

Justifications of Centrifugal Regionalism in the European Union: a Comparison between Flanders and Northern Italy

Michel Huysseune, Vesalius College and Vrije Universiteit Brussel

The present economic recession has reasserted the importance of centrifugal tendencies in rich regions of EU member states. Authorities, political parties and public opinion in these regions voice with an increasing frequency their opposition against the existent redistributive mechanisms of the nation-states. While in some cases such affirmations certainly do not intend to question the existence of the nation-state as such (for example in Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg in Germany), in other cases this anti-redistributionism is more explicitly linked to claims for more autonomy or independence, especially in cases where these rich regions also have a tradition of ethnic mobilization. Such secessionist claims are, however, not limited anymore to such cases of “traditional” national minorities, as the example of the Lega Nord and its professed Padanian nationalism demonstrates.

Affirmations of centrifugal regionalism seem to run counter to the longtime held assumption that the development of a third level of governance within the EU would help to domesticate regionalist mobilizations (Hooghe & Marks 2001). In addition, the creation of this third level of governance historically paralleled the establishment of solidarity mechanisms between richer and poorer regions within Europe, deemed necessary to bridge the EU’s internal economic divide. The present economic crisis has foregrounded the problematic legitimacy of these mechanisms of solidarity, and has in fact made more explicit than before the tensions between two logics in the construction of the EU, that of cooperation and solidarity that policies such as the creation of the structural funds intended to foster, and that of economic competition. Affirmations of centrifugal policies that question existent nation-state moreover also problematize the central tenet of the process of construction of a European identity, since the unity in diversity it proclaims appears to be countered by the confrontational affirmations of identity that centrifugal regionalism frequently implies.

Since the presence of centrifugal regionalism problematizes several dimensions of the process of European integration, it is particularly interesting to understand how articulations of such policies are justified. In my contribution, I therefore intend to analyze the justifications of centrifugal policies in two European regions where this process is very conspicuous, northern Italy and Flanders.¹ These two cases distinguish themselves from other cases of regionalism in Europe by the centrality the rejection of redistributive mechanisms of the central state plays in present articulations of regional identities, and by a clear hegemony of an anti-solidarity and anti-redistributionist world vision much weaker in cases such as Scotland and Catalonia (where several of the actors defending independence in fact display a more leftist profile). The similarities between the two cases are all the more interesting because of the strong historical and institutional

¹ The present contribution, although entirely the responsibility of the author, results from the contact forum *Contemporary Centrifugal Regionalism: Comparing Flanders and Northern Italy*, held in Brussels (Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van Kunsten en Wetenschappen) on 19 and 20 June 2009, and the various contributions to this forum.

differences between them. In Flanders regionalism is related to a historically embedded tradition of minority mobilization that led to the institution of a regional authority in 1980. All major parties in Flanders defend an increase of the institutional competencies of the Flemish region, and several of them are sympathetic towards the idea of Flemish independence. Northern Italy both lacks a tradition of ethnic mobilization and the regional institutions Flanders can rely on, and only one political actor, the Lega Nord, has defended secession. In recent years, however, the Lega Nord has participated both to the national and several regional governments, and its proposal for fiscal federalism is increasingly marking the public debate in Italy.

Taking into account these differences, a comparison between these two cases is relevant since the political systems of these countries share many similarities, as De Winter, Della Porta and Deschouwer (1996) have pointed out. They therefore argue that the study of a particular phenomenon in one of these countries may be a useful tool to interpret it in the other, since “knowledge on Italy can help us to understand Belgium and vice versa” (De Winter et al. 1996: 215). For the comparison proposed here, besides the tension between a richer North and a less affluent South (in a context where moreover both entities have a comparable population, albeit larger in the North) the low degree of satisfaction with the political system and high levels of support for neo-populist and radical right parties (especially in the richer part of the country) are particularly relevant (ibid.: 216).

The construction of justification: the context

In what follows, I propose to analyze justifications of centrifugal regionalism within member-states of the European Union as specific cases of articulations of nationalism. If nationalism is a discursive formation (Calhoun 2007: 86), then such articulations of centrifugal regionalism may be interpreted as discursive formations constrained by the specific European context, and in particular by justifications of the European project (cf. Morgan 2007). Undoubtedly, the particularities of each case play a role in such discursive formations, especially when centrifugal and anti-redistributionist regionalism is proposed in territories with a long-standing tradition of ethnic mobilization. However, already in the past regionalist movements mutually influenced each other and often professed very similar ideologies (radical right in the 1930s, leftist in the 1960s and 1970s). Present articulations of centrifugal regionalism in Europe do not necessary all reflect a common world-view, but are all conditioned by the process of European integration.

