

# A PLACE CALLED PADANIA?

THE LEGA NORD AND THE POLITICAL REPRESENTATION OF NORTHERN ITALY



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## Abstract

In the 1990s, the debates about the resurgence of political regionalism in Europe have become particularly prevalent. One reason for this has been the fact that, in several European countries, regionalist political parties have made significant electoral gains in recent years. This paper focuses upon Italy, which is one of the countries in which there has been a significant resurgence of regionalism over the last ten years or so. Political regionalism is not a new phenomenon in Italy and there have been a number of examples of regionalist political parties during the history of the Italian Republic. However, it is the rise to political prominence of the Northern League (Lega Nord) (LN) political party in Italian politics which has brought to the fore questions about Italian national unity and identity. The party has articulated a new and politically more contentious 'Northern question', which is superimposed upon the long-standing 'Southern question' in Italy.

The fundamental political aim of the LN is the protection of Northern Italian economic and cultural interests and in order to do this the party proposed the creation of a federal Italian state, which would give greater autonomy to the North of Italy. More recently, however, the party has rejected its federalist rhetoric in favour of the hard-line discourse of secession of a place it calls 'Padania' (which roughly corresponds to Northern and Central Italy). The party claims to represent the whole of the 'Padanian nation', but the geography of the party's support is not uniform across the whole of the territory. This paper explores the ways in which the LN has communicated its main political discourses and then considers the reasons why these discourses have generated differing levels of support in three contrasting geographical contexts across Northern and Central Italy.

## Introduction

All over Europe, from the former Yugoslavia through Italy and Scotland, regional autonomy parties are loudly denouncing the perceived injustices of existing nation-states (Newell, 1994). The resurgence of regionalist political parties has had a considerable, though variable, impact on contemporary European politics in recent decades and there are numerous examples of such parties across Europe. For example, in Spain, the Catalan and Basque regionalist parties have gained considerable political importance. In the United Kingdom, there are the Scottish and Welsh Nationalist Parties. In Belgium, the regionalist political parties striving for greater regional autonomy for Flanders have become more prominent in recent years. In Italy, there are several regionalist parties such as the Südtiroler Volkspartei

(SVP) in South Tyrol and the Union Valdotaïne in the Valle d'Aosta region. However, it is the emergence in the last 15 years or so of the Northern League (Lega Nord) (LN) political party, in the North of Italy, which has given a new impetus to debates about the significance of regionalism in Italy as well as across Europe.

The LN's demands for greater regional autonomy are part of a wider trend among regionalist parties in Europe. However, the LN is important in the context of debates about European regionalism because of its distinctiveness from the majority of other regionalist parties. This is because the LN's political project is not based in an area that has historic claims to nationhood. Instead, the LN has attempted to invent an ethnicity for the North of Italy in order to justify its political claims for the protection of the economic interests of the region. The LN rejects the concept of the Italian nation-



Figure 1 The provinces of North-Central Italy

state and wants to create a separate state called 'Padania' ('Padania' is the Latin term which refers to the basin of the River Po) which encompasses the regions of North and Central Italy. 'Padania' has never existed geographically or historically but the LN has attempted to construct (and invent) a geography and a history in order to justify its territorial and political claims.

The LN, by virtue of its name, has a specific geographical focus to its political project. It is apparent, however, that although the LN claims to be the party of the North of Italy (or 'Padania') support for the party is not geographically uniform across the whole of the territory. This is because in certain areas the discourses of the LN have generated greater levels of electoral support and hence a stronger political identity. This paper explores the relative successes that the LN has had in three contrasting localities in North-Central Italy<sup>1</sup> to show how the support for the LN differs in contrasting geographical contexts. The reasons for the limited geographical appeal of the party will be explored in order to highlight the problems and limits to the success of the LN's attempts to construct (and invent) a new sociopolitical identity for the North of Italy (see Figure 1).

### The political project of the LN

In the early 1980s, the LN was generally seen as a protest group capitalizing on the corrupt clientelistic practices of the Italian political establishment. After its first electoral successes, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it seemed to articulate a diffuse dissatisfaction with the political class but it was assumed that the LN would eventually dissipate like so many other earlier political outbursts (Pileri et al., 1993: 86). However, the LN has not simply disappeared or been integrated by other political forces; in fact, far from it, because it has managed to become one of the primary forces of change within Italian politics. The LN has ensured that the issue of federalism has become part of the political agenda of the mainstream Italian political parties.

The enduring political stance of the LN is that it is the South of Italy (and especially Rome) which is the cause for all that is wrong with Italian society and politics. The LN argues that the North and its

citizens are penalized by a corrupt, bureaucratic and wasteful central state that is biased towards the South of Italy and Southern Italians. The strong anti-Southern discourse that the LN has articulated is the fundamental element in its political project. It has allowed the party to develop a hard-line and controversial image for itself as well as to articulate a sociocultural identity for the 'North' using the 'South' as the 'Other'. Undoubtedly, the LN utilizes existing stereotypes of the Italian South in its discourses when in fact it is clear that many of these are anachronistic, inaccurate and misleading. It is the LN's ability to politically represent as well as reproduce such anti-Southern sentiment in the North of Italy which has been the main reason for the growth of the party. However, this has also caused problems for the LN in certain areas because it is often viewed as being racist and against Italian national unity.

The LN was created out of the amalgamation of several 'regional Leagues' in Northern Italy (the two main ones being the Lega Lombarda (Lombard League) (LL) and the Liga Veneto (Veneto League), and has developed into a national political party. Initially the separate 'regional Leagues' stressed ethno-regional differences as a way of gaining electoral support, but this proved to be problematic for a number of reasons (Agnew, 1995). In 1991, after the formation of the LN, the party shifted away from an emphasis on ethno-regionalism to endorse its discourse of federalism. This was based on the division of Italy into three macro-regions: the North, Centre and South. The LN used the territorial reference to the 'North' as an effective way of representing and integrating the problems and protests of the diverse social sectors within the North of Italy (Agnew, 1995; Diamanti, 1995). This was the period in which the party expanded its support into other regions of Northern Italy, outside of Lombardia and Veneto and also into Central Italy (into regions such as Emilia-Romagna and Toscana) (see Figure 2).

