

Italy: the Political Centre-Right, populism and civil society

(Ideologie del centro-destra, populismo e società civile)

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Abstract

In this paper I will argue that civil society has come to represent a new ‘grand narrative’ which is used by all political forces, and notably by the right, as an alternative channel of political representation which in part substitutes and in part integrates a discredited electoral process. Catering to mounting anti-political and anti-state sentiments, an ideological emphasis on civil society is also an idealised alternative channel for service delivery in key policy sectors. Idealising these features has enabled the right to claim ideological cohesion. However, on the basis of an

empirical examination of the electoral texts of the Italian centre-right, the paper argues that different kinds of right conceive civil society in different ways, variously stressing its anti-state and anti-political features, its contribution to a reconstruction and enhancement of an idealised national public sphere, and its local-community integrative functions.

Introduction

In current political discourse, the notion of civil society is often positively framed whilst remaining distinctive in its lack of specificity. This makes it useful for a variety of types of political communication, which sometimes specify its meaning with some clarity and at other times leave it vague whilst referring to it approvingly. In this essay, with reference to the Italian right, I will argue that a recurrent vagueness in defining civil society is used as a conceptual ‘glue’ to provide an appearance of coherence to the values and practices of an internally divided right-wing coalition and to orient its communication strategies. It is also used as a means to address in a novel way the crisis of legitimacy of mechanisms of political representation by using civil society as an alternative channel of communication between the population and the political system.

As I will argue in more detail, the choice of Italy as a test case is particularly apt in revealing the integrative functions of conceptual stretching for a composite coalition. Italy has been mostly governed by a fragmented right wing coalition for the last fifteen years – a coalition that has had to decide on very divisive policy choices while having to appear at least partly united on a wide range of political positions. This paper will first categorise some of the political uses made of the concept of civil society. It will then examine how different factions of the Italian right have used it. It will conclude with some reflections on general features of civil society as a political ideology and its relation to other ideologies.

While in the last decade some study has been made of the connection between existing ideologies and civil society (Chambers and Kymlicka, 2002), it has not expressly conceptualised the specificity of right wing ideologies beyond the observation that the right sees civil society as an instrument of protection against the state, and the left sees it as a tool to promote social inclusion. On the other hand, the work that has recently appeared on associations and the right has often been conducted in the context of studies of ‘uncivil society,’ which thematise the negative aspects of extreme right associationism and the related exclusionist uses of an ethic of community protection (Chambers and Kopstein, 2001, Kopecky and Mudde, 2003, Rosenblum and Post, 2002, Ruzza, 2009). As such it does not, for instance, take account of the equally prominent uses of concepts such as ‘civicness’ or ‘civility’ in relation to civil society and the public sphere, which are recurrent in

the idealisation of civil society by all political actors. More specific attention to actual empirical discursive contexts is needed. Given the ambiguity of the civil society ethos, usages of the concept of civil society should be related to the discourse of specific political formations.

However, before concentrating on discourse, it should be noted that usages of 'civil society' in the political arena are complex because the term refers both to idealised political values and a set of policy practices. As a discursive construct which encompasses the call for more 'civiness' - a more active role of civil society in the political arena - resonates with other currently dominant political discourses, such as the widespread aversion against some of the institutions and practices of representative democracy which have resulted in perceptions of political corruption, pandering to organized business interests, perceived remoteness of political representatives from the opinions and lifestyles of the represented – an aversion which is both expressed by public interest associations and also lies at the roots of anti-political sentiments often voiced by populist politicians and their political formations.

As a set of practices, more 'civil society' often refers to a type of policy making which is more inclusive of individual citizens and associations, and more deliberative, and which is therefore distinct and even alternative to the prevailing style which historically inspired the Westphalian state: the Weberian ideal type based on a mode of policy-formulation decision and implementation which is hierarchically ordered, uni-directional in the flow of decisions, and isolated from social influences. These changes refer more broadly to what has been described as a generalised transition from 'government' to 'governance' in the context of globalisation – broader structural changes that are only partially related to the mounting idealisation of civil society.

One could argue that, in these terms, an emphasis on civil society is viable precisely because it is a concept whose breadth allows a continuing contest over its actual meaning and accommodation to different world views. Such world-views are partly those entrenched in the specific historical legacies and shared memories of different societies. They also emerge in response to similar social and political processes that are shared by entire regions, such as, in Europe, a widespread transition of civil society from engagement in political protest and social movements to its institutionalisation and an expanded role in governance structures (Jobert and Kohler-Koch, 2008).

Aware of these factors, several authors have pointed to both the growing relevance of civil society in all political contexts and also to variations of the concept of civil society identifiable along some of the main political cleavages, such as the right/left axis (Cohen and Arato, 1999, Keane, 1999).