It is obviously tempting to propose an ideological reading of contemporary articulations of centrifugal regionalisms as expressions of neo-liberal ideology. Such a reading would undoubtedly identify an important component in many of these contemporary articulations. Making even abstraction of the fact that the term “neoliberal” is itself a very broad term that covers in practice a broad variety of economic policies, economic ideologies or economic grievances are not sufficient to explain all dimensions of these articulations. To acquire political salience, articulations of centrifugal regionalism are equally in need of a vision of a model community that plays a crucial role in giving the

territorial entity an identity.² It is of course striking how much the Lega Nord invested in elaborating such vision of a community. These visions of a community are themselves at the same time conditioned by ideology, since the image of economically successful, competitive regions oriented towards the international market is prevalent in both cases. Yet, the image of a regional community clearly also includes other dimensions. In both contexts, there is clearly the identification with a set of norms and values that are considered to be normal, part of the European anchorage of the region.

Justifications of regional identities have clearly undergone a process of Europeanization. The European context offers a window of opportunity for regionalism (as shown by the importance almost all European regionalist have attributed to their anchorage in a Europe of the Regions), but at the same time also frames and constraints articulations of regional identity. These articulations interact with affirmations of European values and justifications of European integration, but since these are themselves far from uncontroversial (see the contributions on this issue of Ferrara 2007, Morgan 2007 and Sissenach 2007), they do allow for a degree of freedom that regionalists may instrumentalize. In the case of Flanders the identification with Europe and models of normality is rather taken for granted and may even be taken as the expression of disenchantment with traditional Flemish nationalism (Vos 2002). In the Italian context normality expresses more explicitly an aspiration, since the desire to be normal has played an important role in Italian public discourse in general in recent years (cf. Huijsseune 2006: 220-221). In its identification of normality with Europe (or sometimes somewhat broader with the “West” as locus of civilization), public discourse in Italy resembles similar articulations of identity at the European periphery, for example in Spain where the idea of a modern, Europeanized and normalized country was set up in opposition to its traditional “Hispanic” identity (Jáuregui 2003: 295). Revealingly, in its literature the Lega itself notwithstanding its professions of Euroscepticism, has systematically emphasized the European-ness of Padania (Huijsseune 2010).

The construction of justification: the actors

In Flanders, justifications of centrifugal regionalism are (even when they are not professed in the same way by the different political parties) fairly mainstream. Only the parties that define themselves as Flemish nationalist explicitly profess the idea of Flemish independence. Almost all parties, however, more or less explicitly support a reorganization of the Belgian state that would attribute more power to the regional level, and that would include a financial responsabilization of regional entities (and hence, implicitly or explicitly, such programmes imply the abandonment or at the very least diminution of interregional transfers).³ This shared position reflects in fact the way how

² We follow here the interpretation of identity outlined by Silvana Patriarca, that interprets it as including a project and/or vision for the community involved: “l’identità nazionale, espressione coniata più di recente, tende a indicare una dimensione più soggettiva di percezione e di auto-immagini che possono implicare un senso di missione e di proiezione nel mondo.” (Patriarca 2010: ix).

³ See e.g. the five resolutions the Flemish Parliament voted on the issue of state reform on March 3rd, 1999, and that include the demand for fiscal autonomy. These resolutions were voted by all democratic parties of the Flemish parliament, except the Greens (who abstained) and the representative of the Francophone party. The MPs of the extreme right Vlaams Blok did not participate to this vote. These resolutions remain an

within the political community but also the Flemish economic elites and its media identification with Flanders has become culturally hegemonic. In Flanders, centrifugal regionalism expresses the dominant common sense opinion in the region (provided both by the media and by the region’s political and intellectual establishment) and its transposition in broadly shared political goals.

The political configuration in which demands for centrifugal regionalism are formulated has changed drastically in recent years. Until 2007, the extreme right Vlaams Belang party (formerly Vlaams Blok) monopolized the issue of independence. Mainstream political parties in Flanders, while often sharing elements of the party’s critique of the Belgian state and of its redistributive policies, nevertheless refused any form of political cooperation with this party, and also very explicitly rejected its ethnocentric and racist world vision (and its strongly ethnic vision on Flemish identity). The recent rise of the democratic nationalist party Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (which in the 2010 federal elections has become the largest party in Flanders) has undoubtedly consolidated the mainstreaming of centrifugal regionalism in Flanders. The N-VA is anchored in the predominantly conservative, centre to centre-right tradition of the Flemish movement and Flemish politics in general, in being culturally conservative and attached to liberal economic policies.⁴ It very explicitly distances itself, however, from the radical right currents that historically played an important role within the Flemish movement. It explicitly promotes a civic and antiracist definition of Flemish identity, and attempts to ground its arguments for institutional reforms in a discourse of functionality and efficiency that professes to transcend ethnocentrism. Other political parties in Flanders presently reject the idea of Flemish independence, but definitely are more open towards its views on institutional reform and its critiques of transfers, and proposals for extended autonomy and financial responsabilization of regional entities (that they more or less explicitly also endorse, albeit sometimes with different interpretations).

