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THE SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTION OF COMMUNITY IN ITALY: PROVINCIALISM AND NATIONALISM¹



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Italian citizens are changing the way they construct their sense of community. While European integration and internationalization are erasing national and cultural borders, there has been a rise in provincialism and a reattachment to the local. Drawing on ethnographic data, this article illustrates how residents in Bergamo, Italy, construct their sense of belonging, favoring the local over the national. (Nationalism, community identity, Italy, provincialism)

Facing economic challenges from powerful countries such as the U.S. and from regional trading blocks, national states in Europe, in order to remain viable entities in the global market, have pooled their resources and sovereignty in an economic and quasi-political union. Concurrently, cultural and political movements have arisen within the European states that challenge the legitimacy of the central government. They advance an agenda that calls for the rejection of a standardized global culture and the power of transnational entities. As an alternative to both the national state and globalization, these movements argue that local attachments are a more authentic form of belonging. These ideas reveal the beliefs that certain rights are based on small territorial groups sustained by primordial bonds and autochthonous status (Nadel-Klein 1991:500–01).

Italy may be in a particularly precarious situation because of its weak national identity. In view of this, the former President of the Republic, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, embarked on a mission to foster a stronger sense of national pride when he took office in 1999. He encouraged people to embrace national symbols. For example, he criticized Italian athletes for not singing the national anthem prior to soccer games and other events. Ciampi tried to have them sing the anthem by distributing the lyrics to all athletes competing on the world stage. He also proposed distributing Italian flags to every family in the country, thereby linking a symbol of the nation—the flag—to the family. However, his endeavor was not easy, for even before the erosion of national sovereignty, Italy wallowed in a negative self-image and deep regional divisions.

Ferrarotti (1998) claims that Italian national identity has never had the steely unity of French national identity nor the cohesion that characterizes modern

German history, but has remained culturally fragmented, divided not only between the north and the south, but also into micro-communities over the whole country. This strong attachment to one's locality, *campanilismo*, refers to the belief that people did not venture beyond the point where they could no longer see the bell tower (*campanile*) of their town or village. Cohen (1982) claims that "local experience mediates national identity, and, therefore, an anthropological understanding of the latter cannot proceed without the knowledge of the other" (Cohen 1982:13). Bergamo, a small city of about 100,000 inhabitants in northern Italy, is one of many communities that exemplify celebrating the local community at the expense of a common national identity.

SYMBOLS, RITUAL, MEMORY, AND NOSTALGIA

As Cohen (1985) notes, "[t]he symbols of community are mental constructs; they provide people with the means to make meaning. In so doing, they also provide them with the means to express the particular meaning which the community has for them" (Cohen 1985:17). But, as Kertzer (1988) points out, individuals are not free to pick and choose the symbolic system in which they operate. In addition, symbols do not appear spontaneously or by chance, but are influenced by the distribution of resources in their society and in surrounding societies.

One of the principal ways community is symbolically maintained is through ritual. Early social theorists generally assumed that everyday contacts among people in a community would generate common knowledge, and with frequent contacts create a common culture. However, the symbolic forms of cultural integration take place through ritual. Ritual is standardized and repetitive symbolic behavior that allows individuals to put the chaos of human experience into a coherent framework (Kertzer 1988). Ritual also provides individuals with temporal continuity by linking the past with the present and the present with the future.

A sense of community may be created through daily little rituals that take place between friends, neighbors, coworkers, and acquaintances. These include attending the same bar or café and engaging in behaviors that cement social bonds. Among these none is more visible in Bergamo, as in the rest of Italy, than the *passeggiata* (the stroll). The *passeggiata* exemplifies the key features of ritual. In Bergamo, it generally takes place daily between three and five in the afternoon, but Sunday is the principal day for such a walk. The aim is not only to get out for some exercise, it presents an opportunity to present oneself to the community and feel engaged in it (Goffman 1959). In Italy there is almost an obsessive need to *fare una bella figura* (make a good impression), and the *passeggiata* offers the

opportunity to display a fine appearance. Of course, what constitutes a good impression can vary. For some it means being clad in the latest fashion, for others it means presenting a look communicating that one stands against the establishment. The important thing is to see and be seen. The passeggiata is an opportunity to interact with family, friends, and acquaintances that otherwise might not be available. Finally, the passeggiata offers a sense of continuity with the past. There is a belief that this activity has taken place for generations. As a resident said, "My grandmother tells about when she went on the passeggiata with her grandmother in the Città Alta. She still goes with us today even though she is up in years. It is nice for her, given that so many things have changed."² Rituals like the passeggiata allow the participants to assimilate the symbolic forms to their individual and idiosyncratic experiences, which in turn reinforces the cohesion of the community.

