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THE FAR RIGHT IN ITALY

Paper by

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Economic crisis often leads to the rise of extremisms, and Italy is not an exception: as in many other European countries, the 2008 crisis led to a rise in power of far-right parties, notably the Northern League, which throughout the last two years gained an extraordinary importance on the Italian political scene.

Far right parties in Italy can be divided into two main trends: a neo-fascist group and a new form of extreme right, incarnated by the Northern League, a territorially based and openly xenophobic party. If on certain points these two forms of political extremism converge, they have to be seen as radically different as one is mainly centered on national issues whilst the other is characterized by a strong territorial matrix. It is notably the second kind of right which is interesting to study, as the Northern League is the party that profited the most of the economic crisis. In fact, neo-fascist parties did not rise as much as the Northern League, which has acquired the status of a real political power inside the country. If the votes given to the Northern League after the crisis were undoubtedly more than during the precedent elections, it is nevertheless inappropriate to see this crisis as the only element favoring its rise to power. It will be therefore necessary to see not only why the Northern League acquired so much power after the economic crisis, but also how it exploited previous crisis to impose itself on the political scene. Some space will be dedicated also to neo-fascist right, however, the results of this right are not quite as disquieting as those of the Northern League, as it is still a largely marginalized and extra-parliamentary movement. The main problem is that the hegemony of a party such as the northern League is dangerous for Italian unity, and is symptomatic of a larger crisis. It would be extremely reductive to assert that the 2008 crisis was the only element allowing the rise of the far right; the progressive increase in power for these parties has more ancient roots, dating back to the 1994 political crisis, which marked the end of the First Republic and the evolutions Italy faced, notably the increase in immigrants in the country.

The economic crisis of 2008 did not leave Italy untouched. Albeit being less strong than in other countries such as Ireland, the 2008 world crisis had important consequences on Italian economy. Italy's GDP went from a 1,5% growth in 2007 to -1,3% in 2008 and -5,0% in 2009. Italy's economic problems were already quite strong, but the 2008 crisis was the most intense out of the 5 crisis Italy faced between 1975 and 2008. What surprises the most a person who is not acquainted with the Italian situation is the fact that the effects of the crisis were extremely different in northern regions and in southern regions; indeed, the economic crisis has deepened the traditional cleavage between a developed North and a backward *Meridione*.

The impact of the crisis on the political realm can be observed through the evolution of votes gained by parties such as the Northern League, an atypical far-right party. If the "traditional" neo-fascist parties did not register an important increment in their votes after the 2008 crisis, the Northern League, a regionalist xenophobic party became a true power. The electoral trend between 2006 and 2010 is particularly revealing: in 2006, the Northern League had had only 4,58% and 4,48% of votes for Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, but in 2008 it doubled its scores (8,3% and 8,1%), reaching important governmental places and becoming Berlusconi's most valuable ally; if the 2008 result might not be directly linked with the effects of the crisis (as the vote was casted after a very short delay), the European elections of 2009 confirmed the growth of the Northern League, who managed to reach a peak of 10,2% of votes. The main issue is that the Northern League is very strong, but it does not represent the whole country: in fact, if in Northern Italy it reaches peaks of 27% of votes (Veneto), in most southern regions it hardly reaches 1% of votes, creating a strong electoral division inside the country. As for what concerns the neo-fascist parties, their electoral results are negligible (and do not reach the 4% threshold to enter Parliament), which brings them to express themselves more as an extra-parliamentary movement than a political party.

Nonetheless, the rise of the far right in Italy did not come as a surprise, nor was it the best electoral score the Northern League reached since its birth; if the Northern League became as powerful as it is today, it is not only because of a crisis that increased its power, but also because of

other forms of crisis that occurred before the 2008 crack. The economic crisis did not have important repercussions on the majority of the population, or, at least, it was not strong enough to generate alone a spontaneous change in political opinion; this conclusion leads us to search further the explanations to the rise of the far right.

