‘Institutional thickness’, political sub-culture and the resurgence of (the ‘new’) regionalism in Italy – a case study of the Northern League in the province of Varese

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In recent years, the ‘regional scale’ within the European Union (EU) has become more central within academic and policy debates. In particular, there has been an increased focus upon the importance of so-called ‘institutional thickness’ for regional development within the EU. Furthermore, the fact that in several European countries, regionalist political parties have made significant electoral gains has ensured that the ‘regional question’ in Europe has become even more prevalent. This paper explores the linkages between institutions and regionalist political parties by focusing upon the situation in Italy where the resurgence of political regionalism, centred on the Lega Nord (LN) or Northern League political party, has been particularly strong. In particular, the paper focuses upon the development of the LN in a particular province of Northern Italy, Varese. This section explores the ways in which the LN has developed institutionally and electorally and indeed whether the party has been able to develop a specific political sub-culture to replace the previous one associated with the Christian Democrat (DC) party, which was the main party in Varese before the landmark changes that took place in Italian politics in the early 1990s.

key words Italy Lega Nord Varese regionalism ‘institutional thickness’ political sub-culture

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Introduction

The regional scale in the European Union (EU) has come to the fore of both academic and policy debates within recent years (Hallin and Malmberg 1996). Moreover, this has been accompanied by a rise in interest in debates about institutions and regional development within Europe (Amin 1999; Lovering 1999; Amin and Thrift 1994, 1995; Amin and Tomaney 1995; Putnam 1993; Storper 1995, 1997). In the midst of Europe’s evolving political landscape, it is argued that those regions at Europe’s ‘core’, such as Baden Württemburg, Rhône Alps, Lombardy and Catalonia, have the ability to instigate greater inter-regional networks of co-operation and exchange. This is because such ‘core’ European regions have a myriad of different institutions, which are not only based in formal political spheres but also in a number of other regional and local institutions (Amin 1997a, 6–7).
Clearly, the debates surrounding the significance of institutional ‘strength’ have raised a number of important issues regarding regional economic development within the EU. The key question, which this paper considers, is what are the implications of such institutional ‘strength’ (and weaknesses) for the drive towards contemporary regionalism within Europe. The situation is a complex one because regional institutional ‘thickness’ does not necessarily lead to a greater drive for autonomy and political regionalism. On the other hand, it is apparent that a political regionalist project can gain much greater legitimacy and importance if it is able to embed itself amongst dominant local and regional, economic and civic institutions. The ways in which a regionalist political movement is able to develop linkages with different institutions is dependent on a wide range of factors. Clearly, this depends upon the structure of regional and national governance and economies as well as other factors such as the nature of the political aims, rhetoric and structure of a particular regionalist party. This is because a region is not merely a ‘container’ but is derived from the complex interactions and associations, which develop between economic, socio-cultural, political and institutional actors within a given place (Hallin and Malmberg 1996, 330).

This paper focuses upon the situation in Italy and especially upon the Northern League or Lega Nord (LN), which is a good example of a regionalist political party that has developed in an institutionally ‘thick’ region in recent years and is not based in an area of traditional ethnic identity (Aghnew and Brusa 1999; Giordano 2000). The paper firstly deals with some of the debates surrounding the importance of ‘institutional thickness’ for regional development within Europe. Secondly, it focuses upon the Italian Republic and in particular the ways in which the main post-war political parties (the Christian Democrats (DC) and the Italian Communist Party (PCI)) were able to promote economic development at the regional and local level by developing links with the dominant economic and social institutions of civil society. This section also considers the institutional and political structures of the LN and the ways in which the party has tried to develop links at the local level. The key issue is whether the party has been able to embed itself into civil society by developing links with existing civil and socio-economic institutions, in the way that the DC (and also the PCI) constructed dominant political sub-cultures.

The third section of the paper focuses upon the province of Varese in Lombardy, which is now very much an electoral stronghold for the LN (see Figure 1). However, Varese was an area with a dominant ‘white’ political sub-culture, based upon the hegemony of the DC political party. Therefore, the important question, which this paper addresses, is how the dominant social, economic, institutional and cultural values in the province are politically represented (and hence reproduced) in the post-DC era. This is important because, as Amin (1997b, 6) argues with respect to the Italian case:

Interestingly, only at the margins has research in English explored the connections between the institutions of the business systems and local political subcultures.

‘Institutional thickness’, and the resurgence of (the ‘new’) regionalism in Europe

It is almost axiomatic now to proclaim that, as economic activity becomes more globalised and the nation state relinquishes its role as the ‘natural economic zone’, certain regions are emerging to become the key engines of wealth creation. A number of influential academic perspectives have contended that the political, social and geographical shaping of this regional resurgence is partly dependent on the existence or otherwise of a regionally based institutional thickness or an innovative milieu (Macleod 1999, 1).

There are at least three different processes that have combined to bring the regional scale to the fore of both academic and political debates in recent years (Amin 1999; Hallin and Malmberg 1996; Macleod 1999; Deas and Ward 2000). The first relates to the fact that, in recent years, the region has been rediscovered as an important source of competitive advantage in a globalizing political economy (Scott 1998; Cooke 1997). Moreover, it is argued that the combined processes of globalization and regionalization are contributing to the restructuring of the contours of contemporary capitalism in a way that is ensuring that regions are becoming the main loci for economic development (Florida 1995; Macleod 1999; Scott 1998; Storper 1997). Indeed, Lovering (1999, 386) argues that ‘the dogma that regions are resurgent as a result of
global transformations implied by the growth of informational economies has almost reached the point of orthodoxy."

