

The Reproduction of Identity in Contemporary South Tyrol

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Economic, political and ethnic processes are all of a piece in contemporary South Tyrol. This paper addresses some of the ways in which political elites in this autonomous province have worked to promote economic development, political autonomy and ethnic cohesion. Significant factors in this process have been the growing importance of the European Union, an expanding spectrum of economic possibilities, and an increasing willingness on the part of national and provincial elites to explore new solutions to old problems and to recognize the emergence of new problems.

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The South Tyrolese, German-speaking citizens of the Italian Republic, strive for political cohesion in pursuit of autonomy and economic prosperity. This struggle is carried out in an idiom of defense against the machinations of the Italian State and the seductiveness of Italian culture. It is the product of a series of political permutations experienced by the South Tyrol in this century. Long an integral part of Habsburg Tyrol, the South Tyrol, together with the Trentino, was transferred to Italy in the aftermath of World War I. In the decades that followed the "Great War" it experienced Italian fascism and, in the closing years of World War II, Nazi occupation. Following World War II it was again ceded to Italy as a province within the autonomous region of Trentino-Alto Adige (Alcock 1970). Now, as a consequence of extensive negotiations with Rome in the 1970s and 80s (Alcock 1982), the South Tyrol has become an autonomous province recognized by both the Italian state and the European Union.

This process has been concomitant with the increasing political and economic significance of the European Union (EU). There has been much speculation in both scholarly writings and in the media about "homogenization" and the erosion of the nation state as a result of the growing power of the EU. On the other hand, it

has been clear for some time that the growth of the EU and the diminution of state power have been accompanied by a resurgence of regions economically, politically and culturally (cf. Gerdes 1980). This is expressed in the popular political concept of "a Europe of Regions" and is evident throughout the European Union.

This has given added significance to long extant arguments urging research on the regions of Europe. These have come both from Anglophone Anthropology and European Ethnology (Cole 1985). Social and cultural initiatives emanating from the region are often not evident in research focusing on a single community or in research which takes entire states as its subject.

This is certainly the case in the Tyrol. Social processes there are in part shaped both by community level processes and by what goes on in Italy, Austria, Germany and Europe at large. But they have their own internal dynamics as well. Moreover, what happens in the South Tyrol has not been merely a response to outside forces, but has fed back into what goes on in the state. In this paper I strive to keep these dynamics in focus.

As the Tyrolese see it, they inhabit a Germanic cultural space located in an Italian political state. This brings with it an Italian cultural

influence, which is the antithesis of Germanic culture and threatens their very being. The South Tyrol is the land "Wo der Norden dem Süden begegnet," the land where north and south meet (Dorrenhaus 1959). It is thus a frontier of German culture, a situation that carries with it special responsibilities. In their daily lives the South Tyrolese live with a problem that has troubled German thinkers for centuries, the relationship of the German nation as a cultural entity (*Kulturnation*) to the German nation as a political entity (*Staatsnation*) (Alter 1985: 14–18; 103–109, *passim*).

The central political issue for South Tyrolese has been: can their Germanic-Tyrolese identity be preserved while remaining citizens of the Italian political state? The answer to this question was "no" in 1944 when the South Tyrolese Peoples Party was formed (*Südtiroler Volkspartei*, or SVP). Its founding *raison d'être* was to petition the soon-to-be-victorious Allies to make the South Tyrol a part of post-war Austria. This was ultimately rejected by the Allies. Thereafter, the demand for a plebiscite, with the assumption that its outcome would be an overwhelming vote to join Austria, became a constant in the SVP political program.

In the 1980s, however, the SVP abandoned this position, largely as a result of the implementation of a new autonomy statute known as *das Paket* or *il pacchetto* – "the package." This new, provincial autonomy replaced the early regional autonomy, in which Italians had outnumbered the Tyrolese. With the new statute the South Tyrolese were now masters of their own internal affairs, free from both Rome and Trento. However, the Italian state insisted on a concession in return. They required that the South Tyrolese accept the legitimacy of Italian sovereignty over their province and that they drop their demand for reunion with Austria. The SVP accepted this condition. They are now confident that they have sufficient leverage to defend their interests within the Italian state. Central to this confidence is a conviction that the European Union provides an expanded political arena in which to find allies against any future mischief the Italian state might plan.