During times of intensive social change, communities tend to drop their "heaviest cultural anchors in order to resist the currents of transformation" (Cohen 1985:102), which in Bergamo means resorting to symbols of the past. These references to the past are extremely powerful because they are able to transform temporality into timelessness and because they are ambiguous. As such, they become apt devices for symbolically expressing the continuity between the past and present, and reasserting the integrity of the community threatened by the forces of change. Friedman (1992:837) observes: "The construction of the past . . . is a project that selectively organizes events in a relation of continuity with a contemporary subject, thereby creating an appropriated representation of a life leading up to the present, that is, a life history fashioned in the act of self-definition." Identity, here, is decisively a question of empowerment. Consequently, history and memory become valuable tools for they are malleable and open to interpretation.

The contribution of Italians to the cultural patrimony of the world through the Humanist movement and the Renaissance could be a source of symbols for the construction of national identity. Yet Italians do not seem to value this national heritage, which in turn damages the image of the nation (Tullio-Altan 1995). With such a rich and varied past, why is it that Italy has difficulty creating a common memory on which to build the nation? An explanation lies in the fact that contemporary Italians conceptualize their past more in terms of a specific region or city than through association with the nation (Sciolla 1997:86). Thus, rather than turning to the nation in their search for roots, individuals seize on the micro-history of their city, town, or village. For example, memory in Bergamo draws on images from the local past, which legitimate the present social order and extol the virtues of the Bergamasco way of life.

If, as Featherstone (1995) suggests, a sense of the past does not primarily depend on written sources but on enacted ritual performances and the formalism of ritual language, then ritual is a key means through which shared memory is created and maintained. A form of ritual closely tied with social memory is the commemorative ceremony. It shares the formalism and performativity of other rituals, but differs in that it explicitly refers to prototypical persons and events that are purported to have had a historical or mythical existence. Commemorative ceremonies remind the community of its identity as represented in a narrative, and makes sense of the past through a kind of collective autobiography (Connerton 1989).

In Italy and Bergamo, there are many ways individuals employ ritual to mark their locality, occupation, or other significant form of communal identity. While some of these rituals have an official rationale, the participants usually attribute different meanings to them and experience them differently. For example, April 25 is Liberation Day in Italy, when festivities around the country commemorate its liberation from German forces and the partisans who died during the Resistance. The remembrances in Bergamo include laying wreaths at monuments, a solemn parade, and a rally with speeches by partisan veterans, historians, and local politicians. Such tributes fulfill Connerton's (1989) rhetorical components for commemorative ceremonies. The events are open to multiple interpretations by the participants. Some of the veterans said they saw this as a solemn occasion to remember their fallen comrades. Other participants believed it to show how Bergamaschi had fought against fascism. A few of the younger participants saw it as a political event that raised consciousness against the evils of right-wing tyranny. There are also some constraints as to how the day can be interpreted. During my time in Bergamo, the city's mayor repeatedly attempted to include in the memorial the fascist soldiers who died during the war, claiming that they died believing they were fighting for their country. His attempts were met with staunch resistance, and much controversy ensued.

Recollections of the past often take the form of nostalgia in which the past is made out to be simpler, emotionally fulfilling, when social relations were more direct and integrated, and there was more coherence in the community. Nostalgia in these images of the past becomes a manifestation of the longing for an idealized and romanticized past that has been lost. Given its powerful symbolic nature, it is not surprising that political and social movements utilize nostalgia as a rhetorical tool. This is effective because "nostalgia may play a highly ambivalent role in social criticism and political protest. By converting the past into a Utopian homestead, nostalgia may lay the foundations for a radical critique of the modern as a departure from authenticity" (Turner 1987:154).

Nostalgia in Bergamo is ubiquitous. The local newspaper prints items almost daily that draw on images from the past to arouse feelings of nostalgia. Bookstores carry books, often with many illustrations, that focus on particular subjects of Bergamasco history. While there is recognition that the past featured hardship and poverty, most who invoke it romanticize it. An influential medium of nostalgia in Bergamo has been film. Many videos that are widely available feature some historic event or some particular way of life. One film that comes up repeatedly when people refer to the past is Ermano Olmi's *L'albero degli zoccoli* (The Tree of the Wooden Clogs). Released in 1977 and winner of the Palme d'Or at the 1978 Cannes Film Festival, this movie of rural Bergamo at the end of the nineteenth century is highly ethnographic. The images Olmi captured of life on a farmstead during that time function as fodder for the romanticization of the past in Bergamo. In numerous interviews, individuals cited the film as the perfect representation of their past, their tradition, and the Bergamasco way of life.