In its most recent phase of development, the party has rejected its federalist rhetoric in favour of the hard-line discourse of secession and independence of 'Padania' from the rest of Italy. This coincided with the LN gaining its highest national political result in the 1996 national election.<sup>2</sup> The results for the party in this election showed that its electoral support actually deepened in the provinces in which



Figure 2 The structure of Italian regions

it gained its initial successes in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These provinces are in northern Lombardia (such as Varese, Como and Bergamo) and in the Veneto region (in Vicenza, Treviso and Belluno) (see Figure 1). This area of electoral

strength for the LN corresponds to a relatively homogeneous zone, socio-economically, in which there is a concentration of small and medium-sized firms. In the last 20 years it is this area which has become known as the industrialized or 'opulent'

periphery of Northern Italy (Allum and Diamanti, 1996: 152).

The political project of the LN has been based on several fundamental aspects, which have contributed to the political development of the party and enabled it to create a distinct sociopolitical identity which is really unlike anything that has existed in Italian politics since 1945. The crucial strength of the LN has been its ability to reshape its political line, while at the same time maintaining its *zoccolo duro* (main core) of supporters and activists. This loyalty to the party would seem to stem from a number of different angles. Diamanti (1995: 173) argues that the LN has created what he calls a 'clan identity', stemming from the sense of belonging which prevails between party supporters, activists and representatives within the party. This, he argues, is intensified because the party members have a kind of 'siege mentality' which emanates from the feeling that everything and everybody are against it. This stems from alleged media hostility towards the party, which has only served to intensify and consolidate internal solidarity (Tambini, 1993–4). One LN party activist explained that:

The Lega is not a political party but a 'movement' because it is about much more than politics. Following the LN is like a religion, a feeling that comes from within, and means much more than just supporting a political party. The LN does not have a particular ideology, like those of the parties on the Left or Right, it is a popular movement of the people of the North. The other parties are only interested in politics but the LN's mission is much more than that, it is to save the North of Italy.<sup>3</sup>

Another fundamental aspect in the political project of the LN has been the way it has utilized different and often unconventional communication strategies to convey its political message. These include the use of Northern Italian dialect to distinguish it from the traditional political parties; face-to-face recruitment of political activists and supporters; the use of distinct cultural and historic symbolism as well as a range of other strategies. Significantly, the party uses a direct, provocative and graphical style for its political messages. The party very rarely uses the images of its political candidates on its party messages and slogans, which is a specific strategy on the part of the party leader, Umberto Bossi. As an ex-LN Deputy explained:

The LN uses direct slogans and no faces on its propaganda because Bossi says that no person is bigger or more important than the party and its messages. It is a successful way of campaigning and it also ensures that Bossi remains the key figure in the LN.<sup>4</sup>

The most important example of the LN's use of cultural symbolism is the political 'home' of the LN, which is a small village called Pontida near the city of Bergamo in Lombardia. Historically, Pontida was the site of the swearing of the oath of allegiance between the various Lombard Leagues in 1167, which joined together in order to fight Frederick Barbarossa the conquering German Emperor (Tambini, 1993–4). The LN has vested this event with a political significance in several ways: first, it makes parallels between the party and the historical Lombard Leagues; second, the LN conducts its main political events in the town of Pontida, on the (alleged) actual site where the oath was made in the 12th century between the Lombard Leagues. Pontida has become a kind of 'political pilgrimage' for supporters of the LN, who travel from all over Northern Italy to visit the site. All of this contrives to give the LN a distinct identity and its role becomes not simply political but also social, cultural and historical.

Ruzza and Schmidtke (1992: 64) argue that the LN actually facilitated the 'discovery of Lombardness' because until recently most people who grew up in Lombardia were not too concerned with being 'Lombards'. Especially in the early years, the party emphasized the alleged cultural distinctiveness of Lombardia, which was based on a strong work ethic and culture of enterprise. More recently, the LN has attempted to create a 'Padanian' identity in the same way that a sense of 'Lombard' identity was (re)created (Biorcio, 1997). The fact that the LN has recently changed its name to Lega Nord per l'indipendenza della Padania (Northern League for the Independence of 'Padania'), reflects the hard-line shift in the party's rhetoric as well as its attempt to emphasize its political focus on 'Padania' rather than just the North of Italy. The LN is utilizing similar cultural and historical symbolism to garnish its political rhetoric and the party has already begun to produce publications on the history and culture of 'Padania'.<sup>5</sup>

'Padania' theoretically came into being on 15 September 1996 when it was declared sovereign and independent during a well-publicized LN

demonstration that took place along the River Po, in Northern Italy (the River Po represents the 'lifeflood' of 'Padania' for the LN). The LN's recent shift in emphasis to secession shows how the party is continuing to try to differentiate itself from the other Italian political parties and (re)create its anti-system image. However, this radical shift in the political discourse of the LN means that the party's future political intentions must be seriously questioned.

### Geographical context and political discourse

The most important factor in the political project of the LN has been its ability to incorporate different meanings, symbols and metaphors into a relatively coherent set of political discourses, which the party has managed to successfully communicate in a number of different ways. Therefore, an important aspect of the research reported here examined the political discourses and rhetoric of the LN, in order to understand how these have influenced and affected the success of the party in certain geographical contexts. The reason for doing this is to ground the study of the LN in local settings and to analyse the geographical aspects of a movement that defines itself very much in geographical terms.