In part, this rediscovery is also based on studies of the success of dynamic regional economies and on the increasing recognition of the importance of (local) and regional ‘assets’ in contributing to competitiveness (Amin 1999; Amin and Robins 1990; Deas and Giordano 2001). In addition, the rise of the so-called ‘new economic geography’, which acknowledges the economic externalities and increasing returns to scale associated with spatial clustering specialization (Porter 1994; Krugman 1995) has contributed to a recognition of the importance of the regional scale. Likewise, issues of ‘proximity’ and ‘association’ as a source of knowledge and learning as well as the importance of ‘institutional thickness’ for economic development (Amin and Thrift 1995; Storper 1997) have become fashionable in economic geography. This approach emphasizes and explores the ways in which the social, political and cultural institutions of civil society have an impact upon regional development trajectories. This involves an analysis of a variety of social and political ‘infrastructures’, such as networks of trust and reciprocity, norms and common values, affiliations to place and the historic development of both formal and informal socio-institutions in particular areas (Macleod 1999). The combination of these (and other) factors, it is argued, can help to promote what has been defined as ‘social capital’ (Putnam 1993). It is the growing recognition of the importance of such factors in studies of regional economic development that has
led to the emergence of the term ‘institutional turn’ or ‘new regionalism’ in economic geography (Amin 1999; Macleod 1999; Macleod and Goodwin 1999; Storper 1997).

The second main process, which has led to an increased focus on the ‘region’, relates to on-going policy debates within the European Union (EU). There is an emerging belief that actors at the regional level are tending to become more important as a political force in an increasingly integrated EU. Consequently, the notion of a ‘Europe of the regions’ has become popular in relation to the process by which national political centres are believed to be increasingly by-passed by direct interaction between the regions and the EU. The third reason for the increased attention that is being paid to regional issues in Europe is the actual process of economic integration itself. Indeed, it is argued that the drive towards greater European unity and especially the implementation of policies designed to reduce barriers to free-trade European unity and especially the implementation of policies designed to reduce barriers to free-trade has actually contributed to a divergence in regional economic imbalances in Europe (Amin and Tomaney 1995; Amin and Thrift 1995).

An important starting point, therefore, is to examine the trends in European regional economic development, which clearly has an important impact upon the resurgence of regionalism within Europe. This resurgence is occurring precisely at a time when the EU is increasingly becoming integrated politically and economically but also paradoxically economic disparities within and between the regions of Europe are intensifying (Hudson and Williams 1998). This is despite the wide-ranging attempts by national governments as well as the EU to implement regional policies, which aim to ameliorate this divergence. Indeed, the gap between rich and poor regions within the EU continues to widen and ‘even though a process of convergence between the Member States is apparent, economic and social cohesion within most Member States seems to have experienced a setback during the 1990s in the form of widening disparities in income and unemployment’ (European Commission 1996, 49). For example, in Italy in 1997, the gap between unemployment rates in northern and southern Italy was 15.6 per cent. This gap has been widening since the late 1980s (Lodovici 1998).

Amidst this scenario of uneven regional development a number of serious issues and questions must be raised. Primarily, the most fundamental issue is what are the political implications of such regional socio-economic disparities? Already such divisions are intensifying regionalist political conflicts in certain member states. In particular, the socio-economic differences between the North and South of Italy have fuelled the electoral growth of the LN in the North of Italy (Giordano 1998). Moreover, it is likely that such conflicts will become more widespread in Europe unless real political, economic and institutional change can redress the socio-economic differences between the core and peripheral regions of Europe. However, it is apparent that the institutional, economic and political processes of European integration have already had wide-ranging impacts upon the political economy of the EU as well as upon the resurgence of regionalism (Keating 1996, 1998).

One of the most important institutional developments in relation to the region is linked to the reforms of EU regional policy, which has shifted towards supporting regionalism itself. Indeed, ‘the European Commission itself has emphasized a more “programmatic” approach to regional development focusing on the formation of Regional Development Plans in the poorer regions of the EU’ (Amin and Tomaney 1995, 179). Increasingly, the allocation of EU regional funds has become tied to the abilities of regions to demonstrate their institutional capacity. This involves an interaction between different regional and local institutions, such as those involved in education and training, to those involved in transport, communication and planning (as well as a wide-range of others), to develop, co-ordinate, implement, and evaluate long-term, integrated regional development plans (Amin 1997a, 2). In addition, a significant corresponding institutional development was the creation, in March 1994, of the Committee of European Regions (COR), which has further legitimized the process of reorganization of governance within the EU. Although it is in its infancy and has few real powers, the COR represents a significant theoretical shift of power within the EU because it gives sub-national governments (both local and regional) within member states, a direct link to EU decision making and policy formulation.

Such regional institutional developments within the EU are relatively new and very much on-going and as yet they have had little actual policy impact not least because in different EU countries the development and recognition of the regional tier
varies greatly (Jones and Keating 1995). In some member states, especially those with federal structures, the region has greater powers, whilst in others with more centralized structures, the region has much less power (Jones and Keating 1995, 7). In addition, European nation-states are still very important in guiding and influencing the directions of change and the processes of European integration and regionalism, even though they might not have complete control over future directions and events (Jones and Keating 1995, 11). However, the principle of the ‘Europe of the Regions’ is also important because it has given legitimacy to the demands and claims of a number of regionalist political parties. In particular, the LN has used the principle as a way of justifying its political project and claims to be part of a wider European trend towards increased regional power and devolution (Giordano 2000, 2001; Giordano and Roller 2001).

In the midst of Europe’s evolving political landscape, certain developments already point to the emergence of a form of a ‘Europe of regions’. It is argued that the importance of regional and local institutions cannot be underestimated and Europe’s core regions, such as Emilia-Romagna and Catalonia, have a myriad of different institutions, which are not only based in formal political spheres but also in a number of other regional and local institutions. These represent local economic, political and social interests in the regions and range from trade associations, large and small-firm lobbies and producer services agencies, and other intermediate institutions such as commercial media as well as a wide range of others (Amin 1997a, 6–7). This ‘institutional thickness’ ensures that there is a high degree of interaction amongst the various institutions, which have a common aim or goal for the region (Amin and Thrift 1994, 14). Amin (1997a, 9) argues that ‘within such regions associational life is active, politics are contested, public authorities and leaders come under scrutiny, public space is considered to be shared and commonly owned, and there is a strong culture of autonomy and self-governance which seeps through the whole of local society’. Putnam (1993) argues that such regions with a high level of civic engagement in public affairs, as well as high levels of participation in associational life, have ‘social capital’, which facilitates a degree of democracy and better socio-economic results.

