Civil Society: Political groups and cultural production.
Methodological notes for a case study

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This research is based on a study of the Northern League political culture carried out towards the end of the 1990s and represent the basis of political theoretical in progress of the Northern League. The analysis used The Leagues political sources (neo-ethnic works, the daily newspaper Padania, and Leagues political posters 1979-84). The Political communication of this political actor covers various periods of its career, up to and including 1997 electoral success. Subsequently, the political actor lost a part of its support as it moved towards an institutional role, less strong electorally, but still hegemonically efficient (Bossi-Fini Immigration Law; devolution, reform of the State). It can be claimed that three universal policies, implemented by the present government have been influenced by the League's ideological framework. The characteristics of the Northern League's cultural and political production is analysed using Gramsci's concept of hegemony.

Flanking the legal order (i.e. the government) that asserts the domination of the class in power, Gramsci identified a further super-structural element that he called 'hegemony'. It is a concept defined in cultural terms and which is expressed through the practice of discursive institutions (parties, schools, universities, newspapers, publishing houses and cultural institutes); they accompany and integrate government activity. The transmission of dominant values cannot be achieved exclusively by coercion, but must necessarily include socialisation processes. In distancing himself from Marxist theory in which civil society coincided with bourgeois society (the sphere of economic relations) Gramsci emphasised the importance of ideological-cultural relations as indispensable for building consent. In this analysis, I have privileged the institutionalisation process of parties in Italy, understood as highly representative groups of civil society that act as interpreters of public discourse; groups that act in defence of values and/or intervene in the political sphere and that represent, moreover, the medium for building consensus. The Gramscian framework allows us to analyse empirically the productive discourse of the social groups concerned (parties and ideological pressure groups) without being forced to render their organised communication ideological. Ideology is one of the most complex concepts in political science, because it is one of the possible relations that exists between the meanings and the political and social practice of the groups being discussed. A social group can become hegemonic to the extent that its ideology becomes common sense; in other words when the ideological meanings are recognised by the majority of the population. Il dizionario di politica of Bobbio, Matteucci and Pasquino has interpreted this political concept with reference to two typologies: Weak meaning and strong meaning: "In its weak meaning, ideology represents the genus, or variously define species of political beliefs: a set of ideas and values concerning the political order, whose function is to act as a guide for collective political behaviour. The strong meaning originated in Marx's concept of 'ideology', understood as false consciousness of the relations of domination
between classes, it differs clearly from the weak meaning because it places the
notion of falsity at its core: ideology as false consciousness.". The weak and
strong meanings, despite expressing the concept's complexity and the various
levels on which it is conceptually located, do not, however, allow us to
penetrate the cultural production of a specific social group. At this level, a
number of epistemological problems are raised, instead, by Allum's
interpretative framework, such as, for example, the capacity of a social group
to build a culture of its own. A social group is a more comprehensive entity
than a social class because it is defined not only in terms of economic factors
but also by cultural ones. Culture is a category by which one can observe the
ability of the group concerned to propose reference meanings and values, since
they are defined by the author as "systems of meaning through which a social
system is transmitted and reproduced". While for Bobbio ideology as false
consciousness was derived from the marxist concept, in Allum, the perspective
changes, his analysis has a Gramscian matrix, based on the relation between
consciousness and practice. According to Allum, the ideological theories
deriving from Marx and Engels are twofold: (a) ideology understood as a
system of beliefs shared by a certain class: "it is not men's consciousness that
determines their being, but on the contrary it is their social being that
determines their consciousness". Every class on the basis of its relations to the
means of production is able to express a specific culture which reflects its
material conditions of existence; (b) the relations between classes is always of
an ideological-political-economic nature because the structure (economic
base) necessarily conditions the superstructure (legal-politico-ideological-
cultural system): "The ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas". What is
recovered from the Marxian legacy is the concept of ideology conceived as an
interested process in which a social group elaborates to achieve its own ends.
In this way, Allum resolves the problem of false consciousness associated with
ideology which becomes, instead, one of those meanings employed by a social
group to assert its own interests. The dominant social group expresses its own
vision which does not conceal the reality which its represents but limits itself to
justifying it. The system of meanings (inherited from the Gramscian notion of
consciousness) sets itself out as a continuum between two poles: at one end the
highest level of coherence and internal articulation and at the other the highest
level of spontaneity and minimum level of articulation. Hence, there is
philosophy near the first pole and 'mentality' near the second. His system of
meanings has a vertical relationship with social practice. On the basis of this
schema (conceptual map), ideology is defined as "a set of ideas and values,
concepts and keywords structured more or less coherently by means of which a
social group interprets the world". In Figure 1 are outlined the meanings
proposed by the social groups and the nature (strong or weak) of the relations
that they have with social praxis. Philosophy is the most articulated response of
a social group(s) to its/their situation; it is a long-term reflection, presented in
terms of abstract reasoning, little affected by social in the sense that it is not
directly affected. The social group, through its philosophical framework
institutionalises the normative principles of the organisation, articulating a
discourse in a written form, found in documentary sources (statutes, internal
and external publications), based on rational argument, rich in content and
addressed to an expert public or specialists. Ideology, on the other hand, is the
response of a social group to its immediate problems and, in particular, to those
met with in asserting itself as hegemonic group (close links with praxis).
Ideology is present in oral and written communication, and its arguments appeal to meanings of a philosophical nature even if less complex. It is a form of communication centred on a few restricted, but convincing, arguments, rich in key words, addressed both to members of the group and the public at large (slogans, proverbs, mottoes). Tradition represents the reality of the group concerned, based on the repetition of ritual events whose origin forms part of the group itself.