The Italian context is quite different, since centrifugal regionalism is only explicitly promoted by one party, the Lega Nord, that has moreover increasingly affirmed a radical right and xenophobic profile that makes it similar to the Vlaams Belang. The ideological pluralism of such articulations is therefore undoubtedly more limited than in Flanders. However, contrary to the Vlaams Belang the Lega is far from isolated politically. Moreover, its programme interacts with mainstream interpretations (defended by persons related both the centre-right and centre-left) of the position of northern Italy both in the Italian state and the global economy. This vision is expressed in the so-called “Northern Question” paradigm that “locates the problems of northern Italy at the level of the state and/or the South, and unproblematically identifies northern Italy with modernity”

important reference in Flemish public discourse. The 2010 electoral programmes express the recent views of these parties (see CD&V 2010, Groen 2010, N-VA 2010, SP-A 2010 and Vlaams Belang 2010) and overall confirm the positions they defended in 1999, with Groen as the only party that expresses a sustained interest in solidarity between regions (and hence the only mainstream party that does not share the antiredistributive consensus). To be noted is that the socialist SP-A, albeit more moderate than conservative parties, nevertheless equally defends the regionalization of at least some aspects of social security policies.

⁴ The dominant tradition of the Flemish movement being conservative, it may nevertheless be noted that its programme (including its centrifugal tendencies) also has some defenders from the left, guaranteeing a certain ideological plurality of this political tradition.

(Huysseune 2006: 127).⁵ The political proposals and the world view of the Lega are hence radicalized interpretations from ideas and viewpoints well present in mainstream Italian public opinion. Mainstream parties in Italy reject both the Lega's secessionism, its affirmation of a Padanian identity and its xenophobia. They are, however, more accommodating (at least rhetorically) towards the idea of federalism and, while ignoring the Padanian identity discourse of the Lega, they are not entirely immune towards its anti-immigration campaigns. However, contrary to Belgium, the view of mainstream parties on institutional reform are much more ambivalent (also because these parties are confronted with a southern constituency generally suspicious of them), and proposals for such reforms may indeed be viewed as mere rhetorical ploys in a political game. The Lega itself has moreover equally expressed shifting and often ambivalent incoherent visions on institutional reforms, an ambivalence that may be considered symptomatic of the difficulty of translating the "Northern Question" into a consistent programme of institutional reform.

Fiscal autonomy, transfers, and regional excellence

Fiscal autonomy is high on the agenda in both cases. In the absence of an identity tradition, the Lega's critique of the Italian central state, the issue of fiscal autonomy and the critique of transfers from the richer North to the poorer South have consistently played a central role in its propaganda. Propositions for "fiscal federalism" have moreover played an important role in creating linkages between the Lega's original secessionism and mainstream public opinion. The concept is suitably vague and flexible and may in practice include almost any reform of the fiscal system. However, it does refer to the principle that regions should have the right to preserve their fiscal income entirely for themselves.⁶ The debate in Belgium focuses on the social security transfers between regions (in particular health and unemployment). From our perspective, the crucial dimension of these critiques is that they reinterpret the interpersonal principle of the Belgian social system as interregional transfers, and question the legitimacy and necessity of such transfers (proposing instead the concept of regional social security). Justifications in each region are based on the idea that transfers deprive the richer region of means to which it has a right. Such a vision also implies that calculating what each region is due is considered to be unproblematic, and as a rule discussions on what would be correct criteria for establishing a region's rights - or even whether it is possible to

⁵ This article does not intend to analyse in extenso the programme of the Lega Nord. We will only refer here to the books of its party leader Umberto Bossi, generally written together with the journalist Daniele Vimercati (Bossi 1995a; Bossi 1995b; Bossi and Vimercati 1992; Bossi and Vimercati 1993; Bossi and Vimercati 1998) that have outlined the party's ideas. Good examples of books that articulated the "Northern Question" paradigm are Bassetti 1996 and Diamanti 1996. In recent years, more critical readings of northern Italy seem to prevail, and Bassetti himself has distanced himself from his previous "Northern" perspective (cf. Bassetti 2010).

