

## CHAPTER 9

# **Multi-Level Populism and Centre-Periphery Cleavage in Switzerland The Case of the *Lega dei Ticinesi***

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Ever since its foundation in 1991, the *Lega dei Ticinesi* has been a significant feature of Swiss politics, particularly in Ticino, the Italian-speaking canton located at the south of the Alps. Today, the *Lega dei Ticinesi* is the only Swiss party to reflect a political centre-periphery cleavage, while promoting a dominant anti-establishment rhetoric. Over the last ten years, it has achieved significant electoral success. At its height, during the second half of the 1990s, the party could count on polling around 20% of the vote at cantonal level. Today, after the decline registered in the cantonal and federal elections of 2003, the *Lega dei Ticinesi* retains a share of around 8-10%.

Until now, scholars have investigated the origins and the historical antecedents of the *Lega dei Ticinesi* (Knusel and Hottinger, 1994; Mazzoleni, 1995), its relationship with the political system in the canton Ticino (Mazzoleni, 1999) and its analogies and differences with regard to Christoph Blocher's Swiss People's Party (*Schweizerische Volkspartei*) (Mazzoleni, 2003a and 2003b; Betz, in this volume). However, the analysis of the *Lega dei Ticinesi's* rhetoric has yet to go beyond an essentially descriptive approach. It has been observed that it expresses a "populist" rhetoric on various levels, from the national level through the regional and the local levels (Bohrer, 1993: 47 ff.). However, this rhetoric has not been analysed in terms of the opportunities offered by the cultural, economic, and political-institutional context.

This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, after a brief theoretical framework, I intend to illustrate the contents of the rhetoric of the *Lega dei Ticinesi*, stressing the diverse institutional, po-

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litical, and territorial levels involved. In the second section, I will show the particular cultural, socio-economic, and political conditions of the canton Ticino, where the *Lega dei Ticinesi* has successfully developed and propagated its rhetoric. Finally, I will attempt to show why suitable political conditions for the development of a populist party capable of creating a centre-periphery cleavage do not currently exist elsewhere in Switzerland.

## I. Populism and Cleavages

At first sight, it is by no means easy to combine theoretical analytical approaches which use concepts such as "populism" and "cleavages" in the study of political parties. In the first case, what dominates is a flexible "form" from the point of view of the ideological content, which is capable of adapting itself both to diverse contents and to changing contexts (see, for example, Taguieff, 2001). In the second case, the definition of 'cleavage', developed in a rich vein of political sciences studies, especially from Lipset and Rokkan (1967a) onwards, focuses on the specific contents and, above all, the duration of these divisions.

Recently, a number of authors have observed how the rise of the so-called contemporary European populist parties is associated with the dissolution of traditional cleavages, which are affected by the internal crisis afflicting party systems (Kitschelt, 1995; Meny and Surel, 2000: 223 ff.). This implies that it is possible to distinguish two analytical approaches in the use of these concepts. If, in general, cleavages reflect the social, cultural, and economic conditions at the time -of the emergence of a party's configuration, party populism (politicians' populism, as defined by Canovan, 1981) instead hinges on the level of the political rhetoric. Despite the recognised polysemy of the concept, the populist rhetoric of the contemporary political parties in Europe may, in general, be defined as a combination of an exaltation of the virtues of the people (understood as an homogeneous entity), a systematic *critique* of the elites and the establishment, both of which are accused of betraying the people's ideals and interests (Meny and Surel, 2000), and a critical attitude towards representative democracy (Taggart, 2000a; see also Papadopoulos, in this volume).

At the same time, populist rhetoric is capable of adapting itself to different contents. As a consequence, right-wing and populist parties in Europe may possess a "winning formula" which is ephemeral and contingent primarily in relation to economic issues (Betz, 2001). There has been little reflection on how this flexible "winning formula" is linked to the multiplicity of the territorial and political-institutional levels (local, regional, national, European), in which the neo-populist parties interpret the social-structural and cultural cleavages. As a consequence of the

sub-disciplinary specialisation in the current political science, the territorial and institutional frame of reference often remains one-dimensional. Some scholars turn their attention to the national parties (such as the FPO in Austria, the *Front National* in France, and the *Schweizerische Volkspartei* in Switzerland). Others look to the peripheral regional or local parties instead (De Winter and Tiirsan, 1998). The parties of the first group would defend the nation in its entirety; the second, the periphery under threat. The first would see their spatial frame of reference as the nation; the second, the region or local territories.

In fact, the action and rhetorical spaces of these parties do not always correspond to the territorial limits of their organisation bases. The more institutional opportunities there are, the more the action and the claims become not only regional, but also national or supra-national. This question becomes central where the relationships between the institutional levels (sub-national, national, supra-national) is changing, for example, in the context of supra-national integration. As Keating's chapter in this volume argues, the European integration process has produced new opportunities for the regional parties, which are placing their demands beyond the state border. But the pressure of European integration could also open up new opportunities for an emerging regional populist party which claims the national integrity as a condition for regional interests.

In general, in a multi-level opportunity space, a centre-periphery cleavage may take on different meanings, depending upon how the political actor combines the use of the regional, national, and transnational institutions, and connects it with other parties within or outside the national context. These opportunities vary not only according to the degree of autonomy, but also according to the political weight of each institutional level (more important in a federalist context). In such a configuration, the rhetorical components, especially the anti-establishment *critique*, constitute a stock of ideological resources that regional populist parties can adapt with regard to the different institutional opportunities and the visibility of the "targets" or "enemies".