The importance of so-called ‘institutional thickness’, which is a central element of ‘new regionalist’ writings, has however been criticized for a number of reasons. Firstly, as Lovering (1999, 231) argues, it is ‘a perspective that is informed by the interpretations of experience in some prosperous [European] regions’, which means that any assumption that Europe’s less prosperous regions can benefit economically simply by developing a range of socio-economic and civil institutions is clearly misguided. Furthermore, Peck (2000, 11) argues that:

widespread tendencies to fiddle with governance while the economy burns do little or nothing to alter the economic fundamentals of lagging regions, even if they do have more institutions engaged with inward investment promotion, training and community economic development than before.

In summary, Lovering (1999, 231) asserts that the ‘new regionalism’ ‘might become more substantial and coherent if it also took in the experience of less fortunate regions’ within Europe.

The second criticism that can be levelled at ‘new regionalist’ writings, as Macleod (1999, 13) argues, is that ‘there is a tendency to reify the region as an object/subject, which may lead one to believe that the economic prosperity of a region is dependent on the processes occurring in the region’. However, this is not the case as national state policy in areas such as defence and welfare spending and fiscal and monetary policy clearly have an important influence on regional economic trajectories (Allen et al 1998; Macleod 1999; Peck and Tickell 1995), as does the electoral performance of particular ‘national’ parties in certain regions. Indeed, as Macleod (1999, 14) argues, the key point to bear in mind is that the most economically developed regions in Europe are situated in the most prosperous and dynamic countries (Gertler 1992; Hudson et al 1997).

The third point to note, as Lovering (1999) argues, is that the focus upon the regional scale as the ‘cradle’ of economic competitiveness in Europe is partly reflective of wider social and political influences, which are linked, in part, to the structures of research funding as well as to the rapid increase in the number of ‘regional’ economic development agencies that has taken place in recent years. For example, as Lovering (1999) points out, in Britain in the early 1980s, there were less than 20 agencies formally involved in
promoting economic development. However, nowadays there are now several hundred such organizations, including over 400 local authorities and numerous enterprise agencies. It is precisely such agencies, according to Lovering (1999), that promote, and even encourage, the assertion of particular ‘upbeat’ messages about regional economic trajectories that are influencing the ‘regional’ research agenda.

In spite of the valid criticisms that can be levelled at the so-called ‘new regionalist’ writings from both a theoretical as well as policy related level, it is clear that some of this emerging body of work does offer an innovative and valuable way of interpreting the reasons why the regional scale is becoming increasingly recognized in Europe (Macleod 1999). It is also important, however, to stress another important reason why ‘regions’ have become more prominent in recent years, which is a factor that receives much less attention in the ‘new regionalist’ writings. This relates to the resurgence of regionalist political parties in Europe, which has forced the issue of greater regional autonomy onto the mainstream political agenda in several European countries (Giordano 2000). Moreover, it is precisely in the regions that are economically dynamic and ‘institutionally thick’ that the calls for greater regional autonomy have been the loudest. For example, in Flanders, Catalonia and Northern Italy, the drive for greater regional autonomy is particularly strong. These are all regions, which are economically buoyant but also have relatively strong regionalist political parties. Indeed, it seems likely that such self-sustaining regions will seek even greater autonomy in light of the economic, political and institutional challenges which face the nation-state. Therefore, exploring and understanding the strategies and ways in which such regionalist political parties aim to develop linkages with key economic, political, and civic institutions is vital in order to understand the power of contemporary regionalism within Europe. This issue will be explored in the next section, which focuses upon a discussion of regionalism in Italy.

**Contemporary regionalism in Italy**

The enduring feature of the Italian national state since its inception in the nineteenth century has been the persistence of the dualism between the North and South of Italy (Gramsci 1966). The South is beset by a lack of industrial development, out-migration, long-term youth unemployment, irregular forms of employment, black market jobs and the inefficient provision of public services (Mingione 1994). The North of Italy, on the other hand, has greater concentrations of industrial and financial activity. As Mingione (1993, 316) argues, this system of dual integration was contradictory and characterized by great inequalities and serious problems but it remained viable for a number of reasons. This was mainly because a generation of Southern Italian workers made the ‘industrial miracle’ in northern Italy possible. The South also provided a fast expanding consumer market for northern businesses. In addition, the South experienced an unprecedented period of social and geographical upward mobility and rural poverty was almost entirely eradicated. This hegemonic structure was particularly strong and stable and incorporated both large sectors of the northern middle class and business elites that were advantaged by tax evasion. It was also made up of an increasing southern middle class consisting of professionals and bureaucrats, family farmers (who were dependent on subsidies) as well as a large part of the precarious working class that was in need of work and vulnerable to patronage control. Understanding how, and in what ways, this dual social setting between the North and South of Italy has been maintained during the years of the Republic allows one to understand why the system has begun to fail in recent years (Mingione 1993).

Between 1945 and 1948 various democratic government coalitions were created and during this period there was the gradual development on both the national Italian and international scale of two vast opposing fronts. On the one hand, there was the DC supported by the USA, having its focal point in the employing classes, and there was the other centred on the working-class movement, the PCI and the Soviet Union (Ginsborg 1990, 72). This period saw the emergence of the Cold War global order and the ‘East-West’ polarization of world geo-politics, which has only recently broken down with the demise of the Soviet Union. This ideological confrontation and division has remained fundamental throughout the life of the Italian Republic and has had a profound effect on the course of political, social and economic events within Italy.