While this perspective now defines the center of the South Tyrolese political spectrum, it is

a hotly contested position. To the right of the SVP is the *Heimat Bund*. The *Bund* regards the SVP position as a sell out and holds out for reunification with Austria. Acceptance of certain aspects of *das Paket*, most especially the acceptance of Italian sovereignty, led several leading political figures in the SVP to bolt to the *Bund*. To the left of the SVP is a local green party, known as the *Alternative Liste für das andere Südtirol*. It accuses the SVP of erecting a system of apartheid in the Alps and calls for a New South Tyrol that will leave the old ethnic antagonisms behind in favor of cooperation and understanding between Italians and Germans (Bettelheim & Benedikter 1982). Its detractors say it stands for "*Marxismus und Mischung*."

Meanwhile, the Italians living in the South Tyrol have become alarmed at the growing local power of "the Germans." They see themselves as a threatened minority within their own land and as a consequence have become active nationalists. They give overwhelming support to the Italian neofascist party, the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* or MSI, called "the Mussolini Party" by its detractors. This support is so evident in the city of Bozen/Bolzano that it has been dubbed "the fascist city of Europe" by the European press.

In this paper I want to focus on the intersection of South Tyrolese concern for the reproduction of their identity and the direction of economic change. Over the past two decades the SVP has pursued a rather striking sea change in their economy with full awareness that this had significant implications for their self-identity. This, in turn, carried certain dangers for their political survival. In the past Tyrolese self-identity has been anchored in their existence in a mountainous landscape dominated by peasant villages surrounded by field, pasture and woodlands. Above this pastoral scene towered the magnificent Dolomites. The peasants themselves were fiercely independent and self-sufficiency has been a strong value among them. The few small cities were commercial and religious centers that were well integrated with the countryside.

There was little difficulty in expanding this image to incorporate the tourist perspective of

the South Tyrol as a vacationland. Mountain and valley attracted tourists to hike and ski and the quaint peasant presence added to the province's attractiveness as a destination. In the main, tourist activities were compatible with peasant production and even provided villagers with new sources of income. There was also little difficulty in accommodating the peasant image of South Tyrol to growing Euroconcerns about environmental degradation. The peasant could easily be portrayed as protector of the environment.

This identity has also served in this century as a means of resisting an invasive Italian culture. Under the leadership of the fascist government, Italians established a presence in the South Tyrol between the 1920s and 40s. An industrial zone was established on the outskirts of the city of Bozen. This was thoroughly Italian: capital, management and labor were all recruited from the south. Tyrolese were barred from participation at any level. Italian migrants poured into newly constructed urban neighborhoods and the city took on an increasingly Italian character. As a consequence, the urban population since the end of the World War II has been about two-thirds Italian.

On the other hand, Italians had no success in invading the countryside. It remained staunchly Tyrolese. This gave ethnic meaning to the economic contrast between town and country. Italians were urban and worked in industry and commerce; Tyrolese were rural and worked in agriculture and forestry.

Although the political conditions that had produced the dichotomy were lifted after World War II, the dichotomy itself persisted. The South Tyrolese clung tenaciously to their identity as peasants as the basis of their political identity and resistance to Italian culture. The peasant image gave them a set of values to organize around politically.

It also had implications for the direction of Tyrolese economic development and modernization. The Tyrolese leadership initially ceded urban and industrial growth to the Italians while vigorously pursuing economic ventures anchored in the countryside. They had little difficulty in shifting to market production and in expanding into entrepreneurial ventures

associated with agriculture. Enterprises which processed and marketed local agricultural products or provided goods and services to agriculturists flourished. Similarly, they were able to take advantage of the expansion of mass tourism and promoted the South Tyrol throughout Europe as a tourist destination.