⁶ Such an understanding of fiscal federalism is based on the principle that regions would have a natural right to preserve their income entirely to themselves. In the Italian context, the concept has thus a radically different meaning from that given by scholars (including Belgian ones, see e.g. Cantillon and De Maesschalck 2007) who use the same term to refer to the necessity to locate social security and redistributive mechanisms in general at the highest possible level of governance.

define such criteria - are entirely avoided (what is rather preferred is the production of data that would prove that the region in question is discriminated).⁷

Both in northern Italy and Flanders a consensus around "liberalism" dominates public discourse and undoubtedly this ideological hegemony facilitates the articulation of policy proposals that question interregional solidarity. However, an exclusively ideological reading of centrifugal regionalism misses many points of its meaning. It certainly underestimates that similar arguments of regional dispossession may occur in very different ideological environments, as results for example from Robert Stallaert's (2002) analysis of debates within socialist Yugoslavia between the Croatian and Serbian republics. In Flanders, progressive nationalist movements like Meervoud or the non-nationalist Socialist Party equally problematize transfers between regions. In Italy, an interesting parallel exists with the "northern" viewpoints of the pre-first world war socialists, for example Ivano Bonomi's argument that it was logical that the state spent more in the North, since having reached a higher level of civilization its collective needs were more important (quoted in Petracconi 2000: 197).

Justifications of centrifugal regionalism, even when influenced by specific ideologies like neo-liberalism, nevertheless need an argumentative framework but also a number of (implicit or explicit) assumptions that transcend ideology. Justifications first need to conceptualize the causes of economic success as essentially endogenous, a process facilitated by the fact that many approaches in theories of development - not limited to a particular ideology - accept such an assumption (cf. Harvey 2006: 72). They secondly need to naturalize the territory that is concerned by this process of endogenous development, and they thirdly need to propose a plausible narrative explaining its economic success (a narrative that often also implicitly or explicitly intends to explain the failure of other territories).

I therefore propose to answer two questions: how a region was constructed as such, and how a region became associated with an economic model. This identification has occurred in both regions, albeit in a different context and in different ways. Elaborating a northern Italian model originally took place within the academic community, before the emergence of the Lega Nord. Sociologists, political scientists and economists outlined from the late 1970s on the Third Italy, the regions of northern and central Italy outside the industrial triangle as a new economic model, based on grass-roots endogenous entrepreneurship, and characterized by a large number of industrial districts and their highly specialized production. Crucially, this literature outlined that these districts were strongly embedded in society, were based on the cooperation between local actors (and sometimes also with local and regional institutions promoting these districts) and mobilized locally present skills, values and entrepreneurial resources. The intellectual

⁷ For a recent discussion on the argument in Belgium that argues the case of Wallonia (and does this with more sophistication and historical background than most other publications on this issue), see Quévrit 2010. For a recent Italian example, see Ridolfi 2010. For Italy, the arguments proposed by Scaramellini et al. (1997) against simplistic readings of data on regional incomes and expenses remain valid. The more general point made by Stallaerts (2002: 154), that strictly regional readings of economic data that neglect the essential interdependence of regional economies are per definition unilateral, would definitely undermine the legitimacy of this type of arguments.

elaboration of the Third Italy as a theoretical model of endogenous development and the Lega's political discourse on the productive north have evident parallels, even though the two framing communities have remained rather rigidly separated. In its definition of northern and later Padanian identity, the Lega has indeed constantly emphasized the labour ethics and entrepreneurial qualities of the northern population, and confirms that these qualities are rooted in local society and in history (even linking these capacities to the artisanship of the Celts).

The Lega's discourse on the virtues of the productive people opposes these entrepreneurial capacities to the Italian state that has constantly hindered them. The endogenous development paradigm has a more complex vision on the issue. Although this development is predominantly envisioned as having emerged spontaneously, outside state policies, much literature does emphasize the important role of local and regional authorities in promoting and sustaining this model. The mainstream discourse on the "Northern Question" that opposes a dynamic northern society and its flourishing economy to the state, its inefficiency and its bureaucratic rules nevertheless displays many resemblances with the Lega narrative. Additionally, the emphasis given by scholars to the local social and cultural resources as sources of development has been congenial for an ethnic interpretation of this development model, even if this clearly was not the intention of the authors who elaborated it.

The construction of the region of Flanders as an economic model is a much more recent process, as highlighted by Stijn Oosterlynck (in press). Throughout the 19th and early 20th century, Flanders was overall the economically less developed part of the country, and one of the important concerns of the emerging Flemish movements consisted in fact in the formation of a Flemish entrepreneurial class, while it equally claimed more state support for its economic development. Flanders only experienced a real economic take-off after the Second World War, paralleled by a decline of the traditional industrial sectors (coal and steel) in Wallonia. This provided a favourable context that allowed the newly established Flemish region to outline its own economic profile. It did so in the early 1980s, following the canons of the new hegemonic neoliberal vision (contrary to Keynesianism). It managed to elaborate an image of Flanders as an entrepreneurial region, where regional authorities (while not intervening directly in the economy) played a crucial role in establishing and reinforcing a climate favourable to entrepreneurship and investments.