The nature of argument depends on the institutionalisation of the collective reality in question: it is likely that one will meet a large number of arguments linked to tradition among older groups, engaged in legitimisation (founding and originating myths, material objects with a high symbolic level, like gadgets, icons, places and visual images). They are the natural result of a careful selection of collective memory, or of a social group, found in an essentially oral-type of communication, even if fragments of traditional discourse are present also in more articulated meanings (philosophy and ideology). Its communication is addressed as much within the organisation as outside, sharing with ideology that larger expendability within in the entire social context in which the group operates. Common sense is principally the "way of thinking most widely diffused throughout society; it is a mixture of everyday notions, popular wisdom and ideologised concepts, organised in a fragmentary form or a chaotic set of diverse conceptions". Its relation with social practice is direct or rather is based on a direct (i.e. unmediated) view of

the world. Common sense, nourished by contamination from ideological constructs, is the most widely diffused opinion in society. Hence, there is a pressure for ideology (or its ambition) to present itself as an extension of common sense. The immediate nature of its communication often assumes the form of stereotypes, sometimes prejudices, when it fulfils the needs of the social group to distance itself from the context in which it is operating. It is a case of the oral content which, full of argument, although not very articulated from a rational point of view. It is addressed to the whole public. Finally, mentality includes elements of past culture exploited with the object of defining its identity. It is presented in the form of a portrait of reality, constructed from opinions, recurring among group members. It is difficult for the observer to identify because it is not expressed in written or oral communication, but rather reveals the actors identity, the profound motivations that inspire his everyday behaviour. Its communication is, thus, implicit in the praxis that results from the identity of collective customs.

Once the horizontal relations that exist between the various levels of meanings developed by a social group have been outlined, it is necessary to examine the vertical relations between meanings and social praxis. The latter relationship raises several definitional problems that we can endeavour to resolve in the following manner, even if the observation is intended to verify the reliability of the following hypotheses: (a) culturally relevant practices are those that derive from struggles between different groups. The social group seeks to assert its own organisation on a territorial level (nation, region, city, district, village, community, etc.) and its very differences to other groups (patrimonial, sex, religion, ethnic or racial roots, occupation, membership of different classes, generations, etc). The possibility of a group to develop solidarity on one of these dimensions depends on its capacity to organise itself, its relations with other groups, or the role and policies of government institutions; (b) Language is the privileged link between praxis and systems of meanings; it furnishes an interpretative grid endowed with its own rules (lexicon, syntax, grammar) able to orient social groups' praxis; "our linguistic practice predisposes us to certain decisions and not to others"; (c) the state's role (i.e. that of governmental institutions) intervenes directly in the production of meanings, because it possesses a whole series of coercive instruments (legislative and regulatory production, measures of coercion, rewards and incentives of different kinds) that define the limits of individual and collective freedoms with regard to the very definition of expressive and organisational space. The social group which controls the governmental institutions has, thus, a decisively advantageous position to achieve a situation of ideological consensus in relation to the whole collectivity. Governmental institutions are the privileged instrument on which to build the public spirit: by means of the indirect control on the ad hoc discursive institutions - constructed specifically for the production of cultural meanings, the state is able to orient both group praxis and the definitions which the latter give to cultural discourse.

Interesting results are obtained, if this model is employed to examine the level of the Northern League's ideologisation, or more exactly the extent to which this new actor on the Italian political stage is able to construct an autonomous cultural project.

The League's federal project is, on the one hand, the most complete remedy that the new actor has offered to overcome the present crisis of Italian democracy and, on the other, it is an internally coherent conceptual system that
represents the most articulated version of its political project. It is a doctrine rich in political traditions that is intended to reformulate the pact of civil cohabitation inherent in the state, on the basis of a federal agreement. The League employs this political project to communicate with the political community, using it as an already legitimated 'access key' to the latter. The federal project includes elements of a mediation between opposing factions, even if the new agreement has to take account of the respective differences.

Fig. 2: Lucio Iaccarino, "Cultura leghista o localismo ideologico?", Nord e Sud, Agosto, 1998.