Politics and civil society

In brief, the idea of civil society is conceptualised as appealing in the political realm for two main reasons. On the one hand it refers to a well developed public sphere of ‘civicness’ and of deliberation, which is often seen to constitute an essential context for democratic politics. On the other hand it refers to a network of associations of different kinds (which different approaches selectively include in the concept), and which can improve the political process mainly through the provision of expertise. These two approaches are theoretically quite distinct but they are often merged in the discourse of many political actors and even in the social sciences (Misztal, 2001).

The idea of civil society is generally appealing to the left because it entails a more inclusive and participative ethos, and gives marginalised groups channels for political representation which are alternative to the electoral process (Urbinati and Warren, 2008, Urbinati, 2000). In a protracted period of dominance of neoliberal values, glorification of a market ethos and its prevalence over redistributive values, the left has viewed civil society as the best possible barrier, and as a compensatory factor, against the policy impact and widespread legitimacy of business and its interest groups in the decision-making process. In this context, references to ‘civil society’ mainly relate to public interest groups and their enhanced role in citizens-friendly deliberative fora.

References to civil society appear quite distinct in the discourse of the right, for large part of which civil society is generally useful because it chimes with an anti-state rhetoric and anti-political sentiments. But as we shall see, it does so in several conflicting ways (Ruzza, 2009). This oppositional feature of the concept of civil society explains its prominence in recent years and possibly the ascendancy of the right in many contexts.

The uses of an emphasis on civil society are broader than a call for better connections between society and politics and more civicness. A range of political and bureaucratic organizations at all levels of governance have made references to its organized forms as a channel to provide the political process with the better technical and social information increasingly necessary for the policy process and difficult and too costly to acquire by other means. They have emphasised its role in conflict resolution (Kaldor, 2003). They have pointed to its ability to monitor the implementation of policies. They have stressed its role in aggregating consensus in ways that are parallel, and often more effective, than the electoral process. They have highlighted civil society’s role in intervening in the population of reference and acting as a facilitator in a top-down chain of information from governing authorities to populations, and as a bottom-up mechanism of social representation (Ruzza, 2007). They have stressed the service-delivery functions of civil society organizations. All these elements can be, and often are, emphasised and made politically salient by parties and social

movements. Some of them are particularly amenable to be made ideologically congruent with their ideologies. But also stressing the multiple potential manners of civil society involvement, and characterising them as an overarching solution and an essential ingredient of political life, can have distinctive ideological implications.

It is not only the political versatility of the concept of civil society that makes it viable material for ideological production; so too does its notable recent historical relevance. In the wake of the collapse of statist models, recourse to civil society as a aid in policy making and in service delivery has acquired especial salience. This is particularly the case in societies where the reaction against statist models of social organization has come to be dominant, as in Eastern Europe. It is in these contexts that scholars have most prominently identified the ideological character of civil society (Misztal, 2001, Skedsmo, 2005). Civil society is also often seen as a panacea in development contexts where an anti-statist and neo-liberal ideology of civil society is distinctly correlated with anti-hegemonic contents (Chabal and Daloz, 1999: 22). An ethos of broad reliance on civil society is also typical of particular state models, especially those of Scandinavian states, where its benefits are often unquestioned (Trägårdh, 2007, Prakash and Selle, 2004). More generally, ‘civil society’ has been seen as a new ‘grand narrative’ (Misztal, 2001: 76), a universally applicable solution to a wide range of problems which is emphatically asserted despite the glaring contradictions among different usages of the concept.

One could then conceptualise the current preoccupation with civil society in Freedon’s terms as a weak ideology (Freedon, 1996). A political view centred on enhancing direct citizens’ participation in the political process in all the different forms and contexts that this might entail. As such, it is connected to aspects of other nascent ideological tenets that seek to bypass the electoral process, such as populism, which can also be considered a thin ideology (Stanley, 2008). Civil society, is then a still fairly unspecific political view and whose connections with other ideologies have not been properly worked out by intellectuals and in general in political discourse.

Italy and civil society

As the previous reference to Eastern Europe and to development contexts shows, the ideology of civil society can have different prominence and features in different countries according to recent histories, broader political cultures, and institutional dynamics. In Italy, recent historical dynamics have made civil society particularly salient. These dynamics are rooted in the momentous collapse of the post-war party system in the early nineties and the consequent reactions in the media

and political arena. It can be argued that two systems of incorporation of civil society in the political realm took place before and after the collapse of the first republic.