## **11. The *Lega dei Ticinesi*: Between Rhetoric and Opportunity**

The *Lega dei Ticinesi* is a good example of a regionalist party that exploits, outside the ED, the multi-dimensional opportunities of its political and institutional context. During its evolution from 1991 onwards, the claimant rhetoric of the *Lega dei Ticinesi* continually oscillated between the international, national, regional, and local levels. For this party, the "people" are those of the canton Ticino, as well as of Switzerland.

land and of the Lugano region (economically and financially the main city in the canton). Similarly, the political and administrative elites are respectively those of the federal capital (Berne), the administrative capital of the canton, Ticino (Bellinzona), and Europe (Brussels), depending on the interlocutors and the symbolic relevance of the chosen targets or enemies. From the point of view of its rhetoric, the *Lega dei Ticinesi* cannot be said to be a purely regionalist, localist or nationalist party, but is simultaneously regionalist, localist, and nationalist.

The multi-level rhetoric of the *Lega dei Ticinesi* is made possible by a number of factors. In general, it is favoured by the Swiss federalist structure and the construction of the Swiss national state. Modern Switzerland has some of the most de-centralised institutional structures in the world and a weak central state (Lijphart, 1999; Badie and Bimbaum, 1979), both of which have allowed the acknowledgement and survival of sub-national, cantonal, and communal identities. The construction of the Swiss national identity did not cancel out the ancient cantonal or regional allegiances, but re-modelled and integrated them within a fundamentally non-conflictual co-existence, at least from the 1940s onwards. Despite the recent changes towards an electoral "nationalisation" (Caramani, 2004), the significant autonomy of the sub-national political, cultural, and institutional entities still entails a centrality of the cantonal level in the electoral mobilisations in Switzerland. At the same time, we observe a strong differentiation of the cantonal party systems, a significant autonomy of the cantonal party sections with regard to the weak national confederations and the variety of electoral legislation, and an heterogeneous political weight for direct democracy (Kriesi, 1998a; Ladner and Brandle, 2001; Vatter, 2002). In this sense, if, at federal level, the political parties play a relatively marginal role in the decisionmaking processes, it is more difficult to claim the same at cantonal level, and not just because of the lack of systematic studies in this field. We may, actually, suppose that both the weight of the diverse cantonal parties and their role in the decision-making processes depend on the specific characteristics of the cantonal political system.

In the same way, if the Swiss federalist system encourages the plurality of the political spaces and the institutional references, the emergence of the *Lega dei Ticinesi* is, above all, associated with the particular position of Ticino in the Swiss context, the specific construction of the Swiss identity in this canton, the weakening of the traditional social cleavages, and the crisis affecting the traditional parties of Ticino.

### A.. *The Anti-Establishment Critique: People versus Elites*

Together with other parties in the Alpine region (see Betz, in this volume), the *Lega dei Ticinesi* tried to present itself as the advocate of "genuine" democracy. The emergence of the phenomenon of the *Lega* in the canton Ticino is frequently interpreted as the expression of an anti-party revolt (for example, Rusconi, 1994). Its anti-establishment *critique* has, above all, been expressed as a protest against cantonal partyism and the "big families", political corruption, and the inefficiency of the bureaucracy.

This kind of *critique* aimed at the *cantonal* elites was an essential part of the *Lega dei Ticinesi* politics between 1991 and 1995, that is, until one of its representatives was elected to the cantonal government and it began to intensify its political alliances (Mazzoleni, 1999). Over the last few years, while public demonstrations have been definitively abandoned, even the *Lega dei Ticinesi's* free weekly newspaper, *1/ Mattino della Domenica*, has lowered its voice. Protest against the *national* elites have instead been a constant in the history of the *Lega dei Ticinesi* and is manifest both in its rhetoric and organised action, making a substantial contribution to its visibility at national level- To a greater extent than at cantonal level, the *Lega dei Ticinesi* has made use of the instruments of direct federal democracy (initiatives and referenda). With regard to foreign policy in particular, it has denounced the Swiss "political class" and the federal bureaucrats, accused of selling-out Switzerland or paying little attention to the interests of the canton Ticino. It has regularly targeted the federal institutions of Berne, especially the government and the federal administration, as well as the management of the Swiss national bank.

In general, during the 1990s, the *Lega dei Ticinesi* was thus able to exploit the declining trust in the political elites, the institutions and the political parties. It was able to cultivate an anti-party resentment that was particularly widespread in the canton Ticino during this period. According to the Selects post-electoral inquiries conducted in 1995 and 1999 on the occasion of the federal elections, the percentage of citizens expressing anti-party opinions<sup>2</sup> was significantly greater in the canton Ticino than in Switzerland as a whole, as well as in other cantons' (for example, Zurich and Geneva). Moreover, these opinions were more widespread among the electors of the *Lega dei Ticinesi* than those of the other Ticino parties and the non-voters (Mazzoleni and Wernli, 2002: 139). Furthermore, to a greater extent than in Switzerland as a

<sup>2</sup> The interviewees were asked whether they considered parties to be "necessary" to the Swiss political system or not.

whole, these opinions proved to be positively correlated to the degree of dissatisfaction with the performance of the parties themselves in Ticino.