L'albero degli zoccoli provides visual cues that generate the images people refer to when they evoke the past. Many people I spoke with actually retold scenes from the film as if they were their own. For example, a scene in the film features members of the farmstead sitting together after the maize harvest, singing as they shuck the corn. During an interview, a man spoke about the importance of tradition in local culture, and retold the scene as if his grandfather was a participant. In keeping with the romanticization of the past, these accounts came always from the more pleasant scenes in the film. No one told stories of hardships that appear in the film as their own. Although the culture has changed much from those times, the landscape has not. Only a few miles from the city of Bergamo, there are farmsteads and towns that closely resemble those in the film. Given its continuity with the past, it is easy to understand how the landscape has come to symbolize local cultural continuity.

These halcyon references might be characterized as merely traditionalistic and portraying the community as mired in its own past, unable to come to terms with the realities of the present. However, the past is used as a resource in many ways. The past is invoked to indicate the types of circumstances that "make such 'past-references' salient. It is a selective construction of the past with contemporary influences" (Cohen 1985:99). Thus the representation of the past is a way in which people cognitively link the past, present, and future.

NATION AS COMMUNITY

Like community, the nation is a people's construction by which they give meaning and coherence to their collective histories. The nation also uses symbolic representations to create a sense of unity and meaning. The manner in

which this meaning is given often invokes images that display the naturalness of this attachment. For example, Schneider (1968) points out that nationality symbolically uses the language of kinship. Tropes of kinship can also lead to an unquestioned belief in the naturalness of the hierarchy of social relations, loyalty to the nation and the political system, and the solidarity of its members.

It was difficult through interviews and conversations to get people to explain what Italy meant to them or what it meant to be Italian. The questions on these topics usually drew long silences followed by joking replies and laughter at attempts to break the tense silence. Here are some typical responses from people in Bergamo to this inquiry. The first example is from Teresa, a 22-year-old university student:

Interviewer: Tell me, what holds Italy together?

Teresa: Soccer! [Laughs] No, the language, soccer, and television. Then, I don't know, I think there is a cultural bedrock that we all have in common. Clearly it includes the Catholic religious tradition. Then, I don't know, I guess, well, creativity, ingenuity, the beauty of the country, love towards one's own country, love for Italian things, the defense of things one holds dear, of pasta, of pizza, of Italian culture.

Another illustration is from Letizia, 34, a housewife and mother of a two-year-old son:

Interviewer: What unites Italy?

Letizia: What unites Italy? [Laughs] [Silence] I don't know if Italy can be considered united. I think that there are many differences within each region, even in . . . but then again, perhaps there may be a feeling of having followed a certain historical path that led to the creation of a state. But I don't think this accounts for much, especially from my generation onward. There are great difficulties in maintaining interest in politics and in identity, in other words in patriotism. Italy is a very young country. Italy is little over a hundred years old. Therefore . . . and then having been previously under so many foreign empires, it created so many different communities within its interior.

Interviewer: But what keeps Italy together?

Letizia: What keeps it together? Well, surely [Silence]. Well, the first thing that comes to mind is language. A common language, a common religion. [Silence] There are borders that keep people together. That makes us feel Italian, that makes us subjects of the same laws, that leads us to have common feelings that make us feel Italian.

The final example comes from an interview with Gisella, who is 29 and a sales clerk, and Giuseppe, who is 28 and a mechanic. They have dated for three years and are engaged to be married, but still live with their respective parents.

Interviewer: What unites Italy?

[Silence]

Giuseppe: I have asked myself this before.

Gisella: Spaghetti! [Laughs] The first thing that came to my mind was spaghetti!

Giuseppe: No, no, no. I have asked myself this question before and I admit that I have yet to find an answer. Because it is incredible, I have never understood how . . . I can say fear of the foreigner [unites Italy]. But when the invader is gone, what will keep Italy together? I don't know. It seems rather banal to say spaghetti; although I also thought about spaghetti. Everyone eats pasta. I don't know, Ferrari. Ferrari is rich, fast, and prestigious.