The Flemish economic model is, however, also supported by visions of Flemish identity. This vision is less strongly present in public discourse, since it is also constructed in juxtaposition with the presumed Wallonian one (see also next section). Public discourse, outside mentions of regional excellence, entrepreneurial capacities and good governance, overall tends to be not overly concerned with identity affirmation. In Flanders, the consolidation of regional government has been paralleled with a decline of the traditional nationalist identity affirmation that has easily been perceived as superficial and outdated (Vos 2002). On identity issues, Flemish authorities have frequently displayed a relaxed attitude, more than the Wallonian ones still in search for regional identity. However, a sub-discourse of identity affirmation (in contrast with Wallonia) is indeed present in

Flanders. In this discourse Flemings present themselves as "workers, not thinkers. This is not the Protestant spirit but the Catholic one, in which suffering hard and being able to suffer is crucial" (Keating et al: 84). They equally envision themselves as dynamic and pragmatic, in contrast with the Wallonians who are presumed to be ideological (ibid). This discourse relates Flemish identity to its historically predominant political tradition, Christian democracy, and contrasts it with the predominantly socialist Wallonian region. It also identifies the region of Flanders with practices of good governance, in contrast once again with the presumed weaknesses of governance and practices of clientelism and corruption in Wallonia.

In the two cases, the regions have also been naturalized, albeit in a different degree. Already some twenty years ago, geographers have pointed out how in Belgium ethnic identities have become territorialized, and that conceptualization of territorial variety within the country has been reified within the institutional regional entities (Murphy 1989, Vandermotten et al. 1990). In Italy, the process is more contrasted. Definitions of the "North" and its delimitation from an equally ill-defined "centre" remain contested, and only the southern territories to be excluded are somewhat more precisely defined. In the discourse of the Lega itself, the obsessive emphasis on the link between territory and cultural identity cannot hide the difficulties the party itself constantly has encountered to define the borders of the Padanian territory.

In the two cases, regional economic models are sustained by a vision on regional identity that attributes to the groups concerned the qualities of a modern society. Far from arguing for specificity, discourses on regional identity in fact intend to prove its normality and its correspondence with standards of modernity (with a probably unconscious reference to the models of accomplished modernity outlined in modernization theory). Identification with Europe plays an important role in this regional appropriation of normality. More or less taken for granted in the Flemish case, it has always been an important component of northern Italian identity even before the rise of the Lega Nord. It is interesting to notice that notwithstanding its professed euroscepticism the Lega Nord has always emphatically confirmed the European-ness of Padania, and that in its vision the Celtic identity of Padania in fact serves to affirm the European linkages of the region.

Identification with a model of accomplished modernity, however, also implies the attribution of non-economic qualities. Because of the northern Italians' need to distinguish themselves from southerners, this affirmation has a more long-standing tradition in Italy: 19th century texts on the issue already contrasted the north's civic-ness and capacity for cooperation with the south's individualism and "particularism", and the same topoi appear almost unaltered in Putnam's *Making Democracy Work* (1993). The Lega itself has frequently referred to these values and, particularly in its early years, also reproduced the mainstream image of a North attached to the liberal values of modernity (such as, for example, gender equality). It seems, however, that the party was rather uncomfortable about those values and since the late 1990s it has rather preferred to frame its European-ness in a different way, by highlighting Christian values (associated with a conservative form Catholicism) and juxtaposing a Christian Europe to its Islamic other, equally prominent features in the Vlaams Belang programme. One may hence observe

that the articulation of a Christian identity, a minority vision on European integration but which is considered legitimate, enables these parties to link their programme to mainstream opinions. Their implicit association with the “Clash of Civilizations” paradigm of Samuel Harrington (with an anti-Islamic emphasis) fulfills a similar function.

In Flanders, the affirmation of European-ness and attachment to liberal values plays a less crucial role, because mainstream parties tend to take them for granted. They do play a role in juxtaposing a democratic view of Flanders to the discourse of the extreme right Vlaams Belang, as we will argue in the next section it explains the importance attributed to a multicultural Flanders that counters the xenophobic and ethnocentric identity vision the Vlaams Belang articulates. One may presume that official Flemish articulations of multiculturalism are also displayed because European institutions have frequently been critical of the Flemish treatment of the Francophone minority.

