Ethnicity, Territorial Identities, and Right-Wing Parties in Italy

Carlo Ruzza
Sociologia delle Relazioni Etniche
The Three Political Cultures of the Italian Right and their explanations

- The social right of the MSI-AN party -- Advocates a redistributive state in a strong law and order context, policies for the underclass and the Southern petit bourgeoisie

- The ethno-nationalist right of the Northern League -- Welfare chauvinism, localism, populism, xenophobia, protectionism, Anti-Europeanism

- The neo-liberal right of Forza Italia -- Thatcherite policies the Italian way, consumerism, anti-communism,

Perspectives:

- Sociological perspectives – the impact of the media and globalization
- Social movement perspectives – the political opportunities of inventing ethno-nationalism
- Electoral perspectives – the rapprochement between moderate and extreme right as a European phenomenon rooted in bipolar tendencies
(I) Tangentopoli

- The Italian party system came crashing down in the period 1992 to 1994
- The new electoral law and the second Italian republic.
- Key factors in this included the end of the cold war and the collapse of the communism, and the European decision to adopt a single currency, requiring the Italian state to adopt greater fiscal discipline in order to meet the necessary convergence conditions.
- This made the Italian clientelistic system increasingly unaffordable and spurred rebellion in business and professional elites which the magistrates interpreted.
The electoral context: the Legacy of ‘Tangentopoli’

- The break up of the Catholic electoral and social bloc
- The collapse of the Communist bloc had undermined the necessity of a Catholic party and the events of 1992-1993 had removed the Christian Democratic party (DC)
- The large DC electorate in search of new identities
  - The Northern League attempting to gain national appeal – 1993 and a shift away from localism
  - The MSI between the radicalism of Rauti and the moderation of Fini
  - 1994 - Berlusconi and the formation of the northern Polo delle Libertà and southern Polo del Buon Governo
The 1994 and 1996 elections – the outcomes

- The quick formation of ‘Forza Italia’ and its success: low taxes, liberty, efficiency, family, Anti-Communism, 1 million jobs
- The Progressive and their failed ‘joyous war machine’- factionalism, small parties (Greens, Rete)
- Outcomes: The two poles combined got 42.9% and 58% of seats in the Chamber of Deputies. The Progressive: 34.4% and 33.8% of seats. The Catholic formations: 15.7 and 7.3
- The Northern League: 8.3% of the vote, 118 seats. The ‘thankful’ re-deemed ‘post-fascists’
- Quick victory, quick collapse – November ’94: the defection of a worried ‘League’ after poor European elections and defecting MPs.
- ‘Technical Governments’ – Dini 95 - April 96 and the narrow victory of the Olive Tree coalition of Prodi and D’Alema
The centre-left years (1996-2001) and the 2001 election

- Shaky cultural hegemony of the left. The race for Europe – re-entering the EMS at the end of ’96, acceptance in Euroland in ’98. The invisible reforms of the left (bureaucracy, education, de-centralisation, direct regional elections, late federalism) - The ‘bicamerale’ and the absence of a ‘conflict of interest’ law

- The Northern Question and the re-radicalization of the League after success at the 1996 election

- Communist Re-Foundation brings down the Prodi government – Short D’Alema government. The left is divided. Fall of the Prodi government in 1998 (withdrawal of support from the communists), and its replacement by a centre-left government led by D’Alema, which lasted until 2000 when it was replaced by the centre-left Giuliano Amato.

- Berlusconi’s victory in May 2001. In the Lower House the ‘House of Liberties’ gains 367 seats against the ‘Olive Tree’ 248. Berlusconi’s overwhelming resources and control of the media
By the 2001 general election, Silvio Berlusconi had managed to reconstitute his centre-right coalition (including both the Lega and the AN again), capitalising on popular disillusionment with the unfulfilled expectations and the old style political instability and horse-trading presided over by the centre-left government, to lead the centre-right to a resounding electoral victory.

Italian political culture is strongly polarised

Berlusconi has rehabilitated the political class against the tangentopoli investigations, denouncing the ‘politically motivated’ magistrates and seeking to curb judicial powers.

Parliament in 2003 adopted a law exempting the holders of the five highest political offices in Italy from judicial prosecution, thereby halting the ongoing corruption proceedings against Berlusconi.
(II) The MSI in transition – from Fascism to Post-Fascism

- **Phase I:** In a climate of anti-communism, the MSI gained some credibility through assisting the DC. It collaborated with DC at the municipal level, and also indirectly supported the DC in the national arena. Supporters were mainly southern fascist nostalgics. Socially, *Lumpenproletariat* and high bourgeoisie. The former voted for the neo-fascists to express disenchantment with the political system. The latter desired to reinstate a hierarchical vision of society.

- **Phase II:** *Radicalization and Marginalization* (late 1960s and 1970s). In the early 1960s, the DC severed its connections with the right. The resulting isolation of the MSI was characterized by a growing support for clandestine and terrorist acts. The terrorist right thus discredited the extreme right in Parliament and undermined any prospect for the MSI to play a relevant role.

- **Phase III:** *De-radicalization and the Search for Respectability* (late 1970s through 1993).

- At the 1994 general election the MSI-AN obtained 13.4% of the vote. Predictably the MSI fared best in the areas of the south which had weak leftist traditions, deep-rooted clientistic systems threatened by the centre and left, and economically underdeveloped areas suffering high unemployment. However the MSI had equally strong results in the Catholic areas of the south which had traditionally supported the DC. Young people voted for the MSI marking a transition in Italian culture. In 1995 dissolution of the MSI into the new AN party.