It is possible to see the breadth of the disappointment generated by the cantonal consociational system and the frustrated expectations produced by the traditional parties in these results. At federal level and in many cantons, especially in those where the use of direct democracy proved to be more accessible and straightforward, the parties played a limited role in the making of public opinion and the decision-making processes.<sup>3</sup> According to historians, Swiss cantonal parties are, in general, considered to be the children of direct democracy; as cristallisations of the referendum committees in the second half of the 19th century (Gruner, 1969). However, this was not the case for the two parties of Ticino founded between 1830 and 1840, the Liberal Radical Party (LRP) and the Conservative Party (now the Popular Democratic Party, PDP). These party organisations were created prior to the advent of universal male suffrage and the introduction of the instruments of direct democracy. As a matter of fact, the accessibility and use of cantonal direct democracy was, and still is, one of the lowest ever in cantonal comparison, in which these same parties have dominated the cantonal political scene for the past 170 years, demonstrating an exceptional longevity not only in international comparison, but also in the Swiss context. Today, they are still the first and second most important parties in terms of votes, and have been governing together since 1922, when proportional representation (via direct popular suffrage) for the election of the cantonal government was definitely institutionalised.<sup>4</sup>

The governmental role of these parties in a consociationalist system accompanied the consolidation of the structures of the cantonal state (the first constitution dates back to 1803), contributed to the building of the nation, and played an essential role during the post-war years of economic growth in the mediation of interests and in the distribution of public resources (Bianchi, 1989; Ghiringhelli, 1987; 1988; Mazzoleni, 2001; Vitali, 1996). Moreover, for several decades, this form of conso-

<sup>3</sup> In general, it cannot be said that cantonal direct democracy weakens political parties. However, in the cantons in which the instruments of direct democracy are most widely used, the party system is more fragmented and unstable (Ladner and Brandle, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that Ticino's proportionalism in the cantonal executive election is not a response of the traditional elites to the challenges launched via direct democracy, as would appear to be the case in other cantons, but the result of an "external" imposition by the federal council which, towards the end of the 19th century, obliged the canton Ticino to introduce a proportional system in order to sedate the exceptional violence of the conflict between the two traditional parties. Gruner has spoken of Ticino's *Sonderfall* (1969: 68). With the exception of Zug, a majority system is applied in all the other Swiss cantons.

ciationalism demonstrated an elevated capacity of integration (supported by the proportional system), bringing in all the challenges in the party system, particularly with the Socialist Party in the 1920s and the Independent Socialist Party (PSA) in the 1980s. Nevertheless, the logic of consociationalism also increased the internal opacity of the governmental system, the confusion in the perception of political actors and the expansion of a generic anti-party attitude (Papadopoulos, in this volume). Given this institutional specificity, it is not surprising that the populist rhetoric of the *Lega dei Ticinesi* has successfully been able to play on the negative image of the traditional parties, when an unexpected economic downturn was damaging their capacity to answer their social demands.

***B. "Cantonal-Nationalism": Ticino versus "Bern"  
and the German-Swiss Majority***

Regionalism, or rather "cantonalism", is a central component of the *Lega dei Ticinesi's* rhetoric. This party may define itself, above all, as a regionalist or "peripheral nationalist" party, in the sense that it is active in a sub-territorial national division, seeks to represent a minority with culturally distinct characteristics, and expresses a programmatic policy that claims increased power on behalf of this territorial collectivity (De Winter and Gomez-Reino Cachafeiro, 2002: 500). It is not demanding the independence of Ticino from the Swiss Confederation, but it is asking for a more de-centralised federalism, in which the federal capital Berne has less power. Above all, it is demanding greater fiscal autonomy for the canton.

Nonetheless, it opposes the presumed cultural and economic "colonisation" of the canton Ticino by German-speaking Switzerland. It denounces the economic concentration and the dependence of Ticino's economy on the transalpine economic centres and asks for the Swiss-German companies which are active in the canton to pay taxes in Ticino. With these critiques and demands, the *Lega dei Ticinesi* interprets the hardships and uncertainties that emerged with the crisis of the 1990s in a regionalist key, characterising Ticino as a canton which was discriminated against in the federal context.

In the construction of the relationships between the centre and the periphery, this canton may in a European context be considered an example of the "victorious periphery" (Rokkan, 1999: 185 ff.) in administrative, linguistic, and territorial terms. It represents the "third" Switzerland, the Italian-speaking minority. Individuals speaking Italian as their first language represent around seven per cent of the Swiss population: four per cent (around sixty per cent of all the Italian-speaking persons) reside in Ticino, in which Italian is the only official cantonal language.

Thus, the survival of the Italian linguistic identity is not just a consequence of Swiss federalism or the recognition of indigenous cultural minorities.

In Switzerland itself, the canton Ticino constitutes an exception from the point of view of the relationship between linguistic cleavage and cantonal borders. In no other Swiss canton is there the same degree of overlap between linguistic space and cantonal borders. The two largest Swiss linguistic communities (German and French) are distributed in 25 cantons. With the exception of small and fragmented areas of the canton of Grisons, Italian-speaking Switzerland coincides with the canton Ticino. Cantonal identity is further reinforced by the relative geomorphological insularity of Ticino's territory. Furthermore, as the only canton to the south of the Alps, Ticino was physically isolated from the rest of Switzerland, at least until 1980 and the opening of the St. Gotthard motorway tunnel. Confirming this "structural" insularity, a survey conducted in the mid-1990s shows that the sense of cantonal identity was significantly higher in Ticino than in the French-speaking and Swiss-German cantons (Kriesi *et al.*, 1996: 56).