Gisella: There are certain traditions. When the San Remo Festival³ is held, everyone watches. There are other things that are traditions, things from culture that may be food or songs.

Giuseppe: I am not sure if one can define Italy as united thanks to these things. I have not been able to find a moral meaning, a conscience.

Gisella: Identifying oneself in certain things.

Giuseppe: I have just mentioned good spaghetti, pleasant Italian songs, rich and fast Ferrari. We are only Italian with wealthy and winning things. Perhaps the culture from the past. Italy is a depository of cultures: the Roman culture, the Divine Comedy. It is as though something is missing and we have to go reaching for things.

Gisella: I don't believe it is like that; I think there is something.

Giuseppe: I don't know how to answer this question.

Gisella: Neither do I, but there is something there that Italians have in common. You can identify when something is Italian.

Giuseppe: Perhaps the language. A standardized language. The Italian language is the same in all of Italy. But I am not sure if that is the only thing. Berlusconi, now. No that is only a joke. Unfortunately, I don't know, I don't know.

Despite the uncertainty expressed by these individuals as to what creates Italian unity, some concepts reappear in people's responses, such as religion, history, and language. While seen as shared by most Italians, they fail to serve as effective unifying symbols. Food, however, is the most commonly raised image.

Italy and pasta are always connected. The vehemence with which Italians assert the superiority of their food products indicates an underlying pride in Italy; yet when people think of food as a unifying symbol, they tend to trivialize it. This may be because Italians connect food and wine with the locality first, and thus as something anachronistic and trivial when thinking of national virtues that compete with the virtues of other nations. Such associations occur with other symbols as well, so individuals lack a clear idea of what it means to be Italian. There is a general feeling among Italians that one is born Italian, as opposed to becoming or choosing to be Italian (Ferraroti 1998). This implies an inherent genetic connection to Italian-ness, often described in terms of blood or as coming from the local *terra*;⁴ and just as genetic diseases are passed from one generation to the next, the negative aspects associated with Italy persist. There is little recognition, however, of how cultural practices reproduce a negative self-image of Italy. For example, newspapers and magazines continually carry articles that lambaste Italy. The most striking and probably the most controversial was Oriana Fallaci's tirade that appeared in one of the most widely read newspapers in Italy:

Naturally my homeland, my Italy is not the Italy of today. An Italy that is hedonistic, slick,⁵ cunning, and vulgar, where Italians only think of retiring before they are fifty and have only a passion for their holidays abroad or for the soccer games. An Italy that is nasty, stupid, and cowardly, full of small rats that to shake the hand of a diva from Hollywood would sell their daughters to a bordello in Beirut. . . . An Italy that is squalid, moronic, and without a soul. A country of presumptuous [political] parties that know how to win or how to lose, yet they know how to kiss the behinds of their representatives in the seats of parliament, the ministries, or the mayor's office. (Fallaci 2001:138–9)

Alessandro Cavalli claims that the negativity in Italian national culture is the ideological expression of self-critical individuals who tend to recognize its vices, while unrealistically viewing northern Europe as an ideal society (cited in Sciolla 1997:31). An illustration of finding fault with Italy occurred at a dinner with some Italian friends. During conversation one man said that there was nothing good in Italy, except perhaps for wine. My wife and I countered that there were many other good things like the food, design, and fashion. He maintained that Italy lagged behind Europe in most industries. He claimed that Fiat cars were no longer sold in the U.S., and that the company was probably going to go bankrupt. It was his impression that Americans associated Italy with the Mafia, and he held fast to his downbeat image of Italy.

REGIONALISM AND LOCALISM

Many Italians downplay their association with the country, and some go as far as to renounce their association with it. A conversation I had with some older men illustrates this:

First Old Man: Our problem is that we fight more than the others [Europeans], we argue more amongst ourselves. We are less patriotic and that makes us jealous of the others. This happens from north to south. And while we may have our differences, in the end we are all Italians.

Second Old Man: No, no, no! Just hold on. [In Bergamasco dialect] I am in no way Italian!

First Old Man: [Laughs] See? There you are. Therein lies the problem!

Paolo, who was 25 when interviewed in Bologna in 1997, illustrates how Italians turn away from associating themselves with the nation and prefer to replace it with the local:

Italians have never been very united as a nation. . . . Yes, ok, we are Italians, but are you really Italian? No one likes to be confused with other Italians. This seems to be common to all. Everyone wants to be unique. A Bolognese prefers to be seen as Bolognese rather than as Italian. . . . I believe that an Italian has more of a sense of the campanile, of the city in which he or she lives, much more than of the *patria*. I have noticed this over time. In other words, more love towards the city as being his or her origin, as opposed to the nation or the country.

