

PREFACE

The transformation of collective identities appears to be one of the most portentous changes resulting from the construction of the European Union. The EU has called the hegemony of established national identities into question, creating a European awareness and reinforcing the affirmation of sub-national identities. However, while the construction of the EU presupposed the formation of post-national and non-antagonistic identities, this ideal model has been only partly followed in the transformation of collective identities at the national and sub-national levels. The presence – and even revival – of secessionist movements within the core countries of the EU during the 1990s testifies to the problematic content of collective identities in Europe.

The presence of nationalist and secessionist movements at the sub-national level is undoubtedly conditioned by contingencies related to the particular history and present political constellation of specific nation-states. Nation-building efforts and secessionist claims are nevertheless generally directed at a wider audience than their own particular community. Both result from a conscious and systematic process of intellectual elaboration, and therefore tend to develop a discourse phrased in the universal language of the intellectual community. The perspective of such movements has been broadened by the construction of the EU, which gives them both an international audience and an international context for their claims. Secessionist claims may for example refer to the enhanced role the EU attributes to sub-national entities (e.g., the frequently deployed image of a Europe of the Regions), but they are at the same time obliged to justify why, in this context, separate statehood is needed. An analysis of such discourses thus foregrounds the shifting meanings of statehood, nationhood and collective identities in the context of European unification, especially as regards the ideologies they incorporate and the ideal models of society to which they aspire.

This book studies the relation between the social sciences and the political discourse of secessionist movements in the context of the EU, as a specific example of nation-building discourses.¹ It focuses on a particular case of identity-building in Europe: Italy. It highlights how the *Lega Nord* (Northern League) secessionist movement (commonly referred to as the *Lega*), which emerged as a major political force in Italy in the early 1990s in the context of a crisis of the Italian political system, has constructed a northern Italian, Padanian identity. On the one hand, this book investigates how the Lega's secessionist discourse on behalf of

northern Italy, or Padania – both in its narratives constructing a national identity and in its arguments justifying secession – relies on scholarship from the social sciences. On the other, it analyses the characteristics of this scholarship that make such political instrumentalisation possible. Because the Lega's claim – unlike those of other secessionist movements in Europe – is not based on previously existing ethnic or national identities, this case is particularly appropriate for studying the new meanings being acquired by collective identities.

The Lega Nord originated in 1991 as a merger between northern Italian regionalist groups that had been formed in the late 1970s.² With the crisis of Italy's political system in the early 1990s, the newly founded party almost immediately became a central political player. This so-called 'crisis of the First Republic' culminated when, beginning in 1992, the *Mani Pulite* (clean hands) operation revealed the widespread and deeply entrenched corrupt practices that pervaded the Italian political system.³ The *tangentopoli* ('bribesville', or 'kickbacktown') scandal led to the dissolution of the two main government parties, the DC, *Democrazia cristiana* (Christian Democracy) and the PSI, *Partito socialista italiano* (Italian Socialist Party). The crisis partly sprang from concern about Italy's international political and economic position and anxiety about its joining the European Monetary Union. Although during those years Italy's economic performance remained satisfactory overall, membership of the EMU seemed doubtful for a long time because of her high public debt, itself a consequence of the overspending by the Italian government during the 1980s. The early 1990s were therefore marked by a strong desire to make Italy more European, more modern and more competitive in the global economy. This desire was related to the ideological hegemony of liberalism (in both its political and economic senses). The worldwide hegemony of liberalism in the 1990s was reinforced in Italy by the aforementioned sense of crisis, and additionally by the ideological transformation of the former Italian Communist Party (*Partito comunista italiano*, PCI). The changes of its name, first to PDS, *Partito democratico della sinistra* (Democratic Left Party) and later DS, *Democratici di sinistra* (Left Democrats), symbolise the conversion of this party – once the expression of an oppositional ideology – to the values of liberal democracy.

This sense of crisis of the early 1990s has undoubtedly diminished since. The Italian political system underwent a relative stabilisation after 1994, and the country was finally accepted into the European Monetary Union in 1998. However, especially at the height of the crisis, the Lega appeared as a plausible alternative for the discredited political

parties, especially those of the centre-right. It made impressive electoral gains in the national elections of 1992 (8.6 percent nationwide and 17.3 percent in the North) and in local elections in 1993.⁴ After the elections of 1994, where it polled 8.4 percent nationwide and 17.0 percent in the North, it took part in the first Berlusconi government as a partner in a centre-right electoral alliance. Competition between the Lega and Berlusconi's party, *Forza Italia* (from the football cry meaning 'Come on, Italy!') – which, because of its nation-wide appeal to a centre-right electorate, appeared a more credible political alternative than the Lega – led to the downfall of the first Berlusconi government in 1994. The Lega was also successful in the 1996 elections, polling 10.1 percent nation-wide (and 20.5 percent in the North). However, because the centre-left *Ulivo* (Olive-Tree) coalition obtained a majority in parliament, it lost its strategic importance. Although the overtly secessionist stance it adopted after these elections (for example in the elaborate ceremonies surrounding the 'Declaration of Independence of Padania' on 15 September 1996) still attracted widespread public attention, the Lega gradually declined during the following years. Confronted with electoral setbacks, the party allied itself again with Berlusconi in the centre-right *Casa delle libertà* (House of Liberties) coalition. After the elections of 2001, although much weakened (polling only 3.9 percent nationwide and 8.2 percent in the North), it became a partner in the second Berlusconi government.