The party system that emerged from the second world war was marked by highly proportional electoral law and a unwieldy constitutional apparatus designed to prevent the reoccurrence of totalitarianism but which had the unanticipated effect of making political decision-making notably slow and inefficient. Ruling coalitions reacted to institutional blockages by promoting a parallel system of informal agreements among all the political forces and the development of political practices based on consociational elements among the most powerful parties. Parties acquired and expanded substantial control over the Italian state. They appropriated and negotiated among themselves the distribution of state resources. Over time, even opposition parties were brought into a system of tacit exchanges of resources and influence. On the one hand, parties came to control civil society through resources in exchange for votes: they encouraged the formation of a politically controlled and institutionalised civil society consisting of a network of associations which provided the political system with popular support, public intellectuals, and the future ruling elites of party hierarchies. On the other hand, these associations – notably Catholic associations such as ‘Catholic Action’ (Poggi, 1967), and Communist ones such as the Federation of Communist Youth – provided some roots in society and a means for the proselytising which was essential among a set of parties inspired by strong ideologies of personal commitment, as were Communism and Catholicism throughout the post-war period. Thus, from the outset, civil society emerged as an idealised but fairly institutionalised, subsidised and politically controlled domain. It was, however, a domain different from other models of institutionalised civil society such as the Scandinavian one, because the financial and personal links to the parties were direct and long lasting.

It should be noted that the emphasis by both the right and the left on civil society often merely constituted an ideological tenet, which, while widely echoed in electoral manifestos, found a much slower and difficult counterpart in inclusive or community-enabling policy practices. On the one hand, the right, but to some extent also the left, promoted the role of civil society groups in conjunction with the formation of a mix of public/private partnerships inspired by new public management principles. Cooperatives were recruited as business partners of local authorities. But the involvement of business in state provisions became a technique for new forms of political corruption which amounted to substantial continuity with earlier political practices. City administrators and a wide range of other political actors selected business partners, and civil society service-delivery groups for public initiatives, with criteria that remained particularistic, politically

self-serving and corrupt. And the involvement of public interest groups in the conduct of public affairs often remained severely limited by the traditional familist Italian culture – a culture described as particularistic by Putnam (Putnam, 1993). As Ginsborg notes, this is a culture which is clearly unwilling to ‘sacrifice for civil society, let alone the state’ (Ginsborg, 2001: 9). In practice, civil society was seen as an avenue to expand, use and control political resources, rather than as a space for the donation of time and energy to voluntary activities, which in the Italian context remained rather limited in comparison to other European countries.

Over time, the Italian institutionalised system of political corruption severely hampered the country’s economic performance and became increasingly unsustainable. The system crashed in the early 1990s in the aftermath of a series of corruption scandals. The political system that emerged from its ruins was, from the beginning, inspired by a strong and widely shared anti-statist ethos (Ruzza and Fella, 2009). In the new political culture, largely shared by the moderate left and the moderate right, reliance on the state was now seen as a recipe for political corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, remoteness from citizens. And for both left and right, civil society appeared to be a solution for the ills of the Italian state.

In the meanwhile, however, important changes were also taking place in the third sector. The collapse of the post-war party system had weakened and eventually destroyed the first-republic network of institutionalised and directly politically-controlled civil society associations previously mentioned. However, during the eighties new types of associations became more prominent. The social movements of the eighties – the peace, environmental, feminist, disability-rights, gay rights and anti-racist movements lost momentum in terms of mobilising potential and underwent a trajectory of institutionalisation which transformed them into advocacy coalitions, public interest groups and service delivery groups. A new civil society emerged around them, with different features but still marked by strong though more varied ideological connotations. However, it was becoming a more autonomous realm, but not a less ideologically polarised one. At the same time, a revival of traditional Catholicism also inspired the constitution of a new traditionalist civil society sector, which was also both ideological in its connection to political Catholicism, and pragmatic – oriented to service delivery and advocacy rather than political protest. The ‘Communion and Liberation’ association is the best example of this type of association. Like its centre-left counterpart, this network of civil society association was a more powerful and more autonomous realm, which was now able to address the political system with autonomous claims, to control aspects of the local and national electoral process, and to utilise its control of areas of welfare delivery services for political purposes.

In this new environment, the principle of civil society involvement gained increasing currency, but remained strongly partisan in its orientation. When in power, at all levels of government, the right would choose, involve and subsidise civil society groups, but ones different from the left. However, in recent years both right and left and the respective civil society sectors have been inspired by increasingly anti-state values. Civil society was to become a space of autonomy, a protection against the state, along the lines well emphasised in some East European societies immediately before and during the collapse of the Eastern bloc. One important reason for these foci of Italian civil society was that widespread preoccupation with an inefficient state also resulted in mounting anti-political sentiments. In this context, civil society was seen as an ideological anchor against the demonstrably destructive consequences of bad politics in a system that nonetheless still relied on these practices.