The remarks of the old men and Paolo highlight Ferraroti's (1998) claim that national identity in Italy is confounded with loyalty to the "small homeland" and with localism. Moreover, the negativity associated with Italy, along with regional cultural particularities, has created an Italian identity that Tullio-Altan (1995) describes as a heterogeneous amalgamation of values that produces a "dissonant polyphony." Such division creates a situation where

[s]ixty million Italians make a fetish of appearing to be different from each other. It is not just that the haughty resident of Milan or Turin loathes being mistaken for a Neapolitan or Sicilian—feelings that Sicilians and Neapolitans fully reciprocate. Residents of towns located within a few kilometers of each other also pride themselves on their cultural superiority over their neighbors. (LaPalombara 1989:25)

The Andalusian Sierra provides an illustration of how neighboring communities see similarities and differences between them. They recognize their common interests while concurrently revering their differences (Pitt-Rivers 1971). Similarly, Bergamo people draw boundaries between their locality and the national state, but they also draw boundaries between Bergamo and other communities, especially those in the immediate vicinity. I was consistently offered accounts on how different life and the culture were in Brescia, a city that lies 30 miles to the east of Bergamo. One man said that he had moved there to work and felt like he was in a foreign country: the language is different, the food is different, and people eat dinner much later. In reality the dialects in Bergamo and Brescia are very similar. The main difference in one of the most typical dishes is that the ravioli pasta in Bergamo has cheese and bread in its filling, whereas in Brescia the pasta has no cheese in the filling; and in Brescia, dinner is about half an hour later than in Bergamo.

The context in which individuals express their notions of similarity and difference is important. When I inquired into differences between small localities, people recounted how life differed from one village to another or from one neighborhood to the next. But differences with neighboring localities were played down when the differences with the southern part of Italy emerged. For example, a retired man in his 60s said that while every place in Italy is different, the north is the best of all. He explained that each place—Bergamo, Brescia, Como—was a petal on a flower, each different, but each beautiful. He continued,

Things in the south, from Rome on down, are different. In the north there is a work ethic that is very important. People work hard here. In the south, people are lazy and don't like to work. The government provides assistance that coddles them. It is almost Africa down there and those people have the same mentality as Moroccans.

Thus when things from outside of the community are presented as foreign, it reinforces the notion of the local as a nation unto itself.

The regional differences recognized by Italians are perpetuated through stereotypical images that are the basis for jokes, television comedy skits, and films. For example, a television program called *Sai l'ultima?* (roughly meaning, "Have you heard the latest [joke]?") consists of a joke-telling competition. Most of the jokes feature characters marked by regional identities, identifiable by how they speak. The usual punch line plays on a particular stereotype and involves something done or said that was stupid or silly. The subjects in the jokes are more often from the south. Here is an illustrative joke:

A Sicilian man speaks with his son who does not want to go to school. The father keeps insisting that he must go to school, and the son continues to retort that he does not want to. In the end the man says, "You need to go because your birthday is next week and you finally will be old enough to go to school. You will be 54!"

While each region has its own stereotype, the most striking division and the most widely believed stereotypes are those that run along the north-south divide. The negative images of the south—"Orientalism in one country," as Schneider (1998) calls it—have significantly impacted the public imagination. Northerners tend to evoke contempt when speaking of the south, while southerners have internalized these images and suffer from collective low self-esteem (Sciolla 1997). Racial explanations for the differences between the two regions remain very much alive today. For example, a 50-year-old man explained:

The north has been more united with northern Europe, closer to Europe, while in southern Italy they are all Africans. . . . Mixed in is some Spanish blood, because the Spanish ruled it for so long. Consequently, we feel closer to Europe. We feel more Nordic than the lower part of Italy.

The comments of a 40-year-old factory manager support the conviction of a north-south divide:

If you go to the south you will see that there are many differences between our culture and theirs. In our culture everyone tries to work because what is important is work. Work because one is always in search of having property, like a house. A house is the most important thing for us in the north.

The ideology of localism in northern Italy posits a local system with high economic development, in particular the cultural model of the area around Bergamo where there is a strong work ethic and a spirit of micro-capitalism.