The elections of 2001 mark the final date of this study. Admittedly, it may be too early to declare the final demise of the secessionist claim of the Lega Nord. Both its weakened electoral position and its integration into national politics may be temporary. As far as the terms of the intellectual debate are concerned, however, a revival of northern secessionism would occur in a changed situation, because of the emergence of a broad and militant opposition to the Berlusconi government, the crisis of the Italian economy and the (international) challenges to the predominance of neo-liberal ideologies.

The Lega's 'northern' nation-building claim relies in the first place on a long-standing generic understanding of the internal differentiation within Italy between a more modern and economically developed North (which generally also includes a large part of central Italy) and a less developed South.⁵ The Lega's discourse is thus based on a widely shared reading of Italy's internal divide, a reading in which the concept of modernity plays a central role. The centrality of this concept in Italy derives from the country's location within what may be defined as the imaginary geography of modernity. In a long-standing interpretative

tradition Italy has been seen as un-modern in contrast to the modernity of other Western societies. At the same time, however, its internal North-South divide is interpreted as representing the opposition of modernity and backwardness.

The Lega's political discourse is based on the translation of critiques of the Italian political system into a nation-building claim on behalf of the north of Italy. The normative value attributed to modernity facilitated the association of binary oppositions – North vs. South, modernity vs. backwardness, healthy society vs. corrupted state – and the identification of the dysfunctional features of the Italian political system with the South. Although the Lega's nation-building discourse is almost unanimously rejected by scholars (both in Italy and abroad) and by the Italian political community, there are therefore important convergences between the Lega's nation-building discourse and mainstream anti-secessionist interpretations of Italian society. The particular context of the 1990s, characterised by a crisis of the Italian political system and the reinforcement of the institutions of the EU, undoubtedly reinforced these convergences. The Lega's renewed use of an ancient rhetorical tradition that juxtaposes a 'modern' and 'European' North with a 'backward' and 'African' South linked anxieties over Italy's position within Europe with its internal differentiation. The Lega's political discourse also links the generally acknowledged dysfunctional features of the Italian state (inefficiency, corruption) with its centralised structure. These critiques are related to its demand for northern independence but have a broader appeal, since the present process of constructing the EU is also based on a questioning of the institutional centralism of nation-states. At the same time, the discourse also incorporates a broadly shared awareness of the limits of the regionalisation process Italy has undergone in the post-war period with the establishment of five special-statute regions shortly after the war, and of fifteen ordinary-statute regions in 1970.⁶ Although regional governments in Italy have undoubtedly acquired legitimacy, their possibilities for policy-making have been seriously hampered by financial problems and by the intervention of the central government on which they are also financially dependent, and they have moreover frequently displayed the same weaknesses of inefficiency and corruption as the central state.

The Lega's nation-building discourse is thus based on a widely shared reading of Italy's institutional problems and of its internal divide, a reading in which the concept of modernity plays a central role. Because of this contested modernity and of its internal division, Italy has a rich and long-standing intellectual and scholarly tradition of discussing

national and regional specificity in relation to ‘modernity’, a tradition continued by the present debates. This well-rooted tradition facilitates an evaluation of the framework that analyses Italy as an imperfectly modernised country. An examination of this tradition and its contemporary continuation reveals at the same time the meaning attributed to ‘modernity’ as a prescriptive model of an ideal society.

In my analysis of political and intellectual debates in Italy, I focus upon the relation between the Lega’s construction of a Padanian identity and scholarly interpretations of Italian society and its North-South divide, and on the conceptual importance and normative meaning attached to the concept of modernity in these interpretations. This volume reviews recent international and Italian scholarship in history, political science and sociology that is concerned with the Italian *Sonderweg*. The study centres upon the 1990s, the period when Italian unity was effectively challenged by the Lega Nord, but it also analyses earlier scholarship of particular relevance for contemporary debates. It focuses in particular on theoretical explanations and discussions of the Italian *Sonderweg* that relate the Italian case to international debates on modernisation. While the volume privileges studies with widespread public impact, it also draws attention to lesser-known scholarship offering alternative interpretative frameworks, and includes an extensive exploration of the most relevant disciplinary reviews.⁷

This book has three parts. In the first (Chapter 1), I outline a theoretical framework that relates discourses on modernisation and development to scholarly interpretations of national particularities. At the same time, such interpretations themselves reflect modernisation ideologies and present Utopian visions of an ideal modernity. In the present context, interpretations of national specificity should be understood in light of reflections on the process of globalisation and the post-modern critique of the nation-state.