This served them reasonably well in the 50s and 60s. It allowed for both economic autonomy and growing prosperity. At the same time, the relative homogeneity of economic interest provided a base for political solidarity. The SVP was able to effectively monopolize the political affection and loyalty of the South Tyrolean. They have consistently managed to net at least eighty percent of the vote in every election.

By the early 1970s, however, the strategy was beginning to unravel and SVP leaders felt increasingly threatened. In spite of steadily improving living standards, the South Tyrol was falling significantly behind neighboring provinces in relative economic prosperity. This was in spite of significant advances in both agriculture and tourism. Up to a point this contrast was countered ideologically. Although material less rewarding, an agrarian strategy provided independence and moral superiority. However, as the disparity in material conditions increased, the danger of disaffection from the ideology grew.

Subsistence-based agriculture was giving way to commercial production throughout the province. This was facilitated by assistance available from both Italian and EU sources. Low interest loans and subsidies made it possible for peasants to mechanize their farms and to either construct new homes, barns and stalls, or to renovate old ones.

Agrarian leaders carefully studied emerging EU agricultural regulations and concluded that local farmers could best compete within the EU by intensive farming directed toward the production of "quality goods" rather than by attempting to produce for mass markets. It was explained to me, for example, that local dairy farmers could not match the low prices of either milk or butter imported from northern Europe, not even in local markets in their immediate vicinity. The response in the upper Val di Non/

Nonstal was characteristic. A local cooperative to which most producers belong switched from the production of milk, butter and table cheese to production of parmesan cheese, a product in strong demand throughout Europe. The cooperative disseminates information to guide local producers and enforces standards for production, health and hygiene.

Tourism, too, underwent extensive transformation and expansion. Assistance was available to individuals who wanted to rent out rooms or apartments, expand their bar or restaurant, or build a small inn as well as for ambitious community projects, such as building a ski lift and clearing ski runs. Outside capital investment was welcome, but only within the context of provincial development planning.

However, while tourism and agriculture provide a good living for many people, the number of individuals engaged in farming has declined. Growing capitalization and a certain, if limited, increase in the scale of individual farming operations, was predictably accompanied by a reduction in the number of people engaged in agriculture. Agriculture and forestry had a limited capacity to absorb labor, especially on a full time basis. In spite of their growth, tourism and agriculture accounted for a shrinking percentage of the South Tyrolean work force.

This meant that by choice or necessity, people were electing non-agricultural jobs that took them out of the countryside and into the cities. Some left the South Tyrol to work as *Gastarbeiter* in other countries, while others found work in the cities of northern Italy. Many also found jobs in the cities in South Tyrol where, as we have already seen, their coworkers and bosses were mainly Italian.

Consequently, many of these workers were lost to the South Tyrol. *Gastarbeiter* sometimes turned into permanent residents in the countries where they worked, and whether in Italian cities like Milan or Turin, or in the Tyrolean towns of Bozen and Meran, South Tyrolean workers were in danger of being Italianized. Italian unions actively recruited them and living and working among Italians, made them vulnerable to the charms of Italian culture. Inter-marriage between Italians and Tyrolean

increased in number, introducing new social tensions into the province, such as those so successfully depicted in Joseph Zoderer's novel, *Die Walsche* (1982).

South Tyrolean elites saw these trends as a threat to ethnic continuity and to the political base of the SVP. By the early 1970s they had initiated an innovative set of policies designed to both restore economic prosperity and invigorate ethnic affiliation. The only way to ensure prosperity, they were convinced, was to promote industrial growth. However since existing industries were firmly embedded in an Italian matrix, merely expanding existing industries would not do. Their problem was how to provide economic opportunities within a Tyrolean context.

A major step in controlling Italian influence was to close the City of Bozen and the Bozen industrial zone to further growth. Such a move required the approval of the Italian state, and SVP leaders could hardly have demanded it be closed to reduce Italian influence in the province. However, the city was experiencing serious air and water pollution and its industrial zone was fouling nearby agricultural land. The plan to halt Bozen's expansion could therefore be justified on sound ecological grounds while having the desirable effect, from the SVP's perspective, of severely limiting expansion of existing Italian firms and of halting further Italian immigration into the city and its environs.