In the second republic, civil society has acquired new powers over time. Mechanisms of political socialisation have changed as traditional political subcultures have collapsed and voting choices have been gradually determined less by long-term family allegiances and more by political communication, which has produced a less stable electorate. The effectiveness of political communication is, however, increasingly mediated by agencies of consensus formation and among them, notably, civil society associations. Associations such as sports clubs, trade unions, volunteer organizations and advocacy groups acquire a new power rooted in their ability to orient political choices, to shape agenda setting in the public sphere, to filter media communication. This has in part reversed the previously subordinate role of civil society associations, giving them new relevance – at least a new discursive relevance if not real decision-making power – which in the Italian context has remained (at least at national level) squarely with the political establishment (Ruzza, 2009). As the right has dominated Italy in the last fifteen years, the connection between politics and civil society has been strongly shaped by its ideology.

The Italian right

In order to clarify the use of civil society by the right, a brief summary of the processes of formation of the Italian right is necessary. After the collapse of the Italian party system, a media tycoon – Silvio Berlusconi – founded a new party, Forza Italia (FI), which in 1994 competed for the first time in elections as the largest party in a coalition also encompassing a Northern Italian independentist movement – the Northern League (LN) – and a reformed and broadened ex-fascist party – the National Alliance (AN). These parties won, but they only governed the country for a few months until the Northern League left the coalition. The next legislature was ruled by a centre-left

coalition, but in 2001 the centre-right returned to power and remained in office for five years. However, in 2006 it was narrowly defeated by the centre-left, whose coalition collapsed in 2008 amid internal wrangling. The centre-right returned to power with a large majority after the April 2008 elections. In March 2009, FI and AN merged into a new formation: the Party of Freedom (PdL), although for the time being they still retained separate strong identities. The PdL has recently created a foundation with the same name which comprises all members of the party before its dissolution. However, given the much larger size and resources of FI, the new formation is to a much greater extent shaped and hegemonised by the old FI. The merger of the two parties is still too recent to have produced a common body of thought or a coherent set of documents and leaders. The first electoral competition entered by the two merged parties was the European election of June 2009, which produced successful results for the new party. In this analysis I will continue to refer to the AN and FI and to their historical documents and characterisations of civil society.

Even before the merger, the success of the centre-right cannot be easily explained without reference to the fact that the different components of the right acted in coalition. They were successful, at least initially, in a fundamentally adverse climate. The Berlusconi coalition won with a set of parties that were very new, such as the League, or marginal, such as the old fascist party predecessor of AN. And it prevented - as many would have expected - the victory of a left coalition that was largely immune to corruption scandals. In order to explain the successive victories and staying power of the right, one can point to the Berlusconi's resources and his control over the media. But without also a convincing ideological package that integrated the different kinds of right, these successes cannot be easily explained. Several authors have stressed the importance of populism as a distinctive cultural construct which articulates the relation between representatives and the represented in distinctive ways. I shall argue that this relation is also mediated by a specific conception of civil society held by each of the parties that form the Italian centre-right, and that these conceptions have been made congruent in a new ideological production. I shall posit that they have formed an ideological package which relies on different conceptions of 'the people' and its relation to civil society. Similarly, their political practices have relied on the involvement of different kinds of civil society formations, but the organizations that they have selected for inclusion in policy formation and for the allocation of state resources have a number of features in common.

In general, ideologically, the right has come to emphasise the virtues of civil society as an instrument of direct representation of 'the people' with its distinctive family values, higher sense of morality – a tool aimed against the political class and the state, and other perils that undermine

community integration. Civil society is then a form of community protection. The centre-right's conception of civil society includes economic forces connected to the virtues of the market. It has then emphasised the role of business interest groups, which it conceptualises as a part of civil society. The left, by contrast, has emphasised public interest groups, advocacy groups, and some civil-society service delivery activities as tools for social inclusion and social justice.

The ideology of civil society has been mainly inspired by a distrust of aspects of representative democracy and an idealisation of civil society as a populist alternative to it. It should be noted that even merely discursive references to civil society can imply a re-definition and even a restriction of democratic channels of representation, and in some contexts the political emphasis on 'civil society' has come to be reinterpreted as a populist strategy (Mastropaolo, 2008) – a strategy appealing not only to centre parties, but to extremist parties as well. One can often identify populist undertones in the recurrent approaches that seek to enhance public deliberation at local levels, and other forms of political participation by non-state actors, such as promoting referenda, incorporating the actors of protest politics in decision-making, fostering participation of social movements in decision-making, enhancing the political dimension of third sector activities or increasing electronic forms of democracy. These approaches are more or less viable according to the context in which their adoption is attempted. They are however connected to solutions that attempt to integrate or, less frequently, to substitute representative democracy.

Participation may come to acquire a right that overrides the taken-for-granted legitimacy of electoral democratic representation. This constitutes a strategy that can be used by advocates inspired by new social movements' values and attempting to expand resources for migrants subject to discrimination by participating in local deliberative fora. But it can also be used by right wing ethno-nationalist groups attempting to secure resources of the welfare state for the native population and to restrict access by migrants or other marginalised groups. In the Italian context this has constituted the background for the ideological use of civil society by the right: essentially a component of a broader but equally unspecified populist ideology.