The second part (Chapters 2, 3 and 4) analyses and evaluates the prevailing Italian and international scholarly interpretations of Italy as a society characterised by its ‘incomplete modernity’, that is, descriptions of Italy with a highly critical discussion of its institutions, its political parties, its society, its history, and its culture. This interpretative framework is strongly related to its internal North-South divide, whereby – through the imaginary geography of modernity – the South is perceived as the locus of Italy’s un-modernity.

The third part of the book (Chapters 5 and 6) examines how interpretations of Italy’s supposedly incomplete modernity are translated into political discourses. I focus on how the political discourses of both the

Lega Nord and its adversaries are related to the social science debates on the Italian Sonderweg discussed in the previous chapters.

The conclusion relates the results of the Italian case-study to the broader theoretical debate on the connections between discourses in the social sciences and nation-building discourses, outlined in the first chapter. It highlights the necessity for – and formulates – a critique of contemporary hegemonic notions of modernity.

Notes

1. Throughout this book, I focus on the discursive nature of the social science disciplines. I therefore do not draw a distinction between the human and the social sciences. The research in the social sciences studied in this volume is moreover frequently carried out close to the boundaries between disciplines, as it combines the study of contemporary society with historical approaches.
2. For an overview of the history of the Lega Nord, see Mannheimer ed. 1991; Diamanti 1995b; Farrell and Levy 1996; Biorcio 1997, 2000; Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001; Loiero 2001; Tambini 2001; Gómez-Reino Cachafeiro 2002; Gold 2003.
3. The *Mani Pulite* operation started during the electoral campaign of 1992, with the arrest of a minor official of the Socialist Party. The inquiry soon expanded, uncovering proof of the large-scale involvement of Italy's political class in corrupt practices. Although almost all parties, including the Lega Nord, were involved in this corruption to a certain degree; the Christian Democrat and the Socialist parties, as the dominant government parties, were particularly hard hit. Many of their leading figures came under accusation, hastening the dissolution of these parties.

The 'First Republic' refers to the political system that emerged after Liberation in 1945 and the abolition of the monarchy in 1946. The crisis of Italy's party system and the reform of the electoral process have initiated what is generally referred to as the transition towards the Second Republic (a process that may be interpreted either as having been finished with the semi-majoritarian reform of the electoral system in 1993 and the disappearance or transformation of all the political parties of the First Republic, or as still on-going, as a process of reform that should be continued). On the rhetoric surrounding this transition, see Pasquino 2000.
4. For analyses of the Lega's electorate, see Mannheimer ed. 1991; Diamanti 1995b, 1996a; Biorcio 1997; Tarchi 1998.
5. Of the twenty Italian regions, eight are conventionally associated with the South (Sicily, Sardinia, Abruzzo, Molise, Apulia, Campania, Basilicata and Calabria), and eight with the North (Lombardy, Piedmont, Liguria, Veneto, Emilia-Romagna, Valle d'Aosta, Trentino-Alto Adige and Friuli-Venezia Giulia). The classification of the four central regions (Tuscany, Umbria, the Marches and Lazio) is less clear. The first three are frequently associated with the North. The classification of Lazio, the region of the capital, Rome, has always been problematic: it is never included in the North (confirming in fact the view of the Lega, which opposes the 'North' to Rome, which in its discourse incarnates the state and its dysfunction), but neither is it normally regarded as being part of the South.

6. The five 'special-statute regions' (Sicily, Sardinia, Valle d'Aosta, Trentino-Alto Adige and Friuli-Venezia Giulia) are inhabited by ethnic minorities or have experienced secessionist tendencies. They were granted autonomy after the Second World War (Friuli only later, in 1964), and have a greater degree of autonomy than the fifteen ordinary-statute regions. The statute of each of these special-statute regions is guaranteed by the constitution.
7. These include, for history, *Passato e Presente*, *Società e Storia*, *Nuova Storia contemporanea*; for political science, *Rivista italiana di Scienza politica*, *Quaderni di Scienza politica*, and the yearbooks *Politica in Italia*; for sociology, *Quaderni di Sociologia* and *Rassegna italiana di Sociologia*. Since economic issues play an important role in the debate, I have also explored literature that links economy and society, issues widely discussed in sociological and political science reviews. Of particular relevance here is *Stato e Mercato*. Interdisciplinary reviews analysed include *Meridiana* (on southern Italy), and two foreign reviews *Modern Italy* and *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*.