Historically, the relative linguistic and geomorphological insularity of the canton Ticino has been accompanied by a status of economic peripherality. Until the 1940s, Ticino was a canton of emigration, with an economy based on subsistence agriculture. Processes of industrialisation were very late in developing in Ticino compared to the more advanced cantons in Switzerland, as well being as sporadic and relatively ineffective. Between the 1950s and 1970s, the focus of the economy of Ticino rapidly shifted from agriculture to the tertiary sector, with an increasing percentage of citizens employed in banks, insurance companies and public administration. The "Glorious Thirties" were marked by the development of the financial market (Lugano became Switzerland's third financial centre), tourism and, in recent years, by the opening of a university. Impressive post-war economic development did not, however, succeed in bridging the gap between incomes in Ticino and the other more developed parts or in reducing the dependence of the economy of Ticino on the Swiss-German financial and commercial trusts (Toppi, 1998; 2003).

According to Rokkan, the social state, through the establishment of social rights for the weak and marginalised, contributed to the construction of a sense of "togetherness", which emphasises the territorial and national identity (Rokkan, 1999: 265). In the traditionally poor canton Ticino, the economic welfare of the post-war period, the fruit of economic growth, and the development of the cantonal and federal welfare state, reached a stage in which the consolidation of the national identity was still a recent experience and largely signified "protection" and



"common solidarity" against warring Europe. More so than elsewhere, national identity and the model of Swiss welfare ("sure, we are the richest of the world") have been interwoven in Ticino. To a greater extent than in other parts of Switzerland, to be Swiss was, for the citizens of the canton Ticino, synonymous with economic welfare. Integration in terms of identity and economic status not only resulted in the partial and momentary neutralisation of the effects of the canton's economic peripherality and a specific translation of the national "myths" of Swiss "insularity" and "exceptionality" (Froidevaux, 1997), but also in an enduring increase in expectations with regard to the Confederation.

Expectations of security and welfare contrasted with the new conditions that resulted from the socio-economic transformations of the 1980s and 1990s. With the stagnation of public spending during the 1980s, there were already warning signs of the "fiscal crisis" of the cantonal state (Rossi, 1984). The permeability of the socio-economic boundary began to increase and change, particularly with regard to Lombardy. In these decades, this Italian region became one of the main economic locomotives of Europe but, in comparison to Ticino, it was also distinguished by lower average wages.

Above all, the 1990s were characterised by the explosion of an unprecedented economic crisis and recession (not since the 1930s do we find similar conditions in Ticino), which highlighted the intrinsic fragility of the degree of welfare attained. Moreover, in response to the crisis, the Confederation introduced a series of neo-liberal reforms which aimed at increasing the competitiveness of the Swiss economic market, thereby acknowledging numerous reforms promoted by the European Union (EU), including the deregulation and the privatisation of the public areas traditionally integrated with policies of regional development (Mach, 1998). These reforms subsequently became some of the favourite targets of the *Lega dei Ticinesi*. The *Lega* exploits the image of a discriminated canton, the so-called syndrome of Swiss-German "domination." It tries to reinterpret the "tradition" of the economic and linguistic claims that characterised the history of the canton from the mid 19th century.<sup>5</sup> Before the advent of the *Lega dei Ticinesi*, these claims had been shared during the 20th century, in a moderate way, by all the government parties in Ticino (Marcacci, 2003; Bianchi, 1989).

In summary, with regard to the claims of the *Lega dei Ticinesi* that Bellinzona and, above all, Berne, exploited the socio-economic uncertainties besetting the canton Ticino in the 1990s, we can talk of a politi-

<sup>5</sup> It is also important to remember that, before the foundation of the "Republic and Canton Ticino" in 1803, for three centuries the regions of Ticino were subject to the administrative power (though not a *~olony*) of many German-speaking cantons.

cal capitalisation of a relative deprivation in the form of a "chauvinism of welfare" (Kitschelt, 1995). This defence of the Swiss economic *Sonderfall* tries to capitalise on the resentment not only against the applicant refugees, but also against the cantonal and federal élites. We can also observe this "chauvinism" in the opposition to EU and in the defence of the Luganese economic centre.

C. "National-Nationalism": The Swiss versus "Brussels"  
and Ticino versus Lombardy

Today, although not a member of the EU, Switzerland's relationship with Europe has been one of the most important issues in the Swiss political field since the early 1990s. In contrast with the Swiss legacy, which is based on strong political independence in international affairs, the Swiss foreign policy has changed greatly since the collapse of the Berlin Wall, in favour of increasing international co-operation and integration. But this new foreign policy, elaborated by the Swiss government and the main parties, has often divided Swiss public opinion in recent years.

