, a 'demented' Italian form, and to quell any doubts it is sufficient to listen to Bossi during his meeting at Pontida, or at his rallies in any other part of Northern Italy. When for example he speaks of the Lega as "virile" he metaphorically speaks about the sexual potency of his party. Bossi is notorious for having invented one of the most willfully crude slogans of recent memory. This should not be a surprise, because faced with an increasingly flacid support base, Bossi has to reach again and again for the Viagra of xenophobia and crude racist stereotyping. Bossi's "federalism" is as far from the tolerant vision of liberal federalism intended by the likes of Cattaneo and Mazzini and stands at an equal distance from the Scottish model of devolution to which Bossi claims to aspire. Italy has come to a fork in the road, but will it take the less travelled road to a more open and democratic society?

At the moment the compass would certainly appear to be pointing in the wrong direction, with Berlusconi or without Berlusconi, if the Italian Government is to the Left or to the Right, if Prodi is Premier or not, and despite the illness, the main point is to make a show, to be in the footlights. Sometimes a legal action³⁸ is worth its weight in gold (rather than a principle).

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³⁸ See Bianchi, Sara, *70 miliardi da Berlusconi alla Lega? Bossi querela Sasinini*, in Sole 24 ore.com, 23 march 2007.

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