As a political doctrine, populism, as the idealisation of an undifferentiated 'people' which is self-evidently honest, homogeneous in its interests, and opposed to corrupt political elites, elaborates the concept of the intrinsic unity of the people in different terms (Taggart, 2000, Canovan, 1981, Tarchi, 2002, Meny and Surel, 2001). It posits an implicit and overarching conflict of society against the state, which indicates similarities in the theories of representation of the populist parties of the Italian right – even if they are generally under-theorised. All the three populist parties see their charismatic leader as performing an essential role in intermediation

between state and society, a feature that characterises populist formations (Taggart, 2002, Mair, 2002). But in other respects different populist formations articulate their visions of society differently. The three parties of the Italian right are united in making frequent references in their communication materials and electoral manifestos to both ‘the people’ and to ‘civil society’ (Ruzza, 2009). However, the meanings they assign to these terms are different.

Convergence and divergence in conceptions of civil society and populist frames: three types of right

The right wing coalition that has governed Italy in recent years can be regarded as a paradigmatic example of different populisms which have reached a difficult compromise on some issues and have clashed, often in bombastic terms, on others. It takes as examples models of populism that have appeared on the European political scene in recent years and develops them in distinctive ways, on the basis of the idiosyncratic traits of the leaders of its parties. This is evidenced by the concepts that recur in their electoral manifestos.

To clarify the conceptual differences between the different parties of the centre-right, a frame analysis of their electoral presentation materials was conducted and reported in Ruzza and Fella (2009). This consisted of a thematic analysis that used culturally competent readers to identify recurrent cultural categories and assess their prominence and the contexts in which categories co-occur. Electoral materials of the three parties were analysed with a specific focus on civil society. The materials were considered in their entirety, without reference to how they have changed over time.

The frame analysis showed that, for all the three parties, both the concept of ‘the people’ and the concept of ‘civil society’ (expressed either directly or through references to associationism) were recurrent concerns, although a cluster of other concepts had also to be considered in order to differentiate among different kinds of right (For a discussion of the methodology of frame analysis see: Snow et al., 1986, Snow and Benford, 1988, Johnston and Noakes, 2005). However, references to ‘the people’ appeared to be more central in the electoral discourse of the Italian right, whilst recourse to ‘civil society’ was just one of the means by which, in the right’s conception, ‘the people’ could face and oppose the political class (Ruzza and Fella, 2009). In order to characterise the meanings of civil society for the different components of the Italian right, it is useful to show their contexts of co-occurrence in the texts of each party. However, before examining differences, the empirically established commonalities should be mentioned.

‘The people’ is often presented as possessing a wisdom, values of decency, morality and honesty, and an appreciation of ‘common sense’ that escapes the political class, whose verbose, self-interested and corrupt behaviour must be kept in check by a variety of means. The main means is the intervention of a powerful leader who directs and monitors legislative activities and helps prevent fraud and bureaucratic impasses. But also important is the way in which ordinary citizens can interact with the political system. They can do so through interventions in the public sphere, for instance by taking part in rallies and other mass political events. And they can do so through their associations. The label of ‘civil society’ is assigned to both kinds of activities. Thus the rights find a conceptual ‘glue’ in the reference to civil society, but the differences are substantial, as I shall now illustrate.

Civil society and populism in Forza Italia

For Forza Italia, civil society is related to its idealisation of ‘the people’, which is a people made up of modern consumers - a constituency idealised by moderate conservative parties of the centre right. ‘Civil society’ denotes both the realm of unorganized civiness – a pre-political, Lockean conceptualisation of civil society as the public realm of ‘civiness’ (Misztal, 2001) – and associations. In both cases, civil society is a tool for representation of the primary category, ‘the people,’ which is fundamental to this party and finds its fullest expression in the political role of its undisputed founding leader Berlusconi. It is in effect the somewhat eccentric personal style of its leader – Berlusconi – and its style of political communication that orients this party in a distinctive populist direction. The following quote well exemplifies the connection between the categories of ‘people’, ‘civil society’ and the typically populist anti-elitist and anti-political stance emphasised in the literature (Taggart, 2002).

We shall always defend the autonomy and plurality of civil society against every self-investiture as the ‘moral representative’ of the people by any institutional and political actor (Forza_Italia, 2004)

An emphasis on civil society appears in a context where some of the most recurrent concepts are the use of the state to support the welfare of the population, the idealisation of the traditional family, concerted actions to improve personal security and allay fears of crime, the classically neo-liberal idealisation of the market, and distrust of political parties (Ruzza and Fella, 2009). Thus, in connection with these values, FI’s anti-state stances induce it to glorify civil society

as free from the corruption of politics and indeed as the natural birthplace of the ‘good citizen’, even before it is a network of associations.