- Growing concern with immigration, taxes, drugs, crime.

- The New Right indirectly influenced the struggle for transformation in the MSI. The MSI concerns now included environmental questions, civil rights, a critique of consumerist mass society, and other cultural matters with its more traditional ideological concerns with social order, discipline, and hierarchy.

- The Fini leadership – the trip to Israel – Mussolini’s ‘Liberty and Action’
The Northern League: winning arguments, losing influence

- The emergence of the Italian Northern League was accompanied by a profound renewal in Italian politics.
- Five phases: the ethnic period 1981-89; The Italian revolution 1990-93; Governing Italy in 1994; Radicalisation and compromise 95-99 and 2000-2001; back in government 2001
- Over time, the League’s message could be incorporated by most other parties. Despite the success of its focus – first on political corruption and then on federalism – the League’s movement was marginalised and its themes co-opted and re-interpreted.
- This resulted from the League’s political isolation from ruling elites, the deficit of intellectual and policy skills, and political competition on essentially similar political ground with national formations.
- As a result the League increasingly focussed on an anti-immigrant politics which however failed to rescue it from a substantial decline at the last Italian national election of 2001
Forza Italia

- A new party for the housewives, the youth, the unemployed, shopkeepers, entrepreneurs hoping for a less regulated state and society and afraid of radicalism.
- A new political class coming from business and the service industry (50% MP from Publitalia). Criteria for selecting candidates.
- A new language – simple, like the language of the League, but also moderate.
- A new media-based strategy – the face and speeches of the main leader is emphasised in the electoral contest.
- New keywords: infrastructures, Italian pride, efficiency.
The Right in coalition and their internal tensions

- The ruling coalition continues to be beset by internal divisions over issues such as immigration, constitutional reform, pension reform and economic management.

- Continuing tensions between AN and the League. The Lega and AN disagree on constitutional reform, with the Lega insisting on a more decentralised federalism while the AN insist any interests include a national interest clause.

- The Lega indicates that it would leave government unless stronger measures against clandestine immigrants were enforced, while the AN has sought greater involvement in the direction of economic policy and a diminution of the influence of the Lega within the government (given the relatively level of electoral support of the latter). Tensions with the Catholics and their influence on policies.

- Tension with other institutions – the Judiciary (Jan 2004 - the constitutional court ruled the Lodo Schifani unconstitutional), the Presidency (Ciampi’s refusal to sign the Gasparri law).
The Italian right in the European context

- Europe has witnessed the emergence of a new family of political parties during the last decade and a half: the extreme Right-wing populism of the Front National and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), among many others.

- In 1999, the extreme Right-wing populist (ERP) parties were represented in the Austrian, Belgian, Danish, Italian, Norwegian, and Swiss parliaments, and were also substantially represented at the regional and local levels in France and Germany.

- Since then, Austria and Italy have formed governments involving the Freedom Party and the Northern League (Lega Nord), respectively.

- Thus, for the first time since the World War II the extreme Right constitutes a significant force in Western European democracies.
(III) Sociological Explanations to the rise of the extreme right: relationships between politics and territorial belonging

- The tensions between left and right and within the right can be interpreted as different types of relations between individuals and their territorial identities.
- The left (but in part also the right) have advocated a stronger civil society. The spread of associationism even in the south has been notable, with anti-mafia groups springing up as well as single-issue movements and community-based associations.
- The development of an autonomous civil society not connected to the old sub cultures also found a reflection in the development of new political movements that were involved in bringing down the old party system, such as the greens, La Rete (the anti-mafia network in Sicily) and the Lega. The strong local roots of the League and its attempt at creating a network of civil society associations.
- The strong southern roots of AN.
- The non-territorial diffusion of Forza Italia as a contrasting model – a new kind of right.
Sociological Explanations to the rise of the extreme right: Homelessness, Secularization, Migrations, Fear

- Cultural homelessness which European populations experienced as a reaction of the collapse of communities of co-workers, co-villagers, communities of church goers and of locally-based friends. New communities are invented or re-invented on the basis of cultural similarities (languages, etc.)

- In Europe as a whole, a system of spread-out workplaces emerged as changes in previously dominant industrial work patterns and successful economic innovation undermined the existence and identity of the industrial working class. Perceptions of rivalry in the labour market, competition for resources of the welfare state.

- The process of secularization reduced the socializing role played by religious associations.

- The substantial migration flows of the early and mid nineties have had a particularly relevant spatial and cultural impact in many European capitals and large cities – ethnic separation –
Electoral explanations to the rise of the extreme right

- The moderate and extreme right have recently formed coalitions in Italy, Austria, the Netherlands, and formed parliamentary majorities in Denmark and Norway.

- Everywhere in Europe the political discourse has moved on themes familiar to the right – the extreme views gradually become more acceptable.

- In this context, centre-right parties come to find extreme-right parties acceptable allies.

- The emergence and institutionalization of Green parties has spurred a bipolarization of European politics which has legitimised and facilitated the inclusion of right-wing parties.

- Mainstream responses ‘ignore, isolate, co-opt, collaborate, impose restrictions’ – depend on perceptions of democratic legitimacy.
Social movements explanations

- There is in the social movements literature a consensus on some dimensions of political opportunities that have been used to explain the emergence and institutionalisation of the extreme right in Europe. They are:
  - The relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system (The Italian system opened in ’92-93)
  - The stability of that broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity (lack of stability in crises)
  - The presence of elite allies (Berlusconi)
  - The state’s capacity and propensity for repression (limited)
Sources