In this context, the *Lega dei Ticinesi* played a leading political role in opposing the process of European integration. For the *Lega*, the defence of the so-called Swiss *Sonderfall* - the exceptionality of its founding principles (neutrality, federalism, and direct democracy) and the singularity of its economic success in the second post-war period - manifests itself in strong opposition to European integration. Its protest against both EU bureaucrats and the Swiss government started with the campaign against the Treaty on the European Economic Space (EES) in 1992, subsequently continued in terms of foreign policy with the opposition to any adherence whatsoever to supra-national organisations.<sup>6</sup> There is a clear affinity with other Swiss "national" parties, such as the Freedom Party, the Swiss Democrats and Christoph Blocher's *Schweizerische Volkspartei* (Betz, in this volume), with which the *Lega dei Ticinesi* established alliances, either for elections or on the launching of its support of referenda and popular initiatives on the subjects of European integration and immigration. At the same time, its opposition to European integration is not only in contrast with almost all the regionalist parties that were active in the EU countries in 1990s, but is also partly in contrast with the Blocher's *Schweizerische Volkspartei*, which accepts

<sup>6</sup> After a very hard and polarised referendum campaign, the majority of the Swiss electorate and the cantons refused to support the official policy.

many economic aspects of integration (for example, the first set of the bilateral agreements with EU accepted in 2000).<sup>7</sup>

As the Selects post-electoral surveys of 1995 and of 1999 show, the opposition to European integration was significantly greater among the *Lega dei Ticinesi's* electorate than in those of the other main parties in Ticino. Furthermore, in contrast with those same parties, the non-acceptance of the criticism aimed at Switzerland during the 1990s for the ambiguous role it played during the Second World War is significantly and positively correlated with the *Lega dei Ticinesi's* popularity.<sup>8</sup> The opposition to European integration expressed by the nationalpopulist parties, particularly, those situated in German-speaking Switzerland (the *Schweizerische Volkspartei*, the Freedom party, and the Swiss Democratic Party), has essentially been based on the defence of independence, direct democracy and Swiss federalism, as well as on the critique of the supposed technocratic European centralism. Besides these aspects, the *Lega dei Ticinesi* also encompasses uncertainties about its relations with neighbouring Italy. The opposition to Europe expresses a potential centre-periphery cleavage in which the centre is not just Berne or Brussels, but also Lombardy and Milan.

The *Lega dei Ticinesi* has not openly declared that it is "anti-Italian" or "anti-Lombard", but did actually borrow certain "anti-political" stereotypes from the neighbouring *Lega Nord*, such as "organisational Italian disorder", Roman "centralism", and "bureaucratic obtusity" (Chiantera-Stutte, in this volume). In the early 1990s in connection with corruption scandals in Italy, the *Lega dei Ticinesi* used symbols that echoed the condemnation of the party system by Bossi's *Lega Nord*. Moreover, the use of a certain anti-Italian feeling is expressed on an economic level as an accusation of the allegedly "unfair" competition practised by Lombardy on the economy of Ticino and the threats to its financial market. On the occasion of the unsuccessful campaign against Switzerland's entry into the EES, the principal leader of the *Lega dei Ticinesi*, Giuliano Bignasca, criticised the opening of the border with Italy, insisting on the supposed risks of an increase in "crime, mafia operations, and [H] immigration" (Rusconi, 1994: 166).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> It would seem that, despite the different approaches and emphasis, a significant number European regionalist parties tend to see the supra-national space as an alternative to the power of the central states today (Caciagli, 2003: 191-94; Keating, in this volume).

<sup>8</sup> At national level, it was primarily the electorate of the *Schweizerische Volkspartei* that tended to express this attitude (Kriesi, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> More recently, the *Lega dei Ticinesi* was first in line when the cantonal parliament proposed to write Swiss banking secrecy into the federal constitution, following the legislative attempts of the Berlusconi government to promote the return of the Italian

In supporting the maintenance of the twin keystones of insularity and welfare, the *Lega dei Ticinesi* is not only opposed to European integration, but also to Ticino's ambivalent relationship with its Italian neighbour. Historically, the linguistic ties (not due to a common identity, as much as to the widespread use of the Ticino dialect) have been flanked by a different political experience that helped the diffusion of Inistrust and stereotypes. The long and tormented construction of a national identity came about via the reinforcement of the political barrier with Italy, and the full consolidation of this national and cantonal identity came with the confrontation of internal irredentist strands, with the pressures of the Italian Fascist regime- (which pursued a policy of annexation for Ticino), and through the politics of the national defence during the Second World War.

In the second post-war period, the substantial differences that existed in the respective political systems and political cultures (neutrality vs. Atlantic Alliance, absence/presence of a strong communist party, \_stability/instability of government, etc.) contributed to the consolidation of the political barrier with Italy. On the socio-economic level, at least from the 1950s onwards, the border became a resource, and a guarantee of autonomy and later of welfare for the canton Ticino. The arrival of immigrants, cross-border commuters, and huge financial flows from Italy were considerable sources of wealth and development for Ticino. At the same time, the Swiss and cantonal laws, particularly the custom laws, protected the region of Ticino from the pressure of the Italian economy.