The DC never actually regained an absolute majority in the national Italian elections following
1948, although they had a stake in every one of the post-war Italian governments, up until the landmark elections of 1994 (Kogan 1983, 161). Thus, their ability to govern depended on the types of coalition they were able to engineer with the smaller centre-parties in the Italian Parliament, (and after 1963 with the Socialists). Clearly, this was a significant achievement for the DC, which managed to maintain its hegemonic position by developing a complicated and elaborate web of social, economic and political networks that provided various kinds of benefits in return for votes. In the South of Italy, the party developed a large clientelistic system that provided various incentives such as public sector jobs, generous grants and subsidies in return for political support. Also, in the North of Italy, benefits were provided to party supporters. This system of clientelism spread to the other political parties, most notably to the PCI, which Woods (1992, 111) argues, had previously criticized this system. Yet, in the 1970s, the PCI began a similar system of clientelism developing networks and ties with different social and economic groups, the most important being with Italy’s largest labour union, CGIL (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro).

The development of this system of inter-linkage between the main Italian political parties and the institutions of civil society had specific geographical connotations and gave rise to what Trigilia (1981) terms different ‘local political sub-cultures’ in different areas of (Northern) Italy. The local political sub-cultures are especially prevalent in the area which has become known as the ‘third Italy’ (Bagnasco 1977). This is an area stretching from the regions of Lombardy and Veneto down the Adriatic coast through the ‘Red Belt’ of Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany and the Marche (Hine 1993, 54). Bagnasco (1977) drew attention to the fact that alongside the familiar ‘two Italies’ of the northern industrial triangle and the underdeveloped Mezzogiorno, there in fact existed a ‘third Italy’. This was based on a ‘diffuse economy’, which was relatively small scale, but technologically advanced, and based upon a diversity of highly productive and dynamic manufacturing sectors (Piore and Sabel 1984; Amin and Robins 1990; Beccattini 1987).

Two distinct and dominant sub-cultures developed in certain areas within the ‘third Italy’. Most notably, in Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany, the dominant political sub-culture was based upon the hegemony of the PCI (the so-called ‘zona rossa’ or ‘red zone’), and its links with the trade union and co-operative movements. On the other hand, in Lombardy and the Veneto, it was the Catholic ideology centred around the DC party that was prevalent (the so-called ‘zona bianca’ or ‘white zone’) (Trigilia 1986). The two respective political parties contrived to reproduce and reflect the two dominant sub-cultures; this meant local political administrations mediated between the different institutions and interests dominant at the local level in order to ensure that the different systems of social and economic regulation continued to function (Diamanti 1996). However, in spite of the political differences between the two respective parties, it is apparent that the sub-cultures in the respective areas are remarkably similar to each other in terms of the ways in which the local political culture cuts across class, gender and institutional divides, as Trigilia (1991, 39) summarizes:

in these communities there is often the prevalence of specific political tradition, which generally dates back to the start of the century, and a complex set of institutions – parties, interest groups, and cultural and charitable structures – that derive from the same political-ideological matrix.

The particular system of patronage between the main political parties, business and the State functioned particularly well in the ‘third Italy’ and ensured a high level of economic dynamism and prosperity. In Southern Italy, however, the situation was somewhat different as the region became increasingly dependent on state transfers and on public sector jobs, whilst Northern businesses benefited from favourable economic policies. Ultimately, corruption became an integral part of the whole system. One of the outcomes of this system of corruption was that Italy’s public sector deficit increased steadily and became one of the largest in the European Union. For a number of reasons, it became apparent that the traditional party system could not be sustained, or even tolerated by the majority of Italians (Mingione 1993; Giordano 1998). Indeed, quite remarkably the structure of the Italian Republic all changed within the space of a few years from the beginning of the 1990s, which various commentators have defined as a ‘political earthquake’ (Gundle and Parker 1996, 1). The years from 1992 to 1994 were amongst the most dramatic in the history of the Italian Republic. For example, in the course of 1993, the five ruling parties of the
post-war period were wiped off the political map in an alarmingly short space of time (Ginsborg 1996, 19).

The vast changes that have taken place in Italy in recent years are very much interwoven with the resurgence of contemporary regionalism. The decline of the main post-war political parties and the emergence of new political forces have changed the political map in Italy out of all recognition (Giordano 1998). Farrell and Levy (1996, 132) argue, whatever the contributions of the other parties or events, the most important of the new forces in this period in Italian politics is the LN in Northern Italy. However, the question remains how, and in what ways, the dominant political sub-cultures are politically represented (and hence reproduced) in light of the decline of the two main political parties in Northern Italy. Moreover, the important issue is to assess how and in what ways, the LN has been able to embed itself into civil society by developing links with existing political and socio-economic institutions, in the way that the traditional political parties (the DC and also the PCI) did.

**The development of the LN’s political sub-culture?**

The contribution that the LN has made to Italian politics and society over the last decade or so has been significant in a variety of ways. The party has undergone a tumultuous political evolution, transforming itself from a small movement stressing the ethnic and linguistic distinctiveness of the regions of Northern Italy to a national, mass political party (Agnew 1995, 197; Biorcio 1997; Giordano 2000).

It has developed a distinctive party structure and set of institutions as well as a dense network of party offices and a detailed electoral programme. Diamanti (1995, 122) argues that the LN has thrown into crisis the relationships between the mass political parties, cultural traditions and civil society, in the North of Italy, precisely where these phenomena were most solid. The main reason behind this has been a thin and malleable ideological base, combined with a flexible organization and decision-making structure which is centralized around Umberto Bossi, as the charismatic leader who has proved that he has astute political instincts (Diamanti 1995).

The LN, by virtue of its name, has a specific geographical focus to its political project. It is apparent, however, that although the LN claims to be the party of the North of Italy (or ‘Padania’) support for the party is not geographically uniform across the whole of the territory. For example, in central Italy (in the ‘zona rossa’) the party has been much less successful in gaining support (Messina 1998; Giordano 1999). Indeed, the enduring feature of the electoral geography of the LN is that it seems unable to spread its political support outside of its original political heartlands. The LN remains strongest in the provincial areas of Northern Italy rather than the main metropolitan centres such as Milan, Venice, Turin, Genoa and Bologna (see Figure 1).