Othering

In both countries, critiques of transfers are related to the vision on the other region of the country, but also on the impact of a cessation of transfers. For sure, defenders of such policies refuse in both cases to take into account the possibility that the increased regional inequality that would probably result from such policies might have perverse political effects that would also harm the richer regions (cf. Cantillon and De Maesschalck 2007). They rather (often more implicitly than explicitly) legitimize this cessation of transfers by the combination of two ideas: firstly that poorer regions are in need of cultural adjustment and that this can only be reached through a drastic cure of austerity and liberalization (the equivalent of the IMF’s structural adjustment) that will magically contribute to resurrect them, secondly that richer regions need their fiscal means to better guarantee the efficiency of their economy and the welfare of their population. Certainly in public discourse articulations of centrifugal regionalism are careful to argue that the policies they propose are equally profitable for the poorer region and, interestingly enough, nationalists are perhaps even more prone to defend this idea, equally proposed by the N-VA in Flanders and the Lega in Italy.⁸

Italy offers at once the most straightforward and at the same time schizophrenic vision of regional difference. In a cultural background where from the creation of a unified Italian state on public discourse has devoted considerable energy in sustaining national identity and the unity of the country, and moreover (contrary to Belgium) continues to emphasize this issue, the presence of regional difference and the North-South divide has equally constantly played an important role. In the case of Italy, the very emergence of the Lega has redrawn attention to the important role the North-South juxtaposition has played throughout the history of the unified state. The Lega’s articulation of northern identity for sure recycles both rooted prejudices against a presumed backward and corrupt South, but

also an intellectual interpretative tradition that intended to provide an explanation for what was perceived as the anomaly of southern Italy. Since after Unification previous explanations such as the Bourbon regime lost their salience, articulations explaining this difference by the presumed cultural and even racial backwardness of the South flourished in the late 19th century, contrasting its “Levantine” or “African” nature with a modern and European North). Counter-discourses pointing out the discrimination of the South were, however, equally present and contributed to promote specific policies to develop the region. After the fascist period during which regional differences were denied, the post-War period witnessed a strong political and cultural consensus on the necessity of special policies to develop the southern regions.

The rise of the Lega corresponds in fact with the crisis of this consensus. Although this crisis coincides with the emergence of the new neoliberal consensus, it can certainly not be reduced to it. It itself resulted from the perverse by-effects of the *intervento straordinario*, and in particular of the growth of organized crime and the corruption that characterized the reconstruction after the 1980 earthquake (and that gave extended public visibility to phenomena that were indeed endemic). These events were accompanied by a re-articulation of the frames within which regional specificity and the relation between regions were interpreted. The emergence of the Lega coincided with the publication of a number of texts that argued the cultural otherness (read non-modernity) of the South. Besides highly publicized books written by the authoritative journalist Giorgio Bocca, they also include important more scholarly essays like Tullio Altan’s *La nostra Italia*, published in 1987 (and hence predating the earliest electoral successes of the Lega). This book re-launched a number of concepts in the public debate that had been elaborated in the late 19th century to describe the cultural backwardness of the South and also drew renewed attention to Edward Banfield’s concept of amoral familism. Tullio Altan’s analysis and the theoretical contribution of Banfield both inspired Robert D. Putnam’s famous *Making Democracy Work*, published in 1993 at the height of the Lega’s success. His research on regional governance once again seemed to confirm the thesis of the South’s cultural otherness and inadaptability to modernity (Putnam admittedly interpreted the South’s otherness and lack of social capital as resulting from rational adaptation to adverse circumstances, but equally argued that because of their path-dependent reproduction, such patterns for behavior had become deeply rooted in society and hence extremely difficult to modify). Although northern Italian public discourse overall avoids the articulation of too negative visions of the South, several of Putnam’s arguments and especially his emphasis on the lack of social capital in the region are frequently voiced. The many critiques, mainly from the South, that have problematized Putnam’s reading of the South and have displayed how his representation of the region is stereotyped and ethnocentric, do not really seem to have exercised a serious impact on northern discourse.

It is interesting to observe that the Lega itself has been far from straightforward in its interpretation of southern Italians. Although it has clearly cultivated anti-southern stereotypes, official party utterances have displayed a considerable ambivalence in interpreting southern difference (see my analysis in Huysseune 2008). One line of thought clearly articulates discourse on cultural difference, and argues that southern Italians are culturally inadequate. To the classic topoi of southern character it adds

⁸ For the N-VA, see their electoral programme of 2010. For the Lega, see Huysseune 2008, Bossi and Vimercati 1992, p. 181; *Ibid.*, 1993, pp. 194-6. In both cases, besides this official view “unofficial” utterances of Flemish nationalist express a much more intolerant and punitive view, also endorsed in Flanders by the extreme right Vlaams Belang.

equally traditional images of the region's non-European-ness, but also a less traditional argumentation of the south as a territory culturally contaminated by Orthodoxy and Islam. A second line of argument, on the contrary, understands the South as a territory that like northern Italy has been oppressed by the Italian state. This line of argumentation, very much downplayed in mainstream discourse, combines elements from the "internal colonialism" model proposed by left-wing regionalism in the 1970s (and that incidentally also provided the environment in which the Lega originated), and the neo-Borbonian framework of some southern Italian intellectuals who focus on the allegedly regressive effects of the incorporation of the territories of the Bourbon monarchy in the Italian unified state.