The *Lega dei Ticinesi* came onto the stage at a moment of in-depth definition of the relations of Ticino with Italy. The late 1980s and early 1990s marked a strong discontinuity from the geopolitical and economic points of view (the relaxation of the policy of trade controls and European integration). The increased permeability of the border with Italy called into question certainties that had been consolidated over time. The process of European integration involved a new liberalisation of access to the markets of Ticino, and, with protectionism now a thing of the past, this bred fears that the canton would be marginalised. Today, Ticino risks direct competition with Lombardy, a region that in the last 30 years has become one of the leading economic powers in Europe. This growing permeability introduces pressure and creates potential apprehension on the part of the *petite bourgeoisie* and the working

capital that had been illegally exported abroad, in particular to Swiss banks. In other words, to a greater extent than the other parties, the *Lega dei Ticinesi's* rhetoric has exploited fears that Ticino could become the economic periphery not only of the Switzerland, but also of neighbouring Lombardy.

people of the Ticino.<sup>10</sup> While the cantonal government and the other principal parties intended to take on the European economic challenge by officially embracing the path of European integration, the *Lega dei Ticinesi* developed a Euro-sceptic rhetoric which appealed not only to the fear of immigration from afar, but also of immigration from nearby.

#### ***D. Lugano's Localism versus Bellinzona***

Parallel to these dimensions, a local dimension is involved in the rhetoric and the political action of the *Lega dei Ticinesi*, although, on the whole, it plays a minor role with regard to the preceding dimensions. While the condemnation of the "partitocracy" has been weakening along with the process of institutional integration, the importance in the *Lega dei Ticinesi's* rhetoric and actions for the defence of the economic position of Lugano have grown instead, especially after the party's principal leader Giuliano Bignasca was elected to the communal executive council in 2000. It is also worth noting that all the main leaders and founders of the *Lega dei Ticinesi* are from Lugano and its environs.

On more than one occasion, the *Lega dei Ticinesi* has taken up positions in defence of the city and the region of Lugano against Bellinzona, the capital of the canton, as the centre of the public administration and the symbol of cantonal political power. The defence of Lugano as the leading economic (and financial) force of the canton has been expressed in the form of opposition to the mechanisms of redistribution in favour of the economically weaker zones of the canton. The *Lega dei Ticinesi's* anti-fiscal policy is also to be seen in this context, in contrast with what happens at the level of the federal claims (which include a critique of the dismantling of public enterprises), but remain in tune with the neoliberal wing of the Radical Liberal Party of Lugano with which it has formed numerous opportunistic alliances, at both local and cantonal levels.

The *Lega's* rhetoric has been able to drive between Lugano and Bellinzona, reinterpreting a "new" centre-periphery cleavage in the context of the traditional divisions. First, in the 1980s and 1990s, it is possible to observe a decrease in the rural-urban cleavage and the emergence of a potential new economic cleavage between Lugano and the rest of the canton. The electoral erosion of the Popular Democratic Party (PDP), the second largest cantonal party, from the highpoints of the 1970s reflects the weakening of the importance of the political cleavage that existed between town and countryside in the 1970s. This party, which

10 In contrast with the border regions around Geneva and Basle, the wage's differences between residents and Italian cross-border commuters in Ticino are particularly marked (Flückiger and Falter, 2000). In 2002, around 30,000 Italian workers went to work in Ticino (which has a resident population of around 300,000).

was decisive in the construction of the party system during the 19th century, was always stronger and better represented in the valleys and in the most rural regions of the canton. Today, however, the proportion of Ticino's citizens making their living from agriculture has been reduced to less than five per cent.

Social modernisation, the exodus from the valleys towards the urban centres, the development of intensive internal geographical mobility and the processes of peri-urbanisation have, in many ways, homologated the cultural space of the canton Ticino, which is today defined by many geographers and territorial planners as "a diffused city" (Carloni, 2003). This new configuration has witnessed the growing economic and political importance of Lugano and the surrounding area which, in the 1990s, showed a dynamism in its development and a good deal of adaptation to the crisis of those years that was clearly superior to the rest of Ticino.

Second, the importance of the religious cleavage in Ticino has diminished, after dominating throughout the 19th and much of the 20th century. Alongside the rural-urban cleavage, the religious cleavage was once embodied by the PDP. But, in the cantonal election preceding the advent of the *Lega dei Ticinesi*, the PDP lost one of its two seats in the cantonal "power-sharing" government for the first time since the 1920s. In the wake of the securisation and the cultural changes that took place in the 1970s and 1980s, it is possible to observe a partial melting of the cleavage that had dominated for more than hundred years, from the 1830s at least, when the Catholic (Conservative) Party fanned in opposition to the Liberal Radical Party:

Third, the *Lega dei Ticinesi* came onto the stage at the beginning of a dispute which was generated when the most significant of Ticino's opposition parties joined the government in the 1970s and 1980s. The Independent Socialist Party (*Partito Socialista Autonomo*, PSA) profited from the defeat of the PDP in 1987 and won a seat in cantonal executive. It had been born on the crest of the 1968 wave of change, in opposition to the traditional Socialist Party, which had been represented in the cantonal government for many decades. At the beginning, it made criticism of the party system one of the mainstays of its agenda, but its winning of a government seat involved its integration into the consociationalism system.

Generally, the electoral success of a party derives from a combination of factors that include not only the social, economic, and cultural conditions at the time of its emergence, and thus the cleavages, but also the capacity of the party to capitalise electorally on the latent social questions at party system level. In any case, the aspects that defined the principal conditions of emergence and nourished those of the *Lega dei Ticinesi's* success are also largely reflected in terms of the composition

of the party's electorate in the 1990s. Since 1991, its electorate has resided, above all, in the districts around the two main centres of the canton, Locarno and Lugano, to the exclusion of Bellinzona. Furthermore, according to the surveys conducted between 1995 and 1999, the *Lega dei Ticinesi's* electorate presents a high proportion of those without confession, those with greater mistrust of the political parties and institutions, young people under 30, salaried workers, artisans, small businessmen, and sectors with low levels of education.