Contemporary debates in human geography stress the importance of discourse analysis, which involves analysing how groups of meanings gain wider social and cultural significance to form dominant social and political discourses (Barnes and Duncan, 1992; Duncan and Ley, 1993; Foucault, 1981; Thrift, 1983). The concept of discourse and the ways in which it is produced and communicated is particularly useful in an analysis of contemporary political-geographical research, as Agnew (1995: 156) argues: 'Much of the geographical research connecting "place" and "politics" has tended to privilege the social and economic causes of support for political movements at the expense of examining the political-geographical claims and arguments of the movements themselves'.

The LN has managed to ascribe certain issues and terms with specific political meanings and significance. For example, according to the LN, the 'South' of Italy signifies a homogeneous

geographical unit, which is synonymous with 'corruption', 'Mafia' and 'inefficiency'. This has gained widespread political support in certain areas of the North of Italy, but it is a view of the 'South' that is clearly contestable. Interpreting the political discourses of the LN requires a recognition that meaning is by no means fixed or constant and is culturally, historically, as well as geographically variable (Barnes and Duncan, 1992: 6). The political implications of this are important because certain issues can be given a particular meaning in certain social and geographical contexts, which may be different in other areas. This is particularly relevant to the LN and its political project because the influence of its discourses and rhetoric are stronger in certain geographical contexts than others.

According to Agnew (1996: 132), the concept of geographical context refers to 'the hierarchical (and non-hierarchical) "funneling" of stimuli across geographical scales or levels to produce effects on politics and political behaviour'. However, geographical context does not just refer to the 'local' context but is actually the area in which both micro (localized) and macro (wide-ranging) processes of social structuration are jointly mediated. Agnew (1996: 133) argues that this approach assumes that 'political behaviour is inevitably structured by a changing configuration of social-geographical influences as global-local connections shift over time'. The relationship between the different causes and influences of electoral support in particular contexts is not a linear one; instead, what is important is the way that different causes 'come together' in different ways, in different places in order to determine the ways in which individuals decide to vote (Agnew, 1996: 138).

Focusing on the links between the geography of the LN and its political discourse facilitates a fuller understanding of the party's political rise through problematizing why the party's political discourse has been more successful in certain areas than in others. This helps us to understand the overall success of the LN and also the ways in which its political discourses have had to be modified to reflect dominant political-geographical contexts. It also recognizes that geography is of vital importance, in a number of ways, to the structure, discourses and successes of the LN and also to regionalist political parties more generally. Firstly, geographical context is important in influencing how

political and group identities are conditioned and produced because different identities are associated with particular places. This is the result of the interaction between a number of different factors, such as the symbolic, historical, cultural and linguistic specificities which exist in certain places. Second, there are geographical variations in both the resources that political groups are able to mobilize as well as how political institutions, socio-economic conditions and cultural contexts are distributed territorially. These differences can either constrain and/or assist the growth of regionalist political parties in particular places (Painter, 1995: 165).

The LN has a distinct electoral geography and it is apparent that there are certain areas in which the party has consistently gained support throughout its history (Diamanti, 1996). This raises a number of questions as to why it is that the LN has gained more electoral support in specific areas than in others. Natale (1991), in his work on the Lega Lombarda (LL) in the early 1990s, showed that the areas of electoral strength for the party were the relatively prosperous areas of Lombardia (in the provinces of Varese, Como and Bergamo), on the urban periphery, which were historically the strongholds of support for the Christian Democratic Party (DC). According to Natale (1991), the LL was able to present itself as the only party capable of answering the 'real needs' of the population in the face of the decline of the DC hegemony, and the LL was developing its own form of political subculture to replace the existing one associated with the DC.

According to Cento Bull (1993), the identification of the LL with a political subculture, as put forward by Natale (1991), was correct but incomplete because it did not provide an explanation for the emergence of the LL as a political subculture ready to challenge and replace the DC at the regional level in Lombardy. Cento Bull (1993) examined the links between the political success of the LL and the nature of economic restructuring in the industrial districts of Lombardy. Her analysis showed that the two provinces in which the LL obtained its best electoral results were in the provinces of Varese and Como, which both incurred a severe loss of employees in the manufacturing sector and only a moderate increase in their total level of employment in the early 1990s (1993: 217). She concluded (1993: 224) that the LL took on the representation of Lombardy's industrial districts at a time when this

model was facing a process of restructuring and was in need of government support. The LL presented itself as the only political party that wanted to preserve the local economy and so was able to benefit from the support of the entrepreneurs and artisans involved in the small-firm sector, as well as the local population more generally.

In the most recent national election in Italy, which took place in 1996, the results for the LN revealed that the party remains strongest in the most productive provinces of the North of Italy, where there are a higher number of small firms, a lower density of population and a history of support for the DC (Diamanti, 1996: 20). Moreover, Diamanti (1996) shows that the areas of electoral strength for the LN in the 1996 election correspond almost completely to the areas in which the party was strongest in the early 1980s. Messina (1998: 475) argues that the LN has been able to gain more support in the so-called 'white zone' of former support for the DC because it has inherited the discomfort and the identity crisis of this area but also all the governability problems, which were left unresolved by 40 years of DC government. Messina (1998: 476) argues that in order to understand the role of the LN we must be aware of the fact that it does not so much represent a social class but rather a local identity.

Diamanti (1996) argues that economic factors alone cannot account for an explanation of the electoral geography of the LN because in other economically similar areas of Northern and Central Italy the level of support for the LN still remains relatively weak. In certain areas, issues of economic restructuring and the political backlash against this have influenced the growth of the party. However, in other areas the LN has not been able to benefit from similar processes of economic restructuring, which suggests that other factors are influencing the level of support for the LN. This issue is explored in more detail in the following sections, which examine the ways in which support for the LN differs in three contrasting geographical locations across North and Central Italy.