The LN’s zone of electoral strength is concentrated in an area which is relatively socio-economically homogeneous, based upon a density of small and medium sized firms, which in the last 20 years has become the so-called industrialized or ‘opulent’ periphery of Northern Italy (Allum and Diamanti 1996, 152). Moreover, as Diamanti (1996) points out, in the 1996 national elections, the LN underwent the largest electoral growth in the so-called ‘zona bianca’ of northern Lombardy and the Veneto region, where the DC was the main party. Furthermore, Diamanti (1996) also shows that there is a close correlation between the vote for the LN in the 1996 elections and that of the DC in the 1948 national election, which was when the DC gained its largest percentage share of the Italian vote. For example, of the 15 provinces in which the DC reached its highest vote in 1948, 12 were the provinces in which the LN was strongest in 1996. Diamanti (1996) argues that the similarities between the results for the two parties are too close to be a coincidence. However, he states that this does not mean that the LN simply constitutes a ‘new’ edition of the DC because the distance between the two parties is marked in terms of their respective political projects, organizational models and communication styles. Yet, Diamanti (1996) argues that the LN constitutes an alternative role to the one that the DC played in the past, in its areas of electoral strength in Lombardy and the Veneto. The aim of the LN is try to develop its own networks of reference at the local level in order to replace (or modify) those that the DC built up over several decades. The ways in which the LN has tried to do this are discussed in the next section.

**The structures of the LN**

The organizational and institutional structure of the LN has been a crucial element in its success.
Woods (1995) points out that at the outset the party was nothing more than a small number of supporters who travelled throughout the Lombard region to spread the movement’s ideas. However, after the party’s electoral successes in the 1990s, it underwent rapid institutional development. Also, party membership grew very quickly and so it went from having a few hundred supporters to a party with literally thousands of members. In order to incorporate such growth in support the party had to develop an institutional infrastructure to match. Indeed, Diamanti (1995) suggests that there are three main ways in which the structures of the LN are in some ways similar to those of the traditional parties. Primarily, the LN has developed a strong link to territory and has undergone a very rapid growth in its number of party offices or *sezione*. Between 1990 and 1991 the number of local party offices in Lombardy almost doubled from 52 to 102; and by March 1993 there were LN party offices in all of the provinces of the North as well in Tuscany in Central Italy. Secondly, as with the major mass Italian political parties, the LN has developed a number of related institutions with the aim of embedding itself within the civil, institutional, economic and social spheres of Northern Italian society. Thirdly, the LN has tried to develop supporter networks to attract more and more activists to the party, which has mainly focused on attracting young people and those who have had no previous experience of formal politics (Diamanti 1995).

The LN’s organizational structure (see Figure 2) rather resembles the structure of the traditional Italian political parties, especially with its territorial presence at the local level. However, the key fundamental difference is that power within the party is most definitely concentrated with the leader, Umberto Bossi, who clearly decides the political line of the party. Indeed, Farrell and Levy (1996, 142) describe the LN as having a ‘traditional and Leninist-like party structure’.

Aside from the formal organizational structure of the party, there are a number of other organizations that form an important part of the structure of the LN. These are involved in a variety of different spheres within civil society, and their aim is to expand the level of support of the LN amongst different social and economic groups and further integrate and embed the party into Northern Italian civil society. However, for the LN this has proved to be more difficult because the party is much younger than the other main political parties.
The LN, however, has had remarkable success in gaining support amongst certain social groups in Northern Italy. Most notably, the party has gained considerable support from young people; the main way it has done this is by the development of a network of young peoples’ supporter groups, known as the Gruppo Giovani (Young peoples’ groups). These groups promote the messages of the LN and have attracted a relatively high number of young people into the party, which is one of the most distinctive features of the LN and explains why it has grown so rapidly. One of the reasons for this expansion, Luccini (1990–91) argues, is that the LN is a place for social interaction and the development of strong personal and friendship relations between party members. This means that the party is more than just a political institution but a social network of friends who spend their spare time together, which only serves to intensify the strong bonds between the members and the party itself.

The second sphere of civil society that the LN has specifically targeted is the socio-economic institutions and business community of Northern Italy. This has been an important strategy because the party has tried to position itself as the ‘protector’ of local economic interests from the alleged problems of Italian State bureaucracy. Moreover, in the past, the patronage links that the traditional political parties fostered with big industry, as well as the main Italian trade unions, was one of the most important ways in which they managed to maintain their political hegemony. The LN has developed its own trade union in order to gain greater legitimacy within the workplace and to expand its base of support. The LN’s trade union is called Sindacato Padano (Sin.Pa.) and has grown to be Italy’s fourth largest after the three traditional trade unions (CGIL, CISL and UIL (Unione Italiana del Lavoro)), which is partly because it has amalgamated with other smaller Italian unions.

The second main socio-economic institution of the LN is known as the Padani Imprenditori Uniti (PIU) (formerly known as Associazione Liberi Imprenditori Autonomisti or ALIA). Basically, the PIU is an association which aims to represent the small and medium sized business interests of ‘Padania’, which the LN argues are being undermined by the Italian central State. The PIU has a variety of functions; one is to act as a kind of advice shop for LN politicians informing them of the issues and problems affecting the business community. Indeed, it is precisely from the small firm sector that the LN has gained most support mainly because of its claims to represent the interests of the sector and especially because of its rhetoric about reducing the fiscal burden placed upon small firms (Biorcio 1999).

The institutional structures of the LN constitute an important feature of the party and have assisted its development, in different ways. The LN has developed into a mass political party with a specific organizational structure as well as a set of related institutions. Indeed, Diamanti (1996, 47) argues that in certain areas, especially where the DC was previously the main political force, the LN has been able to develop its own socio-political ‘roots’, reinforce its presence at the local level and form a political sub-culture to replace the existing one associated with the DC. The next section focuses upon the LN in one such local area of Northern Italy, the province of Varese, where the party has gained considerable electoral support in an area where the DC was previously dominant.