In the Lega's hybrid interpretative model, northern Italy is nevertheless presented as the most important victim of the Italian state and much more than the damage the south may have undergone because of state policies, the party emphasizes the "southern-ness" of the state and the importance of southerners profiting from it. The solutions the Lega proposes for the South are clearly marked by cultural paternalism: the South should adapt the economic and cultural model of the more advanced North, ideas equally articulated within mainstream public discourse. Such proposals reflect the demise of interpretations of the South as an exploited region, in favour of ones that tends to emphasize the historical difference between the two parts of the country and their essentially separate development (already proposed by Luciano Cafagna in the 1960s, see Cafagna 2008: 7). Equally important was the idea that the South's further economic growth was dependent on its capacity to create a process of endogenous development similar to the one in the North. In the present political context, from the northern perspective it is paradoxically assumed that such a process can be generated spontaneously in the South, while it requires more extensive financial and institutional support in the North.

In Belgium, the Othring produced by the Flemish is (in light of the long-standing tradition of ethno-nationalist mobilization) paradoxically enough more complex, shifting and ambivalent than in Italy. Since historically the emergence of the Flemish movement occurred around linguistic issues, its first opponent has been the Francophones, but in particular the Francophones within Flanders (and partly also in Brussels). The Francophone nature of Wallonia has with rare exceptions never been an issue for the Flemish movement. Wallonia may have become a problem for Flanders for two reasons: firstly because of the hostility of the majority of Walloon politicians towards the grievances of the Flemish movement (and their de facto alliance with pro-Francophone politicians in Brussels and Flanders), and secondly for reasons of economic competition (and competing demands for state investments). Only with the growing wealth of Flanders in recent decades has the issue of transfers in social security become an important one.

This historical ambivalence is still present in present articulations of identity. With the exception of radical right and some neo-populist utterances, Flemish visions of Wallonia and Walloons tend to be formulated in a prudent way. Rather than a radical othring, mainstream discourse offer a somewhat paternalist vision of a lesser developed region, but nevertheless frequently points out its alleged negative characteristics, such as

clientelism, corruption and wasteful use of means particularly in fields related to social security (e.g. the health sector). Most frequently these vices are linked to the role of the socialist party (historically predominant in Wallonia), perceived as "archaic" and/or "ideological" (code-words for not adapting in a sufficient measure the northern European Third Way type of socialism).

If it comes to it, Francophones outside Wallonia are a more problematic matter in present articulations of Flemish identity. Brussels is a source of perennial tension, since this officially bilingual city is at once part of the Flanders community and outside the Flemish region (while at the same time being its capital). Being at the same time part of Flanders and traditionally framed as one of Flanders' others, not only because the city, originally culturally and linguistically Flemish, was Frenchified, particularly in the late 19th and early 20th century, but also because much of Flemish identity creation happened also against the liberal and cosmopolitan culture of the Belgian capital. The city still raises considerable antagonism in Flanders, as allegedly insecure and poorly governed, and the Flemish in Brussels are often perceived as too prone to compromises with the Francophones (see e.g. anonymous, s.d.). Brussels remains a source of embarrassment for Flemish visions on their region' future, because of its geographical location within the Flemish region, the complexity of its institutional position and the travailed relation it historically has developed with Flanders. Especially those favouring Flemish independence are confronted with providing a solution to the "Brussels problem". Radical right-wing nationalist intend to include it and culturally assimilate it into an independent Flanders. The paradoxes of nationalism are equally clear in the project of the progressive nationalist Meervoud group (Daelemans 2009), which proposes a confederation between Flanders and Brussels (arguing for Flemish independence because of identity reasons, and for the incorporation of Brussels from a functionalist logic which they refuse to recognize for preserving the Belgian state or for extending the Brussels region). This reflects a general tendency in Flemish public discourse, that tends to justify institutional reforms that increase Flemish autonomy with a functionalist language, while refusing the same functionalist logic of Francophone demands (e.g. the extension of the Brussels region) in the name of identity and eternal and fixed language borders (that Flemish discourse interprets as state borders, although nothing in previous agreements warrants this interpretation).

Concerning Francophones within Flanders, the importance of the Francophone bourgeoisie in Flemish cities has gradually lost its saliency, paralleling the declining importance and public visibility of this group. The Flemish political parties and public opinion focus instead on Francophones in the Brussels periphery, as a threat to a homogenous national cultural and particularly linguistic identity and systematically refuse to recognize them as a minority. A traditional problem, the position of minorities within the territory of a politically mobilized ethnic community, here acquires particular saliency because of its international visibility, this periphery being near the European capital and therefore very visible to the European institutions. Flemish parties overall ignore international critiques on its policies, arguing that they result from ignorance of the real situation in the region.