### Varese – *La terra di Bossi* – a heartland of support

The province of Varese is very important for the

LN in both political and symbolic terms. First of all, it was the birthplace of the Lega Lombarda as well as Umberto Bossi, the leader of the party. The commune of Varese was the first in Northern Italy to elect a LN *sindaco* (mayor); the province of Varese was also the first to elect a LN *presidente* (president). In addition, at the national level, Varese was the first province in Italy to elect a LN senator (Bossi) and a LN deputy (Giuseppe Leoni) to the Italian Parliament. Undoubtedly, Varese has been and continues to be one of the heartlands of support for the LN,<sup>6</sup> and so it constitutes an important example of an area where the LN is very strong with significantly deep political and social roots. Analysing the reasons which have influenced the growth of the LN in Varese is fundamental in understanding why the party has gained support in other areas across the North of Italy.

In the last 50 years the province of Varese, as with the other areas that make up the so-called 'industrial triangle' of Milan-Turin-Genoa, has undergone a significant economic expansion, especially in the manufacturing sector. This development has ensured that Varese is one of the most economically developed areas in the whole of Italy. In recent years, however, the economy of Varese has undergone a period of restructuring, which has meant that unemployment in the province increased to around 6 percent (this is relatively high for the province). In particular, the textiles sector, which was a very important employer in the province, has decreased in size over the last few years.<sup>7</sup> The other main sector to be hard hit has been Varese's aeronautics industry, which was another large employer in the province. The density of small firms in Varese has been crucial to the development of the province's economy, but this sector has also faced significant challenges in recent years. In particular, the small-firm sector in Varese (as elsewhere in Northern Italy) is faced with higher taxes forced upon it by the central Italian government. Second, small firms are faced with increased competition from the European Union and South East Asia so it has become more difficult for Italian small firms to find new markets.<sup>8</sup>

The postwar development of Varese's economy was accompanied by the rise in political importance of the DC, which was the main party in the province up until 1992. The DC became deeply embedded into the socio-economic and cultural spheres of the

province, promoting the importance of family values and the Church as well as the virtues of the culture of enterprise and work ethic in Varese. This was because of the party's vast networks of linked organizations, such as Church groups and socio-economic institutions, and its extensive patronage and clientelistic links. The decline of the DC has therefore had a significant impact upon the province of Varese.<sup>9</sup> The whole political, economic and social infrastructure, which the DC had created and maintained largely for its own political gains but also to maintain the socio-economic success of the province was affected. At the same time, Varese's economy was undergoing significant restructuring, which meant that its previously high growth rates were being reduced considerably.

The decline of the DC in Varese (as well as the other main parties) created a political hiatus and meant that former DC supporters had to find an alternative political party for which to vote. The LN, as a relatively new political force in Varese, was able to capture a large proportion of the protest vote in the province. The LN endorsed greater autonomy for the regions of Northern Italy and a rejection of what it saw as central-state bureaucracy and corruption, which was undermining the dynamism of the economy of Varese and the North of Italy in general. The rhetoric of the LN particularly appealed to the small-firm sector of Varese, which was facing considerable problems and resented the high levels of taxation imposed upon it by the central Italian government. It was the strength of antipathy towards the Italian State in Varese which ensured that the LN was able to capture the votes of people who felt disgruntled at what they saw as poor public services in the province. As an ex-LN Deputy claims:

Varese is one of the richest provinces in Italy and so the people of the province demand a high level of public service. Yet, local services are very poor and cannot meet the requirements of the people who are frustrated because they have to pay high taxes but get very little in return.<sup>10</sup>

For the LN and its supporters in Varese the problems of the central State are intertwined with anti-Southern sentiments. The central State is portrayed by the LN as being biased towards the South, which has fuelled resentment among the citizens of Varese and has helped the party to expand its support in the province. This is in part

linked to what the LN defines as the Southernization of the public sector. The party is against what it argues are public-sector jobs being taken by people from the South of Italy while civil servants from Varese remain unemployed. Furthermore, the LN argues that immigration is in fact a danger to the local traditions, values and customs of the province of Varese. As the LN Provincial Secretary of Varese stated:

The immigration of *terroni*<sup>11</sup> and more recently *extracomunitari*<sup>12</sup> is changing the social structure of Varese and other areas of the North of Italy. The influx of *extracomunitari* has caused more problems, such as theft, the use and sale of drugs and general petty crime. The 'black economy' gets bigger every day and the social cohesion of Varese and other towns in the province is disintegrating. The LN wants to protect and maintain the traditional values, dialects and culture of these areas.<sup>13</sup>

The alleged differences between the culture and traditions of Varese are stressed by the supporters of the LN as another way of differentiating themselves from what is perceived to be the Southern 'Other'. Within Varese it is apparent that there is certainly a strong affiliation with local territory and a sense of *campanilismo*.<sup>14</sup> The history of municipal autonomy in the province strengthens this feeling, as does its geographical location in the 'far North' of Italy. The LN has certainly not created this sense of identity and cultural distinctiveness, but yet again because of its political discourse, which stresses the protection of the culture and traditions of Varese, the party has been able to translate this feeling into political support. The LN is saying what the people want to hear and what they have been saying for a considerable amount of time. In this respect, the discourse of the party is further strengthened by the myths, misconceptions and prejudices which are commonly held. In particular, Bossi in his political speeches often makes reference to the 'Celtic cultural heritage' of Varese and uses Celtic folklore and symbolism in his rhetoric. This serves to strengthen the feeling of cultural distinctiveness within the province and further demarcates the differences between the culture of Varese and the South of Italy. For the LN, the culture and identity of Varese is much closer to that of Northern Europe, which is a key element in its discourse as it tries to differentiate Varese from the South of Italy. By doing this the LN aims to reduce the legitimacy and

importance of Rome and the central Italian State and also to promote a feeling of closer links to Europe.