The province of Varese – replacing the DC with the LN’s political subculture?

The province of Varese is very important for the LN in both political and symbolic terms. First of all, it was the birthplace of the Lega Lombarda as well as Umberto Bossi, the leader of the party. The commune of Varese was the first in Northern Italy to elect a LN sindaco (mayor); the province of Varese was also the first to elect a LN presidente (president). In addition, at the national level, Varese was the first province in Italy to elect a LN Senator (the party leader Bossi) and a LN Deputy to the Italian Parliament (Giordano 1998). Undoubtedly, Varese has been and continues to be one of the heartlands of support for the LN, and so it constitutes an important example of an area where the LN is very strong with significantly deep political and social roots (Giordano 1999). Therefore, analysing the ways in which the LN has been able to become embedded within the socio-economic institutions of civil society in the province is fundamental in understanding whether the party has been able to develop its own political sub-culture to replace existing ones.

The LN has undergone a remarkable growth both institutionally and electorally, with the party becoming one of the largest and most important political parties in the whole of the province. From
Varese the party has expanded throughout the whole of the North of Italy and developed into a mass political party (Giordano 1998). There is a close relationship between the electoral expansion of the party and its organizational development because the spread of the LN party offices across the province has been one important contributory factor to the party’s increase in electoral support. This is because it allows the citizens of a particular area to affiliate with the party and become involved both socially and politically with it. Indeed, this has been a strategy of the party in Varese (as well as across the whole of Northern Italy) in order to become embedded within local communities and create links with local territory. For example, by 1992, there were 62 LN party offices throughout the whole of the province, which was an increase of over 60 in just 6 years. In fact, Bossi’s aim is to have a LN office under every ‘bell tower’ in Lombardy in order to spread the influence of the party. This territorial presence is important for the LN because the party has relatively less access to television and media sources than the other mainstream political parties in Italy.5

Undoubtedly, the institutional expansion of the party across the province significantly enhanced its electoral standing and has helped to embed the party at the local level, competing with the previously dominant DC party. It must be said, however, that the relationship between the party’s increase in electoral support in Varese and its institutional development is a complex one. Clearly, the party’s development of a strong institutional base, in a relatively short period of time, ensured that the party was able to develop bases of support amongst specific social groups in the province. On the other hand, the LN was able to develop different institutions precisely because it was able to build upon a relatively strong base of electoral support, which gave it the capacity to develop and become better organized at the local level. This in turn helped to fuel electoral support because the party was able to gain greater exposure and so it became a virtuous circle of electoral and institutional expansion.

There are a number of reasons why the LN was able to develop institutionally in Varese. These are related to the specific geographical context of the province, which provided a very fertile socio-political arena for the politics of the party and enabled the LN to benefit from a certain ‘mix’ of factors that produced a set of social, economic and political responses that the party was able to build upon and also reproduce for its own political aims (Giordano 1999). Firstly, the symbolic and political origins of the LN in Varese are very important for the party and ensured that local people in the province affiliated strongly with its messages. Secondly, within Varese it is apparent that there is certainly a strong affiliation with local territory and sense of campanilismo.6 The history of municipal autonomy in the province strengthens this feeling as well as its geographical location, bordering Switzerland, in the ‘far North’ of Italy. The LN certainly did not create this sense of identity and cultural distinctiveness, but thanks to its political project, which stresses the protection of the culture and traditions of Varese, the party has been able to translate this feeling into political support. Essentially, the LN is saying what the people want to hear and what they have been saying for a considerable amount of time (Diamanti 1996; Giordano 1998). In this respect, the political claims of the party built on, and indeed further strengthened the myths, misconceptions and prejudices, which are commonly held in Varese (as well as across Northern Italy) (Giordano 1999).

Thirdly, the LN has been able to benefit from the decline of the DC, which was the main political party in Varese (and remained so up until 1992). The DC had developed its own political sub-culture, which meant that it was fully embedded into the socio-economic and cultural spheres of the province, promoting the importance of family values and the Church as well as the virtues of the culture of enterprise and work ethic in Varese. The sudden decline, however, of the DC party in the early 1990s had a significant impact upon the province of Varese because the whole political, and socio-economic infrastructure, which the DC had created and maintained largely for its own political gains, but also to maintain the socio-economic success of the province was affected.7 This occurred at a time when Varese’s economy was undergoing significant restructuring, which meant that its previously high growth rates were being reduced considerably (Giordano 1999).

The combination of Varese’s economic problems with the decline of the DC in Varese (as well as the other main parties) created a political hiatus and it also meant that former DC supporters had to find an alternative political party for which to vote. The LN, as a relatively new political force in Varese, was able to capture a large proportion of the
protest vote in the province and the backlash against the province’s economic problems. Messina (1998, 475) argues that the reason why the LN has been able to gain more support in the so-called ‘white zone’ of former support for the DC is precisely because it has inherited the discomfort and the identity crisis of this area but also all the governability problems, which were left unresolved by 40 years of DC political control.

The LN, therefore, has been very successful in gaining political legitimacy in Varese and this has especially been the case from the business community. This is mainly because it has managed to position itself as the only political party, which aims to protect the interests and the dynamism of the economy of the province. The rhetoric of the LN particularly appealed to the small firm sector in Varese, which was facing considerable problems and resented the high levels of taxation imposed upon it by the central Italian government (Biorcio 1999). The LN’s promises of increased regional autonomy, less state bureaucracy and reduced taxes were very attractive, as a representative of the Association of Small firms of the province of Varese explained:

It is from the small firm sector that the LN has gained most support mainly because it has gained the protest vote from the entrepreneurs who are unhappy with being constantly faced with high taxes, poor services and State bureaucracy.