The keystone of South Tyrolean industrial policy, however, was rural industrialization. Six new industrial zones were initiated in different parts of the South Tyrol. The idea was to locate one of these zones within reasonable commuting distance of every village in the South Tyrol. This would mean that people would be able to find non-agricultural employment while continuing to live in a Tyrolean cultural environment. Local capital was directed toward these zones and a campaign was launched to encourage Italian and EU (mainly German) investment as well. A variety of incentives were offered, while retaining local, that is, provincial control. In addition, village councils were instructed to develop rational zoning plans for their communities, which, among other things,

would set aside space for industrial development.

In addition to these industrial policies, the SVP also launched a campaign to expand Tyrolean employment in local branches of the government bureaucracy, including the national police and railway. They formulated a variety of affirmative action which they called *ethnischer Proporz* (Peterlini 1980). They demonstrated that on a statistical basis, German-speakers were seriously underrepresented throughout the bureaucracy. As a part of the implementing procedures of the autonomy statutes, they won the right to have future hiring in all branches of the government be on a strict proportional basis. The goal was to have each ethnic group represented in the bureaucracy exactly as it was represented in the provincial population at large.

These initiatives have enjoyed a considerable measure of success. The numbers of South Tyrolean in government employ has steadily increased. The magnitude of economic growth in the new industrial zones was impressive throughout the 1970s. Expansion has also continued through the 1980s, although some industries have retrenched and the overall rate of expansion has not kept up the pace leaders had hoped for. The unemployment rate in South Tyrol, although always a concern, has remained low by European standards.

As a consequence, outmigration has slowed to a trickle even though the province shows a high birthrate. As a consequence, population increases over the past two decades have been well above both Italian and European norms. Indeed, the South Tyrol has not as yet participated in the dramatic drop in fertility that has left Italy with the lowest crude birth rate in Europe (Chesnaïs 1996).

At the same time, the Italian population in the South Tyrol has declined, not only relative to the Tyrolean, but in absolute numbers. In 1988 the City of Meran showed a German majority for the first time since the 1930s and while Italians still make up the overwhelming majority in Bozen, Tyrolean are making gains there as well (Landesinstitut für Statistik/Istituto Provinciale di Statistica, various issues). It is no exaggeration to say that the growth of the

South Tyrolean population both in absolute terms and relative to the contracting Italian population in the province leaves many South Tyrolean political leaders and their followers ecstatic.

While the demographics of rural industrialization thus seem to be working out as SVP leaders calculated they would, not every rural community is proving to be viable. While many hold their own, others are obviously in decline. Elsewhere in Europe, as in North America, rural depopulation and even abandonment of entire rural communities has been regarded as desirable, or at least inevitable, and has not occasioned much political concern. In the South Tyrol, however, the demographic performance of every community is reported, monitored and analyzed in painstaking detail.

The measures taken to promote viability can not always be justified in economic terms. A case in point is the attention being lavished on two small villages on the Nonsberg, Laurein and Proveis. With a combined population of about 700, the two villages are separated from other Tyrolean communities by massive mountains. To reach other South Tyrolean communities, they must travel through a portion of the Italian Trentino, and it is a long trip. They lie beyond reasonable commuting range of any job in the Tyrol. As a consequence, population has been declining and their future seemed bleak. Total depopulation was a distinct possibility. To stem this trend, the Provincial Government financed construction of a road through the mountains that has linked them directly to the rest of the South Tyrol.

It is too early to tell what will happen to Laurein and Proveis, but in general the provincial policies have succeeded in providing villagers with occupational choices while remaining at home in their natal villages. Growing up in the village and educated in local schools, people who remain in a village are then integrated into a web of kinship, church and associations that dominate village life. In this way, the rural values that make up South Tyrolean identity and political ideology are learned early and reinforced in adult life. Those workers who continue to keep a few cows and hoe a potato and cabbage patch easily find common cause

with full time farmers. Even workers who live in the village, commute to work, and carry out no farming at all remain under influence of farming friends and relatives.