The specific geographical context of the province of Varese has provided a very fertile sociopolitical context for the LN. The party has benefited from a certain 'mix' of factors that produced a set of social and political responses, which the LN has been able to build upon but also reproduce for its own political aims. In particular, the problems facing the economy of the province fuelled resentment among the business community, which rejected the burden of the central state in favour of greater fiscal autonomy. In addition, the decline of the existing political subculture built around DC hegemony was also very significant. Furthermore, the symbolic and political origins of the LN in Varese are important for the party and there is still a close link between the province and the party because of Bossi. However, in other areas of Northern Italy this 'mix' of factors has not produced the same responses, for a number of reasons. This is especially true for the LN in the province of Trento where the party has not been able to gain the same level of support as in Varese. The next section discusses the reasons for this in more detail.

### Trento – the Lega Nord in an autonomous province

Trento, along with the province of Bolzano, forms the 'Special Status' region of Trentino Alto-Adige in the North East of Italy (see Figure 2). This region's economy, society and culture are distinct from the majority of other Italian regions for a number of reasons. First, it is one of only five regions in Italy to have this 'Special Status', which gives it a significant degree of autonomy from the central Italian government as well as a different set of institutional, political and socio-economic structures. Second, the region has a specific culture and identity partly because of its geographical location, its long history of autonomy and the ethnic and linguistic mix of its population.<sup>15</sup> Third, the region itself is one of the wealthiest in the whole of Italy and has one of the lowest unemployment rates. The specific sociopolitical and socio-economic characteristics of Trento provide a distinct environment for the LN, which ensures that the

LN's political discourses do not have the same impacts as they do in the party's heartlands of support. In order to gain electoral support the party has had to modify its political rhetoric to take into account Trento's distinctiveness. This has enabled the LN to gain some electoral success,<sup>16</sup> but this is partly due to its success across the North of Italy rather than the party's ability to develop consistent bases of electoral support within Trento. To a large extent, it would seem that the geographical specificities and differences between Trento and the rest of Northern Italy contrive to make the province infertile political ground for the LN.

For centuries the province of Trento was a relatively impoverished agricultural area, which was beset with problems of emigration. However, during the last 25 years or so, Trento has undergone a massive socio-economic, institutional and social transformation, mainly due to the province's autonomy, which has had a number of significant impacts. Primarily, it has guaranteed the province large amounts of central-government funding, which has undoubtedly influenced the socio-economic development of the province. Overall, the organization of the province is different in terms of its territorial and political-administrative structure, and this means that public administration is the biggest employment sector in the whole province (Coppola, 1994). Trento's autonomy has ensured a high standard of living and quality of life for the majority of its citizens. Moreover, it ensures that the province has a greater degree of power at the local level than the majority of other Italian provinces. However, there are a number of different problems with Trento's autonomous political and institutional structures.

Trento's autonomy ensures that some of the factors that had contributed to the growth of the LN across Northern Italy, such as discontent with the bureaucracy and inefficiency of the central Italian State, are not as widely felt in the province. In particular, the issue of the mismatch between high levels of taxation and alleged poor public services, which is one of the key discourses of the LN elsewhere in Northern Italy, is not as important in Trento. This is because of the fact that the province receives 90 percent of its tax revenues back from the central government and public services are relatively good. Consequently, the challenge for the LN has been to adapt its political discourses in order to make them more applicable within Trento.

According to the LN, Trento's autonomy is not 'real' because it is basically Rome that has the greatest control. For the LN the only way in which 'real' autonomy can be realized in the province is if real power is given to it to make its own decisions. In criticizing Trento's autonomy the LN attempts to include the province in the arguments surrounding the problems of the centralized Italian State. The party goes even further by claiming that the Trento is too bureaucratic and wasteful, and makes a direct comparison between it and the central government in Rome. As an ex-regional councillor for the LN summarized:

The province of Trento gets massive amounts of money from central government but the citizens have no real accountability. In spite of all the public money, there has been no real development of wealth creating industries, and instead a kind of 'assisted economy' has been created, which simply consumes massive amounts of State money to sustain public sector jobs and services.<sup>17</sup>

The LN's discourse of federalism in Trento has proved to be quite problematic for the party. This is because the LN is rather vague about the type of federalism it would introduce and more importantly how it would be possible, within a federal structure, for Rome to maintain its funding of Trento's massive budget. Moreover, with the LN now endorsing its discourse of secession for the state of 'Padania' it has created a number of problems for itself in Trento. Primarily, this is because the province is geographically and culturally very different to 'Padania' because of its mountainous location on the edge of the Alps. Thus, it is not clear whether the people of Trento will continue to support the LN because of the emphasis on 'Padania' and the specific set of cultural values and traditions related to it. This is an example of how the rhetoric of the LN, at the national level, has a negative impact upon the image of the party at the provincial level. The LN in Trento has to endorse the new hard-line direction of the party but yet also suffer the consequences of any problems that this will create. As the National Secretary of the LN in Trento explained:

The people of Trento do not really identify with the concept of 'Padania'. The culture, identity and traditions of the two areas are totally different. That is not to say that 'Padania' is not important because it is a metaphor for the common culture and identity for the North of

Italy and anyway the geographical boundaries of 'Padania' are not really fixed in the conventional sense. For the people of Trento, 'Padania' symbolises a set of values rather than a specific geographical region in the conventional sense.<sup>18</sup>

Another feature of the LN in Trento is that the party has generally gained greater success in national and regional elections in the province, while in local elections the party has generally done badly. The reason for this is in part due to the anti-system image of the party, which at the local level generates less electoral support. As the National Secretary of the LN Trento pointed out:

The LN is viewed as a radical party and one that wants to instigate change. At the local level this is not necessarily a good thing because local people in local elections are only really interested in local issues. However, at the national scale it seems that the people are more prepared to vote for the LN because the changes it wants to create are radical but at the same time quite distant.<sup>19</sup>

The province's autonomy means that some of the issues which have influenced the growth of the party elsewhere in the North of Italy are not as strong in Trento. This has been a constraining factor upon the growth of the LN in the province. However, because of the province's autonomy there are a whole set of other issues and problems, of which the LN has been able to take advantage mainly by the way it has tailored its political discourse. The party has targeted what it sees as the key issues in the province – the relatively high levels of bureaucracy, political instability, and the lack of strategic policy making – and incorporated these into its political discourse. Therefore, the party has merged its national discourses with those more specific to Trento, a province whose citizens nevertheless share many of the issues and concerns found elsewhere in the North of Italy. On the other hand, the province of Macerata is outside the North of Italy but still a part of the LN's creation of 'Padania'. This creates a different set of issues and problems for the LN (as is discussed in the next section), not least because the party has had to tone down its anti-Southern rhetoric.

Macerata: the centre of 'Italy' or the border of 'Padania'?

The province of Macerata within the Marche region of Central Italy is an area of weaker electoral support

for the LN (see Figures 1 and 2).<sup>20</sup> Clearly, one of the key factors for the lower level of electoral support is the geographical position of the province. This is a significant issue for the LN because the Marche region is situated outside the 'North' of Italy and so outside the boundaries of the party's zone of support as defined by the party's name. However, the discourse of 'Padania', which the LN now endorses, refers to a geographical area which is much more broadly (and vaguely) defined and includes the whole of Central Italy, comprising the three regions of Toscana, Umbria and Marche. In not referring to the 'North', the LN is attempting to expand its potential 'imagined community' and zone of support out of the North and into Central Italy. However, this is a problematic process. Understanding why the discourses of the LN do not appeal to the kinds of social groups in Macerata which support the party in the heartlands of support elsewhere in the North of Italy goes some way to understanding some of the constraints that the LN faces in expanding its electoral support elsewhere in Central Italy.

In the last three decades, the socio-economic development of the province of Macerata has taken place relatively rapidly. The reasons for Macerata's development are similar to those which have influenced the growth of the so-called 'Third Italy', which encompasses the Central and North East areas of Italy (Bagnasco, 1988; Trigilia, 1986). The economy of Macerata has been largely influenced by the dominant structure of agriculture in the province – the *Mezzadria* structure. As with elsewhere in the 'Third Italy', this system ensured a specific type of diffuse industrialization based largely upon dense networks of small and medium-sized firms (often family-owned) which have a close link to agriculture.

The economic take-off of the province in the 1960s brought with it a rapid increase in the standard of living for most of the citizens of Macerata. One of the preconditions of this was the overlapping of modern industrial activities with the traditional social structure, both co-existing in relative harmony. The socio-economic development of Macerata has ensured a massive social and economic 'uplift' for the majority of its citizens, but in spite of this the social structure of the province has not changed significantly. It is still very strong and based on traditional family values and the

teachings of the Church, and there has been no real change in the urban structure of the province of Macerata or indeed the Marche region.

Macerata's economy is as dynamic as those areas of Lombardia and Veneto where the LN has gained its highest levels of support and its citizens are confronted with many of the same problems which face the majority of people across Northern Italy. In theory, the province of Macerata could be seen as a potential zone of support for the LN, given the nature of its socio-economic structure and the problems which confront its economy and small-firm sector. However, it is clear that the political rhetoric of the LN does not have the same impact in the province as it does in the regions of Lombardia, Veneto, or indeed across most of the North of Italy. The LN has received a negligible amount of electoral support in Macerata and so the key question is: Why have the discourses and rhetoric of the LN not been as popular in Macerata, as they have been in other areas of the North of Italy?

One important factor is that the economy of Macerata has not undergone the same kinds of restructuring processes as have taken place elsewhere in the North of Italy. Unlike the 'far North' of Italy, where the LN has gained considerable support from people angry at the alleged poor quality of the state bureaucracy and public services, in Macerata such sentiments are not as widely felt, partly because the quality of public services is relatively good. In the recent past the Marche region received considerable levels of public funding from the central government in Rome. Indeed, the southernmost province of the Marche, Ascoli Piceno, was the northernmost province in Italy to receive aid from the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno ('The Fund for the Italian South'), which only stopped a few years ago.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the Marche had very close political links to Rome and central government because it was a very strong base of support for the DC; as the General Secretary of the CISL trade union for the province of Macerata explained:

The Marche region has always really received more money from Rome than it pays back by way of taxes. The region benefited from its links to the DC through the patronage and clientelism which existed. The people are reluctant to change a system which has brought a relatively good standard of living when previously there had been poverty and social hardship.<sup>22</sup>

In Macerata, largely as a result of its geographical location, there is greater concern for the issues of solidarity between the North and South of Italy as well as those of national unity, and this serves to undermine the appeal of the LN in the province. This ensures that the federalist discourse of the LN in Macerata is commonly rejected. Moreover, LN party activists and the citizens of Macerata alike view the LN's discourse of secession with a considerable amount of scepticism. The LN's project of 'Padania' has very little sense for the overwhelming majority of the citizens of Macerata (as well as the Marche as a whole). As a LN party activist explained:

The people of Macerata do not feel a part of 'Padania' and so now it is even more important for us to campaign at the local level to make them realise that the LN is about local issues and wants to protect local jobs. We must make people realise that 'Padania' is only one aspect of the politics of the LN because it is clear that it does not mean anything here.<sup>23</sup>

By calling for secession, the LN hopes that the people of the Marche will want to remain a part of 'Padania', or at least the North of Italy, mainly because of its relative wealth and economic strength. However, it remains very doubtful whether the party will be able to increase its level of support in the province by endorsing the discourse of secession. Ironically, with the rejection of federalism the LN stands to lose more support than it will gain through the inclusion of the Marche in its discourse of 'Padania'.