According to Natale (1991), in the early 1990s the Lega Lombarda (LL) was the only political party able to present itself as the answer to the ‘real needs’ of the population in the face of the decline of the DC hegemony in provinces such as Varese, Como and Bergamo. Similarly, Cento Bull (1993) in examining the links between the political success of the LL and the nature of economic restructuring in the industrial districts of Lombardy, showed that the two provinces in which the LL obtained its best electoral results were in the provinces of Varese and Como. Both provinces incurred a severe loss of employees in the manufacturing sector and only a moderate increase in their total level of employment in the early 1990s (Cento Bull 1993, 217).

Furthermore, Cento Bull (1993, 224) argues that the LL took on the representation of Lombardy’s industrial districts at a time when this model was facing a process of restructuring and was in need of government support. The LL presented itself as the only political party that wanted to preserve the local economy and so was able to benefit from the support of the entrepreneurs and artisans involved in the small firm sector, as well as the local population more generally.

In Varese (as elsewhere in Northern Italy) most people feel that the province is economically central to the Italian State but yet politically peripheral because it has little control over the way State resources are distributed. The LN was able to gain support in the province as it was the first party to propose the formation of a federal Italian State, which it claimed would solve the problems of the economy of Varese by giving it greater autonomy and responsibility for its own resources. Indeed, ‘a 1992 survey of northern Italian residents fully 46.1 per cent favoured large-scale fiscal decentralization to the northern administrative regions with shopkeepers, artisans and workers giving it the strongest support. For these social groups a regional identity seemed to increasingly capture their social identities’ (Agnew and Brusa 1999, 127).

These trends ensured that the LN was able to attract widespread support across the province. Indeed, the party’s first electoral success came in May 1985 when the LL (as it was at that time) gained 1831 votes (3 per cent of the vote) in the Varese commune elections. Its first elected representative was Giuseppe Leoni (one of the founders of the movement) who gained a seat on the commune council. In his first speech as councillor, Leoni spoke in the local Varese dialect, which caused a considerable amount of controversy as well as publicity for the party. The main platform of the party at that time was to extol and protect local values, dialect and culture, which it saw as separate, superior and different from the rest of Italy. In the same year there were two other elections; in the regional elections the party gained 2265 votes (4 per cent) and in the provincial elections it gained 381 votes (3 per cent) (Comune di Varese 1985).
Just 5 years later, in May 1990, again in the commune elections of Varese, the LL gained 21 per cent of the vote (12,704 votes). This meant that the party was the second largest, with nine elected councillors out of a total of 40. The largest party was the DC, which gained only 13 councillors and 30 per cent of the vote. Similar gains were made by the LN in the regional and provincial elections during the same year. In the regional elections the LL got 21 per cent of the vote (13,197 votes) and in the provincial elections, the LN gained 22.38 per cent (2,433 votes), which was only 400 less than the largest party, the DC (Comune di Varese, 1990).

In the Varese commune elections of December 1992, the LN (as it had become known) gained 37 per cent of the vote (22,654 votes), which meant that the LN had 17 elected councillors on the Commune Council. This was a landmark election in the history of the LN because it was the first time ever that the party had gained political control of a commune in the North of Italy. In addition, it was important because for the first time ever the DC became the second largest party in Varese. The DC only gained 17.64 per cent of the vote and only eight elected councillors. None of the other political parties in the election gained 10 per cent of the vote or more than three councillors (Comune di Varese 1992).

In only 7 years from 1985 the vote for the LN in the commune of Varese had risen from 3 per cent to over 37 per cent and the party’s electoral success continued during the provincial elections at the end of 1993. The LN candidate, (Massimo Ferrario), gained 68 per cent of the vote (Comune di Varese 1993). Moreover, in the national elections of 1994 and 1996, the LN achieved similar electoral success gaining almost 30 per cent of the vote in each seven electoral constituencies in the province of Varese (see Table I).

After 1992, therefore, the LN became the main political force in the commune of Varese replacing the previously dominant DC party (Agnew and Brusa 1999, 122). During its period in office the LN has implemented a range of policies. For example, the party controversially sold off the commune’s research institute, in an attempt to reduce costs and public spending. In addition, the party is undertaking a project of privatization of public services, such as refuse collection, gas, and water. The LN has also implemented improvements to the transport system in the commune, which involved an increase in the amount of public transport provision. The intention being to reduce the number of motor vehicles as well as reduce the level of pollution and congestion in Varese.9

The LN has instigated a number of changes in the commune of Varese. Moreover, the relative success of the party at the local level has allowed the party to develop closer linkages with the dominant political and socio-economic institutions within Varese and also gain experience of political office. However, this experience has created some problems for the party at the local level. Firstly, a key issue is the apparent lack of experience that the majority of LN politicians have within local government. For example, as Agnew and Brusa (1999, 130) point out, ‘in the commune of Varese between 1992 and 1997, the shortage of qualified LN party representatives able to serve as administrators led to the appointment of former Communists and others in an ‘anomalous’ municipal government’. Secondly, the LN’s success in local elections, not only in Varese, but elsewhere in Northern Italy means that many communes as well as provinces are now dominated by LN politicians. And, in order to stay in office, they see their role as providing ‘good government’ at the local level (Agnew and Brusa 1999, 129). However, there is an inherent tension here within the political project of the LN because, on the one hand, it needs to continue its political success at the local level, but yet this goes against its claims about the need to create a ‘new’ territorial entity based on the idea of ‘Padania’, which would replace existing structures of local (and regional) government in Italy.

In spite of these problems, however, it is apparent that the LN has been relatively successful in

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Source: Comune di Varese, 1996
governing at the local level in Varese (Giordano 1998). Yet, it is too early to properly assess whether the party has been able to implement successful policies to maintain Varese’s economic position and also develop its own brand of local politics as the DC was able to do so successfully. In part, this will depend upon the skill and efficiency of party officials to build effective local political coalitions (Agnew and Brusa 1999, 130) as well as create its own linkages to the dominant socio-economic and political institutions within Varese (Giordano 1999). On the other hand, it is clear that already the LN has managed to instil its own form of political management as well as develop its own social, economic and political roots in Varese. Indeed, it can be argued that the party has gone some way to replacing (or at least modifying) the DC’s political sub-culture and forming its own longer lasting structures and institutions. These are premised upon the protection of local economic dynamism, preserving local cultures and identities and promoting greater local autonomy (Diamanti 1996).