The League's federalism personifies, moreover, the codified version of its project, capable of legitimating the new actor also with the entire electorate. This view induced political observers to give up the interpretation of the League as a 'flash party', hence, destined to disappear in the short-term because devoid of a project and a deep-rooted consensus. The federal project tends to be flanked, to the point of complete radicalisation, with the appeal to the right to self-determination of the people of Padania: the latter arises and is strengthened by the explicit need to be able to have a stock of meanings capable of securing recognition for the League and a certain level of difference in relation to the other political forces. The right of peoples to self-determination also represents a coherent and complete reformulation that appears to permeate the very bases of international law. This version of the League's project meets greater problems of legitimacy, given the great difficulty inherent in its recognition, which comes to depend, in final analysis, on the power relations that already exist between the nation-state and a nation that claims its own territorial existence. Certainly, beyond a certain concrete
demand, this concept has large symbolic value because it places the will and power to decide in the hands of the people (to the extent that they will eventually exist). The federalist conception, inspired by the respect of regional autonomy, is flanked, with increasing force, by the idea of secession and self-determination. The League's ideology revolves around the centrality of the context of small, marginal mountain communities. Leghism represents the premise of an internally, strongly integrated context, where the particular nature of the relations to be established between the social actors would ensure democracy and economic development. Ideological localism, thus, becomes itself an element among those proposed in the League's political project, able to represent the type of society to which the League refers. There is not, therefore, a strong connection between localism as ideology and localism as a concrete system of relations; it is more the case of an image conjured up by the League's militant elite to extol the value features most easily recognisable in the local community. Family capitalism, Community integration, the cult (or culture) of labour, the exploitation of communitarian origins (sometimes even its ethnic roots) become values that found the League's identity. The latter, thus outlined, is certainly attacked by the Italian state, by the parties, by the South, and this, threatened in its being from outside, finds in the League protection and representation. The League's ability to transform every form of protest inside a unique framework, always and continuously linked to the territory, responds to the need to pose, on the one hand, the local question (the classic relation between centre and periphery) and, on the other, to emphasise the Northern Question (representing a single North opposed to the South and the state). The efficacy of the League's political practice (its enracinement) can be evaluated to the extent to which its ideological system is the result of the contamination with common sense. The League has demonstrated clearly that it knows how to participate with a part of Northern society in the economical-political-social transformations that concern it. This larger participation placed the League in a position to redefine the preferences of that part of the North that it represents and to requalify it within its overall project. Ideological localism has, thus, a sufficient level of internal coherence, less evident in its philosophical formulation (federalism and secession), but always clearly recognisable. The League's strategy is not limited, therefore, to the polysemy of its various applications, rather the latter derives from the coherence and centrality that the territory assumes in its ideological system.

This greater ability to turn the content of common sense into ideology acts so that its project appears to the outside world as an extension of what the people think. The greater sensibility that the new actor demonstrates in the face of protests (Rokkan's "voice") places it in a situation to be able to reactivate in an ideological key old questions (North/South), in addition to giving same valence (ideological) to others (foreign immigrants, political corruption, Mafia). On the side of tradition, the League is anxious to invent one, capable of being compatible with its project. The invention of a padanian tradition is one of the topics which has least studied in the vast literature on the League, given the (even) caricatural form that it has assumed in the continuous search to differentiate itself from the Republican tradition. Its lack of efficacy reveals itself to observers, thus, by itself alone; its appeal to rituals far back in time and devoid of any real continuity with the past, reveal immediately their groundlessness. Yet, even this proposition of archaic meanings, often close to legend, contributed to outlining the features of as strong identity and
immediately recognisable as its own. The invention of Padania was a careful selection of fragments of collective memory, in which memories were flanked by legends and mythic figures. Finally, mentality included a whole series of attitudes that were becoming radicalised in Italy’s culture and which the League gave more suitable representation than the other political actors. The encounter between the rest of the meanings projected and the mentality of the Northern electorate marks, perhaps, one of the most interesting features for understanding the League's rise and its staying power. The new political actor has defined its identity starting from the radicalisation of certain political questions such as that of leadership (leaderismo), or from the electoral behaviour that reward those political formations that succeed in differentiating their own political project (from the rest perceived increasingly as an undifferentiated mass), or again from a coefficient of novelty to be found as much among the political personnel as in the elements of identity.

Even in this case, language is the privileged link between the system of meanings and social praxis and the great care which the League adopts as regards the type of communication with its publics (militants, sympathisers, mass media, political parties) is the proof. Its communication code is immediately endowed with distinctive features which tend to distance the League from other actors in the Italian political system. It is, however, in this key transit that the Lombard activist elite has succeeded in achieving the transit from dialect (as a national language) to language (as an expressive code for ordinary people) that needs to be studied in order to understand the novelty represented by the League phenomenon; yet this, without it being abandoned altogether, is increasingly less used; or, if employed, it is to stress the original features of local communities. The reference to specific languages is one of those decisions that allow the League to expand the boundaries of the padanian identity. The League's language is able to reproduce common sense meanings and particularly those of everyday life; thus, reducing the distance between the League's voters and the political personnel who represent them: the League's leader speaks in, and about, the institutions with the same emotional participation as that which the people speak in the bar or in the street, not economising more colourful expressions which are less serious than the ones commonly used by the politicians.

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