There are a number of other problems which have restricted the growth of the LN in Macerata. For example, a major hurdle for the LN in the province is to gain enough people to help with party activities and also generate enough money to fund the growth and development of the party. Also, as a relatively new political party, the LN in Macerata has not established formal internal structures and it would seem that sometimes this causes conflicts between different personalities. A more serious problem for the LN in Macerata has been overcoming the apparent stigma which goes along with being a member of the party in the province. As the LN Provincial Secretary argued: 'In Macerata there is a great stigma attached to openly being a supporter or member of the LN. The main worry is not being able to gain favours and recommendations within

the clientelistic networks that exist within the province.<sup>24</sup>

It is clear that the task of the LN in Macerata is a very difficult one and that there are many problems and constraints facing the party. Undoubtedly, the geographical location of the province is the major constraint for the LN, which ensures that the rhetoric of the party, and especially its anti-Southern messages, are not as popular as they are further North. Moreover, the image of the party nationally means that the LN in Macerata is viewed rather negatively precisely because of its hard-line rhetoric. This has been a recurrent problem for the party in Macerata and it seems likely that this image will get even worse with the LN endorsing secession and the division of Italy. It is clear that even though the province is confronted by similar socio-economic problems to areas in the North, the political response to these problems is different. For the time being, in the opinion of the majority of its citizens, Macerata remains quite clearly at the 'centre' of Italy rather than the 'border' of 'Padania'.

## Conclusion

The resurgence of regionalism in Italy has taken a relatively unusual but powerful form, which is associated with the rise of the LN. Before the LN, the idea of a separate Northern Italian nation called 'Padania' was unheard of; however, in recent years the LN has managed to put the issue onto the political agenda and also into the minds of a considerably large number of people in the North of Italy. This is especially the case in the heartlands of support for the LN, such as Varese, where the party has been able to generate significant electoral support and develop a distinct sociopolitical identity.

Varese is one of the provinces of Northern Italy where the growth of the LN has been most marked. The LN has been able to take advantage of the widespread resentment and anger felt by the citizens of Varese towards the alleged problems of the Italian central state. However, the real success of the LN in Varese has been its ability to interpret and reflect such problems and issues in its political discourse for its own political advantage. The political sphere of influence of the LN, though, has clear

geographical limitations. The party's lower electoral standing shows this in the respective provinces of Trento and Macerata where the party's political discourses have been viewed less favourably for a number of reasons. In Trento, the desire to gain greater autonomy from the central Italian State, which is relatively strong in Varese, is not really an issue because the province already has a significant degree of autonomy. But the issue of geographical context is of paramount importance in understanding why the LN has only been able to gain a very low level of electoral support in the province of Macerata. The main reason for this is that Macerata is outside the North of Italy and so is outside the party's 'imagined community'.

All three of the case-study provinces were traditionally areas with a dominant 'white' political subculture, based upon the hegemony of the DC. In light of the decline in importance of the DC, the important question is how the dominant social, economic, institutional and cultural values in the three areas are politically represented (and hence reproduced) in the post-DC era. In Varese, the LN has benefited from the decline of the DC and has managed to gain a significant amount of support from ex-DC supporters. In Trento, however, the LN has not managed to gain as much support and in Macerata the decline of the DC has not resulted in a growth of the LN. Therefore, it is apparent that in certain areas of Northern Italy, most notably in Lombardia and Veneto, the LN has managed to reshape (or indeed replace) the 'white' political subculture with what Diamanti (1996) calls a 'green' political subculture. However, in other areas, which are outside the heartlands of support for the LN, it is clear that the party has not been able to develop any consistent bases of electoral support.

Understanding geographical context is of vital importance in understanding why the LN has been able to gain more support in some areas than in others. This is shown by the ways in which the discourses of the LN have generated differing levels of electoral support. Moreover, there are specific geographical limits to the success of the LN's political discourse, which it seems will be difficult to overcome. The endorsement of the secession of a place called 'Padania' is the latest attempt by the party to overcome the geographical limitations to its political project and (re)define its role in Italian politics and society. The LN is proclaiming itself as

a kind of *volkspartei* ('people's party') and aims to construct a form of 'neo-ethnicity' for the 'Padanian nation', made up of citizens who do not necessarily have a common history, geography, culture or language but share an identity derived from similar socio-economic values and attitudes. It seems, however, that it will be very difficult for the LN to become the main political party for the whole of 'Padania'. Instead, it seems that the party will remain strong in particular geographical contexts where its political discourses will continue to generate a considerable amount of support. The political implications of this remain to be seen.

## Appendix

The findings reported here are taken from my doctorate, which was undertaken in the Geography Department of the University of Durham between 1994 and 1997. The research was carried out during the period from January 1996 to August 1996. Within each of the three case-study areas, intensive interviews were carried out with LN party activists, representatives and supporters. All the interviews were conducted in Italian and were largely semi-structured and on a one-to-one basis, although some group interviews were carried out. The interviews explored a range of issues; the most important being why and for what reasons people supported the LN. In addition, other issues related to the structure of the party in the local area; the role that the interviewees carried out in the party and their views on the different discourses of the party. The number of interviews carried out with LN supporters varied in each of the case-study areas, due to differences in electoral support and organizational structures.