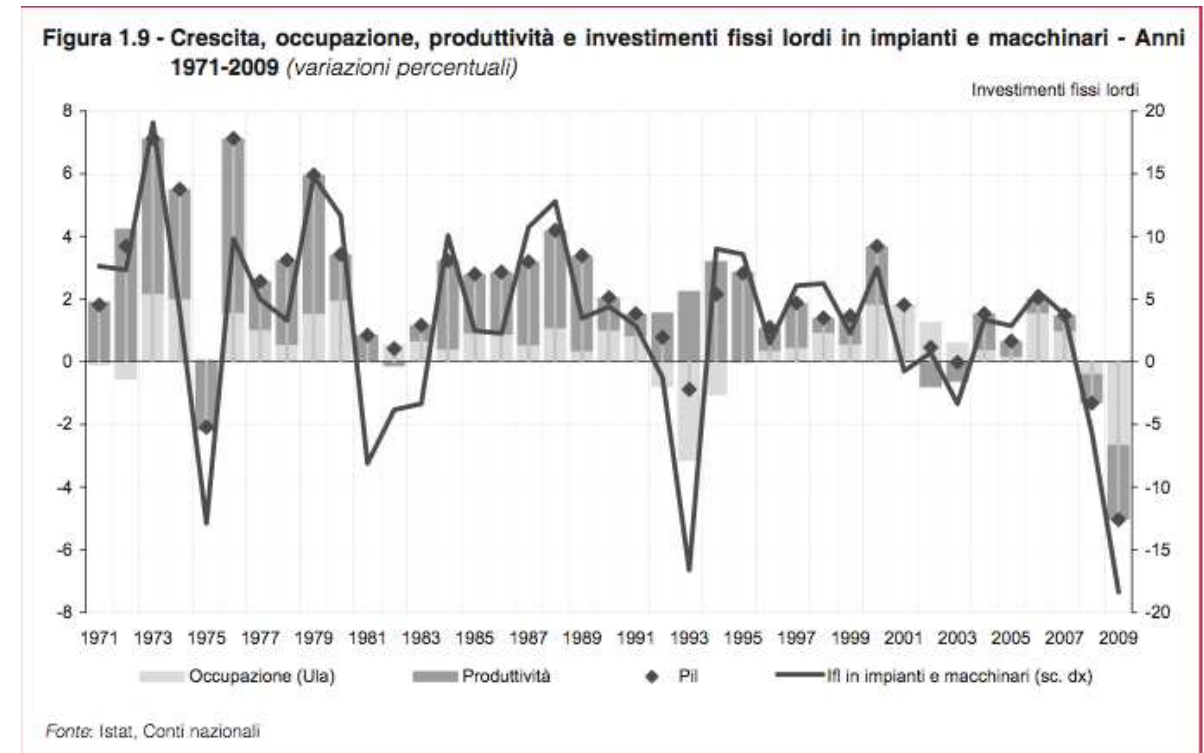
If the economic crisis did have an important effect on the growth of Italian far right parties (especially the Northern League), such growth would not have been possible if a series of structural changes had not occurred in Italy in the years before the crisis. The first of the vital elements to consider in the evaluation of the position of extreme right parties in Italian politics is the great changes the Italian society faced during the last twenty years. Italy went from being a country of emigrants to being a country attracting immigrants; this shift has had strong consequences on the political realm and on society as a whole: indeed, the changes in society left Italy without reference points, which subsequently led to a crisis of Italian identity. The progressive loss of “*Italianity*” and the problems brought about by immigration gave the far right the possibility to exploit fully an openly xenophobic propaganda, centered on the dichotomy between “them” and “us”; this “them” is not necessarily to be considered exclusively as designing immigrants from foreign countries, but also people from southern Italy. In fact, the Northern League, instead of insisting on nationalist values, insists on regionalism and foments tensions inside the country between North and South. Moreover, through the exploitation of a cultural crisis, it imposes a new form of culture, based on regional values, dialects and traditions. This creation of a new form of culture is common to both extreme right neo-fascist parties and the Northern League, however, the main difference lies in the fact that the northern League is a Parliamentary party, whilst the neo-fascist parties do not have enough votes to impose as anything but an extra-parliamentary movement.

However, to fully understand how the rise of the far right was possible in Italy, one needs to go even further in the past to understand it and go to the roots of political crisis: it is therefore necessary to understand what happened in Italy in 1994, when all of the parties that had ruled Italy since the end of the Second World War were involved in the “*Mani Pulite*” scandal. Without such basis, the rise of the Northern League would appear as linked exclusively to conjuncture issues, whilst the reasons that made it possible for it to become as powerful as it is today are deeply rooted in the past.