It is interesting to notice that the closed official Flemish attitude towards Francophones in the Brussels periphery (largely shared by Flemish public opinion), is not mirrored in the region's official attitude towards immigrants.⁹ Probably in order to contrast the negative association outsiders and Francophones frequently make between articulations of Flemish identity and the racism of the Vlaams Belang, the official policies of the Flemish region promote multiculturalism and respect for cultural diversity. This multiculturalism is admittedly bereft with contradictions. It is in perpetual tension with the need Flemish parties feel (because of the pressure of the Vlaams Belang) to propose a tough attitude on issues like regularization of illegal immigrants or the acceptance of asylum seekers. It is also inegalitarian, not only because it does not really tackle discrimination and also implies the recognition of the central place of Flemish culture (and particularly the Flemish language) and hence (particularly in recent years) has included mandatory citizenization in its policies. It nevertheless also refers to the history of Flemish cultural emancipation to justify respect and recognition of immigrant culture and their organized cultural and political participation (while the Francophones tend to propose social integration, but seem more influenced by the French assimilationist tradition).

In northern Italy, the attitude of the Lega Nord towards minorities is twofold: it traditionally defends the rights of cultural minorities long established on the northern territory (and sometimes expresses more liberal views on this issue than mainstream Italian opinion, often suspicious of these minorities, especially the South Tyroleans) but is on the contrary strongly hostile towards the presence of non-European and even eastern European immigrants in northern Italy (paralleling the position of the Vlaams Belang on this issue). Although northern entrepreneurs, policy makers and scholars have frequently highlighted how much the region's economic development has become dependent on immigrants (Allasino 2010), the Lega's views have nevertheless exercised an impact on mainstream public discourse and on official policies (cf. Sacchetto in press). This institutionalization of discriminatory policies in an EU member state hence problematizes the relation between policies and values in the European Union, since these policies are hardly compatible with the official multiculturalism of the EU.

Conclusion

Centrifugal regionalism intends to present itself as a normative programme. In both cases, justifications of centrifugal regionalism, although motivated by the necessity to defend regional interests, do not limit themselves to such a utilitarian argumentation. They include an argumentation that such reforms will equally be profitable for the region that they intend to exclude from redistributive mechanisms. They also include a self-presentation of the region as an ideal community that merits retribution for its virtues, virtues in which the regional capacity for competing in the global economy clearly plays a central role, but where this capacity is itself understood as related to broader moral values in the territory. They equally (although clearly more explicitly in Flanders) refer to practices of good governance (implicitly assuming that their regions exemplify the European best practices of good governance), to legitimize these policies (and the terminology of responsabilization plays an important role in this context, since they

⁹ For an analysis of these policies, see Loobuyck and Jacobs, in press).

assume that the lack of good governance is the essential reason of the other regions' problems). The Flemish model is clearly more institutional, with the advantage of delimitating (and at the same time reifying) a territory of economic virtue. While in northern Italy such precise delimitation is absent, the more elaborate discourse on communal virtues may equally play a legitimizing function for centrifugal policies, even in the absence of an elaborated identity tradition.

These justifications of centrifugal regionalism are undoubtedly constrained by the frames the European context and the values professed by the European Union impose. The European frame in particular internationalizes and Europeanizes articulations of regional identity that more or less need to adapt to the European rhetoric of unity in diversity, and also to an idea of European solidarity. This context also implies that any crudely and explicitly self-centred affirmation of regional interests is problematic. In both cases, the abandonment of interregional transfers is in fact argued by pointing out that such policies will also help the development of the poorer regions. Such a justification nevertheless reveals the fragility of solidarity within the EU, and how in the absence of well outlined principles and policies on the issue – and in the presence of an equally strongly affirmed discursive tradition with sometimes social Darwinist tones on the competitiveness of states and regions – territorial entities have ample leeway to justify anti-redistributionist policies. Concerning identity, articulations of centrifugal regionalism in Flanders and northern Italy combine the rhetoric of unity in diversity (and in Flanders also multiculturalism) with practices of exclusion. Flemish public discourse, more attached to these principles, has problems in legitimizing its policies towards the Francophone minority. In Italy, the Lega Nord justifies its ethnocentric policies by referring to an alternative frame of European identity, the Christian one opposed to Islamic outsiders. Although its interpretation of Christian identity is problematic even for the Catholic Church, this discursive construction shows how European identity may be reframed in more ethnocentric ways, revealing its fragility as an instrument of integration in a period of crisis, weakening of solidarity and growing ethnocentrism.

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