In Varese, there were significantly more LN supporters and representatives than in the other two case-study areas and so it was possible to carry out a greater number of interviews. Overall, over 50 interviews were carried out with supporters, representatives and key-informants in the province. In Trento and Macerata, however, because of the lower levels of electoral support for the LN, fewer interviews were carried out. In Trento, 12 interviews with key informants and supporters were carried out, while in Macerata the figure was 5.

In addition, in each of the case-study areas, a series of semi-structured interviews was carried out with a number of different key-informants from a variety of institutions and organizations. These included trade unions, other political parties, the Church, private enterprise, local newspapers, industrial associations and chambers of commerce. The aim was to explore how specific socio-economic, political, institutional and cultural contexts facilitated or hindered the growth of the LN. In Varese, a total of 24 interviews, in Trento 37 interviews and in Macerata 10 interviews were carried out.

The information gained from the interviews with both LN supporters and representatives as well as the different key-informants is presented in extracts from notes taken in the field. The reason for this is that the interviews carried out were not tape-recorded. Instead, extensive notes were taken both during and after the interviews in order to record the information. There are several reasons why this method was used: first, it was apparent that both the supporters and (in particular) the party activists of the LN were very hostile to outsiders and particularly to journalists. The interviews explored relatively sensitive political and social issues and so it was apparent that the use of a tape recorder was not appropriate in these circumstances. This allowed a greater amount of in-depth information to be discussed than would have been the case in the presence of a tape recorder. Moreover, this allowed a greater degree of trust and reciprocity between interviewer and interviewees to develop over time, which was conducive to facilitating informative discussions.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The first area is the province of Varese, in Lombardia, in which the LN is relatively electorally strong. The second area is the province of Macerata, in the Marche region of Central Italy, which has a very low level of electoral support for the LN. The autonomous province of Trento forms the third area because it has an intermediate level of electoral support for the LN and also because of its contrasting set of institutional and political structures due to its constitutional autonomy from the central Italian state. (See Appendix for details of the ways in which the fieldwork was carried out in each of the case-study areas.)
- <sup>2</sup> The LN gained 10.1% in the national Italian election of April 1996, which was an increase of 2% nationally from the 1994 national election. This meant that the LN gained 90 parliamentarians and was the largest party in the regions of Lombardy and Veneto with over 35% of the vote.
- <sup>3</sup> Author's fieldnotes: extract from interview with a LN party official in the province of Varese, 26/2/96.
- <sup>4</sup> Author's fieldnotes: extract from interview with an ex-LN Deputy for Trento in the Italian Parliament, 9/7/96.
- <sup>5</sup> See Oneto (1997). Gilberto Oneto is head of the Libera Compagnia Padana, (a cultural organization linked to the LN), aimed at diffusing the awareness of 'Padanian' culture and identity.
- <sup>6</sup> In the 1996 national Italian election, the LN gained over 29% of the vote in each of the seven electoral constituencies in the province of Varese.
- <sup>7</sup> Information taken from author's fieldnotes: extract from interview with the Secretary General of the CGIL Trade Union, province of Varese, 4/4/96.
- <sup>8</sup> Information taken from author's fieldnotes: extract from interview with the Vice Secretary General of the Artisans Association of the Province of Varese, 5/4/96.
- <sup>9</sup> The DC had a stake in every one of the postwar Italian governments, up until the landmark elections of 1994. The corruption scandals, which became known as *Tangentopoli* ('kick-back' city) involved all the main political parties and came about after judicial investigations which revealed the endemic and systematic nature of corruption in the Italian political and economic system. This ensured the disintegration of the two main postwar parties of government in Italy, the DC and the Communists (PCI).
- <sup>10</sup> Author's fieldnotes: extract from interview with an ex-LN Deputy for Varese in the Italian parliament, 3/4/96.
- <sup>11</sup> *Terroni* is a derogatory term used by people of the North for people of the South of Italy, literally translated it means 'dirt-scratchers'.
- <sup>12</sup> *Extracomunitari* is the word used to describe people who come to Italy from countries outside the European Union. It is often used in a derogatory fashion.
- <sup>13</sup> Author's fieldnotes: extract from interview with the LN Provincial Secretary for Varese, 30/4/96.
- <sup>14</sup> *Campanilismo* is the term used to describe the feeling of belonging that Italians have to their place of birth.
- <sup>15</sup> The region has a mix of different ethnic and linguistic groups, of which the three main ones are Italian, German and Ladin (the oldest and the smallest linguistic group in Trentino Alto-Adige). Trento's population is mostly Italian-speaking, although 8000 people are of Ladin origin and 2000 speak an ancient German language. On the other hand, in the province of Bolzano, 68% of the population are German-speakers, 28% are Italian-speakers and 4% are Ladin-speakers.
- <sup>16</sup> In the 1996 national elections, the LN in Trento gained 21% of the vote.
- <sup>17</sup> Author's fieldnotes: extract from interview with a co-founder and ex-regional councillor of the LN in Trento, 5/7/96.
- <sup>18</sup> Author's fieldnotes: extract from interview with the National Secretary of the LN Trento, 4/7/96.
- <sup>19</sup> Author's fieldnotes: extract from interview with the National Secretary of the LN Trento, 4/7/96.
- <sup>20</sup> In the 1996 national election, the LN gained less than 2% of the vote in the province of Macerata.
- <sup>21</sup> Information taken from author's fieldnotes: interview with the Provincial Secretary of the CGIL Trade Union in Macerata, 24/5/96.
- <sup>22</sup> Author's fieldnotes: extract from interview with the General Secretary of the CISL Trade Union in Macerata, 30/5/96.
- <sup>23</sup> Author's fieldnotes: extract from a group discussion with the Macerata LN party activists, 29/5/96.
- <sup>24</sup> Author's fieldnotes: extract from interview with the LN Provincial Secretary for Macerata and the LN candidate for the Macerata constituency in the 1996 election for the Italian parliament, 20/5/96.

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