The *Lega* rarely pronounces itself on religious or ecclesiastical matters, to which it maintains an ambivalent attitude, seeking instead to take up the "legacy" of the PSA in terms of anti-party protest. However, the electorate of the PSA, was situated on the (extreme) political left of the left-right axis, and was made up of people with a medium-high educational level. In contrast, the voters of the *Lega* are composed not only of the lower middle classes, but are also, in general, located in the centre-right strand. Moreover, it has a smaller "right-wing" voter component than the electorate of the Liberal Radical Party (Mazzoleni, 1995; 2003a; Mazzoleni and Wernli, 2002: 126-27; 139).

### **III. The Centre-Periphery Cleavage in Switzerland**

The *Lega dei Ticinesi* was thus able to move simultaneously on multiple levels, exploiting its compound identity (local, cantonal, national) and political agenda (condemnation of the cantonal, national and European elites), and taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the context of Ticino. But where is the case of the *Lega dei Ticinesi* in Switzerland to be placed? The *Lega* is the sole political force to have mobilised - successfully - a centre-periphery cleavage during the 1990s to the present day. Does this, perhaps, mean that the conditions for the emergence of a party which defends the interests of the "periphery" do not exist elsewhere in Switzerland?

On the structural level, there are a number of factors or "threats" which suggest that several conditions for a possible centre-periphery cleavage in Switzerland - as in the Alpine region as a whole (Caramani and Meny, in this volume) - have been reinforced in recent years: these include the socio-economic crisis of the 1990s, the acceleration of the processes of globalisation and European integration, the diffusion of neo liberal politics, the increased economic concentration around the main centres of the German-speaking Switzerland, the increased disparity in the social distribution of resources as a result of the reduction of the protectionist mechanisms introduced after the Second World War, and the weakening of regional economic policy, which is partly a result of the privatisation and liberalisation of the major Swiss public corporations (postal, telecommunications, and rail).

Switzerland has not joined the ED, although, from the point of view of economic policies, its process of integration has intensified throughout the 1990s to the present day. External economic pressure over the past decade does not seem to have strengthened the internal cohesion and approval, but has instead increased internal conflict the political elites and Swiss public opinion; between the economic areas opening to the external markets and the areas that focus on the domestic market; between management and the unions; and between the advocates of a line of traditional independence in foreign policy and those who are, instead, inclined towards change within the context of Swiss integration with the ED, and who have found expression in the federal votes (Brunner and Sciarini, 2002).

These are tensions that the *Schweizerische Volkspartei*, a governmental party at federal level, as well as the main force of opposition to the decisions of the governmental majority with regard to immigration and foreign policy, has partially succeeded in intercepting, and has, thus, established, a new cleavage between the "winners" and "losers" of the process of modernisation, between Alpine and urban Switzerland (Kriesi, 1998a; 2003). Notwithstanding this, on the political agenda of the *Schweizerische Volkspartei*, the centre-periphery theme and that of linguistics are, on the whole, marginal. Historically strong, above all in the rural areas of the protestant Swiss-German cantons, this party has decreasing ties with the agricultural world, from the point of view of its electorate too. Moreover, despite its significant success in the French part of Switzerland, its electoral bases are especially concentrated in the German part, particularly in the cantons of the political and economic "centre" (such as Berne and Zurich) (Sciarini, Hardmeier, and Vatter, 2003; Mazzoleni, 2003b; Selb and Lachat, 2004).

In terms of culture and values, the economic cleavage between rich and poor regions seems to lead to the re-appearance of the ancient division between the Catholic and Protestant cantons, which dates back to the time of the *Sonderbund* civil war (Sciarini, 2002). Established essentially in the cantons with a Catholic tradition, the leading political representative of the religious cleavage in the present-day Swiss party system, the Christian Democrat Party, has, at least partially, defended the interests of the rural regions against the Protestant economic centres, as against the advocates of the centralist trends of the 19th century. Nevertheless, its electoral strength has been declining since the 1970s (21 % in the federal elections of 1979; 16% in 1999). Furthermore, in its mobilisation in defence of the peripheries, the Catholic movement has never made direct reference to language, not only due to its own political culture, but also because its presence traverses the various nationallinguistic boundaries.



On the other hand, in recent years, there has been an increase in the structural and cultural importance of the linguistic cleavage and the decline of the religious cleavage (Trechsel, 1995). Three factors, at least, are responsible for this change: (1) the secularisation and the changing relationship with religion; (2) the diminished importance of the cantonal border compared to the regional one in the definition of the feeling of belonging among the citizens of the French-speaking minority (Kriesi *et al.*, 1996: 54--56); (3) the consolidation of the cultural barriers between the three main linguistic regions by the audio-visual and traditional media, particularly, the increasingly significant role of television in the political communication (Kriesi, 1999a: 21-22; Steiner, 2001: 144-45). However, in spite of the changes that have taken place in recent years, the elements that historically make the emergence of a centre-periphery cleavage in Switzerland exceptional appear to persist. In French-speaking Switzerland, in other words, within the country's main linguistic minority, the conditions for the development of a political force which expresses a centre-periphery cleavage seem to be lacking, despite the contrasts that have, to a greater or lesser extent, emerged with regard to the Swiss-German majority in recent years, and despite the fact that the French speakers appear to attach less importance to national rather than cantonal and regional identity (Kriesi *et al.*, 1996: 55).