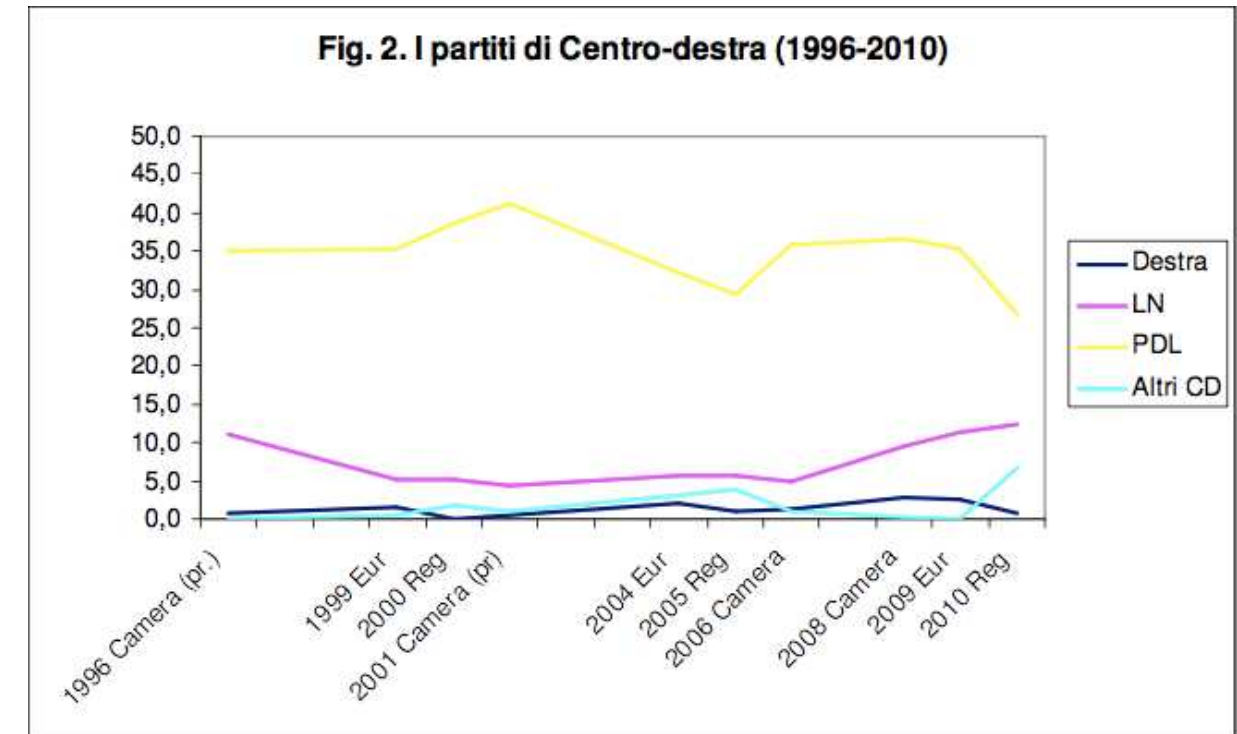
Italy’s situation does not seem to get any better: the country is facing a new political crisis and the Northern League is the only party who is keeping the government going: if it quits the coalition, Italy will face new elections. At the moment, Berlusconi is basically forced to accept anything the Northern League asks if he wants to stay in power, as it is only thanks to their votes that he can actually stay in place; it is a strange form of political blackmail. If Italy were to go to elections right now, probably the Northern League would be the great winner of the elections, with disastrous consequences on the unity of the country: if they stopped asking for secession, they still insist greatly on implementing federalism, which would mean great advantages for northern Italy, but southern Italy would find a more complex situation in front of her. The main issue is that Italy is a country which stands only because of the existence of Berlusconi, the polarizing element in Italian politics. If he should fall, or abandon politics, it is likely for Italy to face a major political crisis, due to the loss of the elements that have characterized Italian politics during the last 17 years. The question is whether Italy is more likely to go back to normality, to become a federal country or to end up divided like Belgium.

Annexe 1: croissance, occupation, productivité et investissements fixes bruts en établissements et machinerie - Années 1971 - 2009 (Valeurs en pourcentage)

Source: Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, *Rapporto Annuale 2009*, présenté le 26 Mai 2010 à Rome, consulté sur www.istat.it



Annexe 2: Les partis de centre-droite (1996-2010) - Droite, Ligue du Nord, PDL, autres

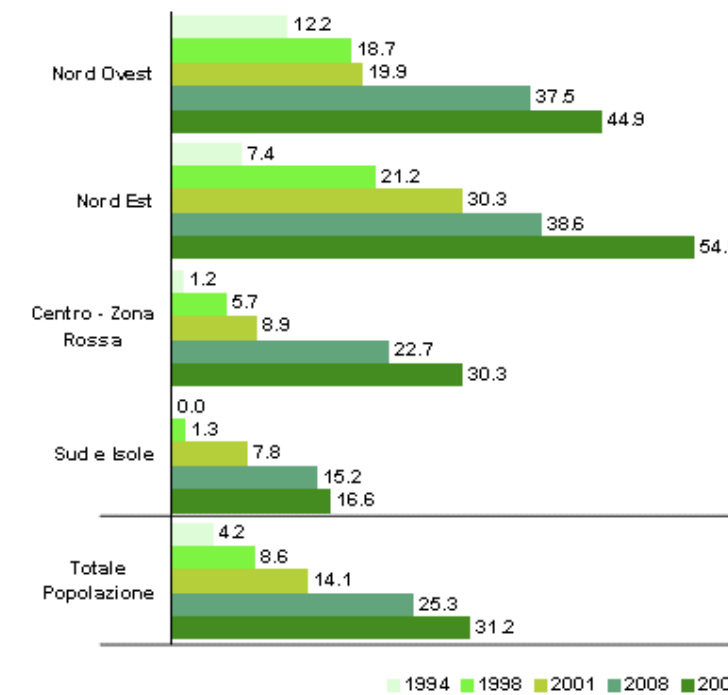


source: Istituto Cattaneo

Annexe 3: la proximité aux positions de la Ligue du nord ans les différentes zones géopolitiques entre 1994 et 2009 (Nord Ouest, Nord-Est, Centre, Sud et Iles)

LA VICINANZA ALLA LEGA NORD

Valori percentuali di quanti si dichiarano molto o abbastanza vicini in base all'area geopolitica – serie storica



Fonte: Indagini Demos & Pi