These are the virtues which are born of civil society and which are the basis of any moral and economic growth. If these virtues may sound ‘antiquated’ this is only because the power of the state, by bearing down on society, has repressed and forced them into oblivion (Forza_Italia, 2004).

However, the aspect of associated civil society is also central to Forza Italia, not only because it engenders social solidarity, but also because as a network of third sector organizations, it can be recruited to deliver better welfare at local level, and replace a crumbling and distrusted public sector.

Public intervention on its own is not enough: the ambitious objective of enhancing social cohesion and trust among citizens cannot be achieved without activating all the resources with which civil society as a whole is endowed. The Municipality is the crucial channel for application of the principle of horizontal subsidiarity, in that it is best positioned to identify, to evaluate, and to promote the social activities to be undertaken by third-sector organizations and local civil society. (FI Piano di governo 2001)

Civil society is defined as an anti-political tool to be wielded against the dominance and the abuses of the state-parties-trade unions nexus

A modern democratic dialogue must consist in the constant exchange of information and decisions between efficient institutional and political structures and a strong civil society organized into communities and associations given increasing responsibilities in public governance. Hitherto our system has operated only along the axis of mediation among parties, state and trade unions (Forza_Italia, 2004).

Forza Italia opposes the dominance of professionalised politics, identified with the forces of the left, with a new nexus.

The changing times also require new forms of legitimacy in the relationship among the individual, community and government. Forza Italia must never become the tool of a self-referential nomenclatura. It must always be open, in different political circumstances, to the most dynamic currents in society, guaranteeing the permanent representation of civil society. (Forza_Italia, 2004).

However, Forza Italia's conception of civil society emphasises not only conservative grassroots groups, but even more specifically, professional groups and their associations, including chambers of commerce.

In policy terms, Forza Italia and now the PdL have sponsored various initiatives termed 'circles of freedom': groups of citizens who meet for partly cultural, partly recreational and partly political initiatives, such as discussions of topics such as citizens' security concerns, but also public readings, debates on how to protect the environment, improve job prospects for the young, and improve local tourism. At least two prominent FI and CdL parliamentarians – Marcello dell'Utri and Vittoria Michela Brambilla – have coordinated different and often opposed kinds of 'circles,' and both of them have received substantial resources from the party, particularly in the run-up to elections, including funding for a television channel and several publications. And these circles have in turn been useful tools with which to reach out and attempt to prove the party's embeddedness in society, which several observers have repeatedly questioned over the years, often referring to it as the neo-patrimonialist party of its leader – a party unable to establish strong territorial roots (Diamanti, 2003). Finally to be noted is that an emphasis on civil society is to some extent a way to de-politicise and technicalise policymaking which gives additional legitimacy to a party inspired by successful business leaders such as Berlusconi.

Civil society, nationalism and corporatism in the AN

The 'people' and the related civil society of AN is formed by self-professed Italian patriots. Consequently, their idealised community is the nation of classic nationalism, with many of its ambiguities and contradictions (Freedon, 1998). But important innovations have taken place with respect to the old fascist conceptions of the MSI. Classic nationalism is enriched by a variety of new themes. They range from idealisation of the traditional family and promises to protect it, through the idealisation of liberty as a political value, a concern with strengthening the role of the executive, that is, moving towards a more authoritarian but effective state, to promises to concentrate on the security of citizens against crime – particularly by migrants. Also important are anti-political sentiments, particularly in terms of negative evaluations of the Italian party system, the idealisation of 'the people' as an untapped source of virtues, but also the idealisation of neo-liberal competitiveness (Ruzza and Fella, 2009). In this discursive context, civil society emerges as a means to tap directly into the uncorrupted values of the people, which, however, need to be protected against disruptive influences.

One important theme is the protection of national communities against the homogenizing impact of globalisation and the triumph of the market. Some examples taken from a 2001 document illustrate these points. All the documents analysed for the period 2001-2008 showed a similar pattern. Thus, in 2001, referring to civil society as a public sphere, the AN electoral manifesto laments that:

The pressure of globalization has tended to make the mechanisms of the ‘market’ prevail over the life-worlds of ‘civil society’ and the functions of the state (Alleanza-Nazionale, 2001).

And the same document contains similar references to civil society understood as a network of associations whose participation is essential for preserving and enhancing a good society.

The subsidiarity principle, if correctly applied, does not consist solely in the ‘vertical’ dimension of the devolution of state to local administrations; it also comprises the ‘horizontal’ dimension of the responsabilization and participation of individuals, families and organized civil society (Alleanza-Nazionale, 2001).