However, we still cannot talk about a Swiss-French identity, which is capable of providing claimant support for a political player that would, in any case, have to take the cantonal divisions into account. Moreover, the capacity of the Swiss-French left-wing to articulate a class cleavage to a greater extent than that of the Swiss-Germans, particularly of the Socialist Party (Kriesi, 1998b; Mazzoleni and Wernli, 2002: 120 ff.), "neutralises" the effect between "losers" and "winners" that was revived by *l'Union démocratique et chrétienne des Ticinois*. This class cleavage also smothers the development of a virtual centre-periphery cleavage based on the contrast between French and German speakers (see Caramani, 2004).

The complex cultural and particular linguistic and religious cleavages in Switzerland are not superimposed, but intersect, neutralising one another (Lijphart, 1980; Kriesi, 1998a,b). Moreover, while political mobilisation still essentially takes place at canton level, the linguistic boundaries do not coincide with the cantonal borders. It has been established that the economic differences within the linguistic regions are of more concern than those between the various linguistic regions (Joye *et al.*, 1992: 222). On the other hand, the diffusion of the instruments of direct democracy, the weakness of the party structures, and the development of social movements in general, obstruct the construction of an

anti-establishment rhetoric which identifies politics as the domination of "self-referencing" parties (Zolo, 1992).

## Conclusion

The *Lega dei Ticinesi* is an example of a party that expresses defensive socio-economic claims through populist rhetoric. Its reinterpretation of the geo-economic peripherality of the canton Ticino produces a double challenge against consensus democracy and against European integration.

From the early 1990s up to the present day, the predominant component of the *Lega dei Ticinesi's* populist rhetoric has been built on the contrast between the canton of Ticino and the canton of Berne, the political capital of Switzerland. However, as I have attempted to show, it is not uniquely a regionalist party: it expresses nationalist and local demands as well. The rhetoric repertory cannot be reduced to a regionalist defence (Ticino vs. Berne), whose aim is the defence of the Swiss *Sonderfall*. From this point of view, it has in part been possible for the *Lega* to occupy the political position in Ticino which, in the Swiss German cantons, is essentially the prerogative of Christoph Blocher's *Schweizerische Volkspartei*.

The *Lega's* regionalist rhetoric aims at economic protectionism and greater autonomy within Swiss federalism, in order to revive Ticino's image of a discriminated and outcast canton. Its targets are the "political class", the government, and the federal administration. Within the cantonal realm, it defends the principal economic centre against the administrative and political centres, focusing at the same time on anti-fiscal themes and the critique of the "partitocracy", even though this last point seems to be gradually declining in recent years. However, from the point of view of rhetorical content, we can say that the common denominator of the *Lega dei Ticinesi* is a form of "chauvinism of welfare", in other words, a political response to the failed promises of the Swiss *"Sonderfall"*, in conjunction with cantonal and national insularity and economic welfare.

As a consequence, the *Lega dei Ticinesi's* ability to develop a populist rhetoric at different levels at the same or at different times and in relation to the political situation should not be seen solely as the effect of the ephemeral nature of the repertory drawn upon by contemporary populist parties. It has also been seen as a resource that was made available to it by the multi-dimensional nature of the institutional levels involved in Swiss federalism. The *Lega's* multi-level populism - along with other factors, such as the presence of a charismatic leader and a centralised

and flexible party organisation (Mazzoleni, 1999) - is also a resource through which it responds to the challenges of institutional integration.

The question of multi-level opportunities is also crucial for the explanation of the recent electoral decline of the *Lega*. After the mid-1990s, the opportunities at cantonal level were reduced because the cantonal coalition government had partially recovered the claims against Berne. The centre-periphery cleavage partially cuts across the cantonal party system. The local opportunities were declining as the *Lega dei Ticinesi's* principal leader participated in the Lugano city government coalition after 2000. At the same time, the national opportunities have progressively been reducing, since the Ticino section of *Schweizerische Volkspartei*, which has recently moved towards Blocher's positions, has had an increasing electoral success: in the last national elections, Ticino's *Schweizerische Volkspartei* registered a share of 7.5% of the vote.

However, the necessary social, cultural, political conditions for the emergence and the development of a regionalist party do not appear to be found in any other part of Switzerland. Only the canton Ticino has so many conditions which favour such a development. In this canton, there are nearly identical cantonal and linguistic boundaries, a relative geomorphological insularity, a strong sense of cantonal identity, a tendency towards economic peripherality, and a strong presence of anti-party feelings favoured by the consociational decision-making accommodation. While the institutional and territorial Swiss structure habitually neutralised the centre-periphery cleavages, Ticino has provided many opportunities for a new national-regionalist populist actor.

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Daniele CARAMANI & Yves MENY (eds.)

# **Challenges to Consensual Politics**

**Democracy, Identity, and Populist Protest  
in the Alpine Region**

"Regionalism & Federalism" ,  
No.6

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