Tyrolese leaders do understand that this is a two-way dialogue and that workers and entrepreneurs bring different perspectives into the political arena. Whether living in villages or urban centers, both are wont to grumble about the privileged position of farmers in the distribution of the provincial government's largess. The present *Landeshauptmann*, Luis Durnwalder, put it this way: "Right now, farmers make up about 11 percent of the work force, but they wield at least a third of the political influence." He estimated that it will take at least two generations before rural workers will develop a distinctive set of interests like their urban counterparts. Durnwalder himself came to power with the backing of the powerful *Bauernbund*.

SVP leaders are keenly aware of the growing political significance of workers and have taken steps to accommodate them. They stress that the SVP is a "*versammelt*" party with room for the perspectives of all Tyrolese. This has been formalized by creating both a worker's and an entrepreneur's wing within the party. Leaders agree that there is increased tension within the party. But by stressing its comprehensive nature, they hope to mediate among different perspectives and to prevent any segment of the political spectrum from bolting to other political parties. In promoting this end, they have sometimes turned to the *Sozialpartnerschaft* model developed in Germany and Austria (*Sozialpartnerschaft in Südtirol* 1979).

At the same time, there are constant threats from both the right and left. Right position here means a rejection of any accommodation with the Italian state, even in a "Europe of Regions." A left position rejects ethnic-based policies as apartheid and would completely relax ethnic distinctions in education and politics. However, to date neither position has gained significant ground within the population as a whole.

The SVP does not celebrate the cultural diversity of Europe and argue their case on the grounds that their autonomy will add to this diversity, as do the Flemish, for example. But

neither do they fear that membership in the EU will lead to a loss of political autonomy and an erosion of important social and cultural attributes as do the Danes and English. Having always been an element in a larger political entity, they expect to have to negotiate their way in the world. Presently, EU membership, as an autonomous province of Italy, presents more opportunities than dangers. For them, it provides expanded opportunities by loosening the grip of the Italian state.

While a recitation of events in Tyrol seems to carry a certain inherent fascination for many, I also believe that there are several significant points one can make out of their experience. One has to do with the impact of the EU on what can be regarded as a resurgence of regionalism. South Tyrol is hardly unique. While it may be eroding the significance of the nation state, it is at the same time establishing new political and economic possibilities for regional political and economic strength and cohesion and for reaffirmation of distinctive cultures.

It is good that we have learned to be skeptical of the exercise of drawing determinate arrows from economic to ideological, from material to mental. However, in our post-modern mode we have been more likely to neglect not only material concerns, but even the institutional frameworks in which we and our subjects live. I would argue that the current fascination with identity politics often suffers from a disinterest in material concerns and a neglect of the institutional framework in which we and our subjects act out our identities.

I am offering this perspective on the South Tyrol as a way in which one can pursue the nature of modern ethnic or regional politics and culture without either attributing undue influence to material concerns or neglecting them all together.

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Notes

1. In many contexts South Tyroleans regard their land as an integral part of the Tyrol and of the larger German *Kulturland*. In other contexts they insist on a unique identity emerging from their distinctive experiences as a part of the Italian state. Elsewhere I have addressed certain aspects of the history and political economy of Tyrolean and South Tyrolean identity (Cole 1999).
2. This paper results from field research in the South Tyrol and Trentino carried out at intervals since 1982. It is a continuation of research I conducted in the 1960s with Eric Wolf (Cole & Wolf 1974). The new project has involved numerous periods of residence in the area, the most extensive being an eight month stint in 1988. I continue to visit the Val di Non/Nonstal on the frontier between South Tyrol and Trentino, where Wolf and I worked in the 1960s. My focus, however, has been on the political elites in South Tyrol so that much of my time has been spent in the provincial capital of Bozen.

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