Further statements in the texts propose the integration of the activities of organized civil society with those of families to support the state in welfare delivery, and advocate this inclusion as a model on which the state should be reformed. Civil society is also described as an ‘engine of social solidarity’ based on ‘the glue’ of shared community belonging. In this and other documents the community is viewed as having the right to protect itself against external cultural influences. In turn, economic development is connected to the presence of a viable community whose role should not be overwhelmed by the state. On this view, the state retains its powers in matters of national defence and policing – functions emphasised by the classic fascist ideologies from which this party descends – but should not intrude in the autonomous local role of civil society, whose autonomy must now be protected against the evils of globalisation.

Over the years, by borrowing elements from democratic conservative parties and from the French new right (Taguieff, 1994), the old MSI (Italian Social Movement) – the precursor fascist party out of which the AN would develop – was able to redefine itself in terms that made it look distinctly modern – modern in the sense of adopting modernity as an ideological feature to be promoted as a distinctive trait and hence as a marketing strategy. In so doing, the MSI continued the endeavour of revision and updating that several far right parties have undertaken in recent years (Minkenberg, 2000). The AN has subsequently been able to promote modern policies expressing tolerance and respect for minorities and which mark a clear difference with its fascist past. This however has taken place at the same time as the party has advocated explicit reference to Christian

values in the European constitutional treaty. The following quote illustrates the connections between civil society and the classic corporatist view of the right:

The right believes in recognizing and promoting not only the function and public utility of third-sector organizations but also all the intermediary social formations, also as channels through which citizens may participate in the country's public life. Accomplishing this recognition requires definition of a "Statute of Social and Functional Autonomies" which provides a uniform frame of reference for the operations of intermediate bodies, without privileges or monopolies exercised by political, social or economic pressure groups. The employers' associations, trade unions, consumer associations, professional orders, chambers of commerce and universities, if enabled to verify their representativeness and pursue their social goals, can actively participate in realization of the common good and the public interest, eliminating every form of lobby-driven particularism.

Despite the frequent references to civil society in AN documents, the party has not produced and supported a comparable set of associations equivalent to the FI's 'circles' and, as we shall see, the LN. In terms of frequency, the use of the term 'civil society' occurs more often with reference to politically independent candidates included in AN lists for local elections than with reference to associations. The term seems mainly to assert a distinction from professional politicians and the party's willingness to engage with its grass-roots. These are then candidates who, as emphasised by the previous quote, are from "employers' associations, trade unions, consumer associations, professional associations, chambers of commerce and universities." Civil society is thus mainly conceived as a locus of independent civility, distinct from and opposed to the vested interests of professional politics.

Civil society and ethno-nationalism in the Northern League

As for Forza Italia, but to a lesser extent than for the AN, the Northern League's main channel of political representation is its leader – Umberto Bossi. However, for the Northern League, too, civil society performs a special role of political representation. As for the other parties, so for the League, this role is dual in nature. On the one hand, civil society consist in the morally healthy public sphere of North Italy's population of artisans and shopkeepers inspired by the values of hard work and traditional morality, and love and respect for the local community – the 'healthy and hard-working people of the North' (Lega-Nord, 1996). On the other hand, the extensive associative dimension of the League is idealised as well. The League's associations include the Padanian trade

union, the Padanian school, the Padanian cubs, Padanian women, Padanian assistance, the Padanian Catholic Assistance, Padanians in the World, Padanian Environment, the Padanian National Guard, Green Volunteers, Beautiful Padania, the Association of Padanian Alpine Veterans, Padanian Medicine, Padanian Drivers, Padanian Auto Club, North Art, Padanian Humanitarians, and others. Some, however, have only a small number of members.

The ideational context in which civil society acquires meaning and relevance is the Northern League's overarching emphasis on the distinctiveness of Northern Italy, and its political demand for reform of the state along federal lines. Subordinate in frequency and emphasis to this value are traditional family values.

The 'people' of the LN is made up of local communities: the residents of villages and small towns who want to preserve their way of life against every intrusion by foreign elements. The LN's inspiration has been the many regionalist movements – some with highly influential leaders, like the Catalan Pujol – and operated with degrees of populism. Its conception of civil society relies on a rich network of associations typically used in anti-state terms (specifically against the Italian state) with the typical anti-political and anti-southern implications. The following quote from an electoral programme for a general election reflects some of these contents.

Therefore the State must be rethought, also because it is losing powers to bureaucracies and financial groups, hidden behind Europe. More space needs to be given to the people, their elected representatives, the associationism of civil society, and families, as required by democracy. (Lega-Nord, 2001).