Conclusion

The Northern Italian case is an important example in the context of debates surrounding ‘institutional thickness’ and the resurgence of political regionalism in Europe for several reasons. Firstly, the example of the LN raises significant questions about the implications of ‘institutional strength’ for increased regional autonomy amongst the ‘core’, economically dynamic regions of Europe of which Northern Italy is most definitely an example. The LN has risen to prominence in a relatively short space of time and has been able to institutionalize itself and gain considerable political power, in particular areas. Furthermore, the party has managed to put the issue of constitutional reform of the Italian State onto the mainstream political agenda. Also, more than that, the LN has actually raised a serious challenge to the unity of the Italian State with its articulation of its powerful secessionist rhetoric based upon the creation of ‘Padania’ (Giordano 2000).

The case of the LN, therefore, exemplifies the speed and intensity with which regionalist tensions have arisen in recent years in contemporary Europe. Such tensions are not going to go away, and they are in fact more likely to intensify. Moreover, given that the trend towards greater regional autonomy is increasing in precisely those European regions, which are economically dynamic as well as ‘institutionally thick’, it is vital to try to understand the reasons that account for this regionalist resurgence. The ‘new regionalist’ writings offer an important theoretical starting point from which to explore the relationships that exist because this body of work recognizes the importance of the interaction between various socio-economic, political and cultural institutions for (local and) regional development. Overall then, further research in different regional contexts needs to be carried out to explore these issues in more depth in order to fully understand the resurgence of political regionalism in Europe.

A vital part of analysing regionalism, as this paper has shown, is to explore the strategies of regionalist political parties, in ‘core’ European regions such as Northern Italy, to develop linkages with key economic, political, and civic institutions in order to enhance their electoral standing. In the case of the LN, the party has attempted to embed itself within the civil society of Northern Italy in a number of ways. Firstly, by developing a network of party offices, which enables the party to develop bases of support in particular areas. Moreover, the party has developed a network of related organizations that are aimed at developing closer links with different spheres of civil society, such as young people and the business community.

The key point that the case study of Varese shows is that the relationship between institution-alization and electoral success is complex and the issue of causation is an important one. In Varese, the LN was able to develop a web of related institutions because of its relatively solid base of support, which meant that the party had the resources (both human and financial) to facilitate its expansion. Undoubtedly, this expansion contributed to the LN’s increase in electoral support, however, that certainly does not mean that this was the most important or only reason that accounts for the party’s expansion. It is clear that, as Diamanti (1996, 49) argues, the growth of the LN in the so-called ‘opulent periphery’ of Northern Italy, which includes the province of Varese, is part of a wider set of socio-economic, political and cultural transformations that have taken place in this area. Notably, these include the dramatic decline of the DC, the previously dominant political party; an increase in hostility towards the central Italian
State and what is seen as its inefficient public services; and increased demands for greater fiscal autonomy, especially from the small and medium sized firms in this area of Northern Italy.

The outcome of these and other transformations ensured that the LN, with its rhetoric about protecting local values, culture and economy in precisely the areas of Northern Italy where there were concerns about future levels of well-being, meant that the LN became the most important political force. These processes along with the development of the party’s institutional structure, which helped to cement its presence at the local level, have ensured that the LN has been able to superimpose a new political sub-culture in areas such as Varese and hence a modified form of socio-economic and political integration with existing institutions. The question remains, however, whether the LN will be able to guarantee and oversee the same kind of political and economic mediation that the DC (and the PCI in central Italy) was able to carry out in order to ensure the specific trajectories of local economic development associated with certain parts of the ‘third Italy’.

The key point with respect to the LN, especially in Varese, is that with the decline of DC hegemony nationally, this means that there is a different national political structure, which will inevitably change the local and regional economic compromises that existed previously. The LN, does not have the political power that the DC had and so it remains to be seen how this will impact upon the nature of economic development in Varese, the rest of Northern Italy as well as the country as a whole. In spite of this point, it seems likely that the so-called ‘Northern question’ (Diamanti 1996), which the LN has so powerfully articulated that revolves around the problems of maintaining economic dynamism, will have to be answered much quicker than the more traditional ‘Southern question’ ever has been in Italy.

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Notes

1. According to the LN, the 14 ‘nations’ which constitute Padania are Alto-Adige or Südtirol, Emilia, Friuli, Liguria, Lombardia, Marche, Piemonte, Romagna, Toscana, Trentino, Trieste, Umbria, Valle d’Aosta and Veneto. Padania is the Latin term for the region surrounding the River Po in Northern Italy.
2. Author’s fieldnotes extract from interview with a representative of the LN’s trade union, 25 March 1996.
3. Author’s fieldnotes extract from interview with a LN director of PIU, 12 March 1996.
4. The Lega Lombarda (or Lombard League) was one of the regionalist political parties in Northern Italy, which amalgamated in 1991 to form the Northern League.
5. Author’s fieldnotes extract from interview with the LN Provincial Secretary for Varese, 30 April 1996.
6. ‘Campanilismo’ is the term used to describe the feeling of belonging that Italians have to their place of birth.
7. The DC had a stake in every one of the post-war Italian governments, up until the landmark elections of 1994. The corruption scandals, which became known as ‘Tangentopoli’ (‘kick-back’ city) involved all the main political parties and came about after judicial investigations, which revealed the endemic and systematic nature of corruption in the Italian political and economic system. This ensured the disintegration of the two main post-war parties of government in Italy, the DC and the PCI.
8. Author’s fieldnotes extract from interview with the Vice President of the Association of Small firms (API), Varese, 17 April 1996.
9. Author’s fieldnotes extract from interview with a LN local councillor in the commune of Varese, 20 March 1996.

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