Here the people speak not only through their elected representatives but also through organized civil society (that is, the League's associations) and unorganized civil society (families). Over the years, the LN has sought to strengthen its relations with civil society by creating a set of organisations able to serve a variety of purposes and therefore become relevant to the daily lives of its members. These have ranged from recreational organisations to trade unions, professional associations and mutual support groups. At least in some periods – particularly during its 'secessionist' phase, as Diamanti argues (Diamanti, 2003: 76)– the involvement of members in a project to create a territorially based community has been an important electoral strategy and an ideological goal for the LN. It is in this context that 'Padanian associationism' – as it is termed by the League's publicity materials - has warranted special attention. The presence of associations supposedly testifies to the LN's roots in its territory and to its broad appeal, and reflects the desire to circumvent the traditional associational resources typically characterised in the Italian context as connected to the Catholic or ex-Communist subcultures. It also reflects how left/right distinctions or

class divisions are subordinated to a more essential (ethno-) national community. Furthermore, one should bear in mind that, since its inception, the League has recruited entire pre-existing social networks, reflecting awareness of the electoral advantage of maintaining a presence in recreational and corporatist networks (Ruzza and Schmidtke 1992). However, several organisations created by the League have never represented a real constituency, and have been supported mainly for ideological reasons. They are given special prominence on the LN website, in the media and at the Pontida festivals.

Nonetheless, in-depth interviews with activists indicate the adoption of a fairly unreflective attitude towards strategic decisions – the belief that the leader Bossi is able to decide what is best for Padania and act accordingly regardless of contingent left–right divides, and even able to interpret the desires of the League’s civil society components. Thus, as for FI, civil society is a support – even an important one - for the leader’s inspired decisions.

Contradictions within the Italian right

As the previous sections has shown, despite the features common to the three visions of civil society in the Italian right, fundamental differences remain. The Italian right has failed to converge on even a minimal understanding of its idealised community. These differences concern an array of issues wider than different conceptions of the right’s idealised constituency. However, these forces have successfully played down these differences by emphasising other factors and a strong connection to their charismatic leaders, who bypass - or transcend - the political process of representative democracy in an idealised direct connection with the ‘people’ – a people that each leader is seen as understanding and representing. An alliance among leaders then enables all parties to gloss over ideological differences. In this process, confrontation and competition with other parties, and particularly with the left, assumes an almost tribal connotation in which the ideological glorification of recourse to civil society as an anti-political strategy acts as a conceptual ‘glue’.

The strategy with which to achieve unity is denying dignity and importance to politics, which is then subordinated to a mythical image of the people and its expressions in civil society, whose will is osmotically received and incorporated by the leaders. None of the three parties openly rejects representative democracy – which would be unfeasible in the context of any contemporary European political culture - rather they qualify it and integrate it with novel elements. These are elements which re-define the political space in distinctive ways. A strong compact between the state that they control and civil society organizations is assigned a new role of improving society,

reinforcing communities, and forging and strengthening collective identities, albeit of different kinds.

It is their populism that provides the glue that binds the three parties together and has made possible a merger of two of them into a now well-tested coalition that has ruled Italian politics for many years. Their idealisation of civil society is a novel and distinctive approach to political representation.

Discussion: Civil society, populism and representation

Some reflection on how the concept of representation is utilised in relation to the role of civil society is necessary. Political representation, as the activity of (re) presenting opinions and interests to the policy making process, can be performed by representatives holding elected office, or by others. Representation can take place in several arenas. Whilst democratic theorists often focus on the activities of office holders in democratic arenas, the representation activities of civil society groups of different kinds are increasingly the focus of analysis in the literature (Plotke, 1997, Warren, 2001), and they have been developed by the right in distinctive ways. In an increasingly media-centered society, representational activities can now be said to take place in a broad set of arenas - including advocacy groups and public interest groups connected to political parties of the right, such as the network of FI and now PdL circles, and the activities of NL associations.

These civil society formations experience the same tensions as occur in elected institutions, such as tensions between acting as delegates or as trustees whereby delegates closely follow the preferences of their constituents while trustees are free to pursue their strategies on the basis of their own perception of the best course of action – an important distinction when, for instance, there is no time or resources to consult the base. Here the type of associational representation that takes place in populist parties ruled by charismatic leaders is one in which the role of ultimate trustee is assigned to the leader, but still necessary is a chain of representation created with the help of civil society groups, whose role is that of aggregating consensus across the particular policy areas in which associations are active, and gathering and channelling information upwards. This, however, concerns a channelling of information in two directions. In the absence of internal democratic channels, populist leaders need to rely on the organized activities of civil society in order to gather the necessary information. However, civil society groups are also mechanisms used by the leader and the parties' ruling elite as ways to influence the rank-and-file. They are tools with which the leader can reach out to the base – particularly the base in its organized form – and potentially

control dissent. And different social constituencies see civil society organizations as ways of speaking to the leader and exert influence over the party.

Although processes such as the crisis of legitimacy of politics are regular features of Western electorates, they may well have gained momentum in recent years – as indicated by the recent success of maverick anti-European and right-wing parties. This has further emphasized the relevance of civil society representation, broadening its forms (Warren and Castiglione, 2004). The right has been at the forefront in this utilization of civil society.

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