LOCAL IDENTITY IN BERGAMO

The symbols of work, home, and terra appear in most of the images Bergamo people evoke when speaking about the city and its inhabitants. For example, a social worker in his thirties described himself in the following manner: “I am a Bergamasco, who comes from a small village in the hinterland, who has internalized some cultural traits of Bergamascity, including work—which has to correspond to sweat.” The trope of work is key to local identity in Bergamo. As to why the value is so important, some people pointed to poverty in the past and how, without a strong work ethic, survival would have been impossible. Others thought the historical presence of the Austrians imposed the work ethic on the local inhabitants. Some resorted to environmental explanations, stating that the harsh weather of Bergamo forced people to work to grow food for winter, while the nice weather of the south allowed people to relax, since food was abundant all year. A few individuals who had a knowledge of local history suggested that Bergamo had a sizeable inflow of Protestant Swiss immigrants during the nineteenth century, and it was they who brought the “Protestant work ethic” to Bergamo. Regardless of its origins, there is a consensus that working and productivity are requirements for inclusion in the community.

In addition to stressing the significance of work, the social worker continued the description of his culture by touching on the closed nature of the Bergamaschi. He mentioned that in the dialect, the word “welcome” does not exist. He also cited the popular folk song, *Nóter di Bèrghem* (We of Bergamo), which is sung in dialect. This song was cited by many people of all ages as illustrating Bergamasco culture, for it is believed that its origins go back several centuries. A local folklorist who specializes in traditional songs pointed out that the song was actually written in the 1950s from sources that go back no further than the 1920s. The song is nonetheless taught to children in school and sung by folklore choirs. While there are many versions of this song, the lyrics most often sung are:

We of Bergamo
 Of the High City
 A urinal we call *ol bocàl* [chamber pot]
 This is my house
 And I am in charge
 I want to know who comes and who goes
 Because I am the master

The image of one’s house is central to this song, because it equates Bergamo with home. This analogy is symbolically useful because it ties the image of community

with the family. Just as a family lives in a home, the locals live in Bergamo. Furthermore, anyone from outside can be seen as a guest or as an intruder in one's home, depending on the context. A guest is expected to not be intrusive or imposing. An intruder one can legitimately expel. A man in his 50s, who was complaining about people arriving to live in Bergamo, used this analogy:

Is it not justified that every people be allowed to defend their own values, their own home, their own land, their own state? If I build a house, sacrificing everything I have, and then someone comes along who says, "Now I will come in and live here." No one would say, "Oh please come in and I will leave." This is my point.

The question arises as to who can be included in the family of Bergamaschi and who is an intruder. Moreover, how is membership in the family determined? People in Bergamo often refer to people who are the "true" or "real" locals. Various terminologies are used to describe these authentic Bergamaschi: a Bergamasco-Bergamasco, a four-by-four Bergamasco (with reference to a vehicle that has traction on all four tires), a Bergamasco DOC (referring to certified origins for food and wine), and pure-blood Bergamasco. The general belief is that one is Bergamasco only through blood. A prominent businessman explained:

You cannot become Bergamasco. One is born Bergamasco. It is passed on from one generation to the next. We are tied to our terra. We love our terra, our valleys, our plains, our *casancei* (local ravioli), *la polenta e ossei* (a local polenta dish), our women, our women! We love our terra too much. I have traveled around the world and have seen émigrés from Italy; none are as attached to their terra as the Bergamaschi . . . everyone else has integrated, but the Bergamaschi have not. The Bergamasco has an attachment to his terra that is extremely strong.

The repeated use of the term terra indicates the vital connection between the land and one's local identity. Moreover, as farmers work with the soil, agriculture is the most respected and romanticized form of work. Agriculture and "terra" evoke strong emotions of nostalgia, as illustrated by the comments of a teacher in her 40s when asked whether she liked Bergamo:

Yes. You might say it is my soul. My roots, I feel like they are here. I like it because it reminds me of my infancy. The Bergamo of peasants. I grew up in a farming family; my grandfather was a farmer, my uncles were farmers, therefore I love the terra. Even now I love to put my hands in the ground, to touch the soil. . . . I like to put my hands in the dough to make bread . . . this is tied to the fact that I lived and grew up on a farm.

As with the Italian identity that is ascribed at birth, there are widespread beliefs that one's local identity is determined by birthplace. Any official document with one's name will also include place of birth. For the Bergamaschi, to acquire a local identity, one must be born there, but there must also be a long

historical family presence, thus blood becomes a factor as well. In other words, one's local identity is tied to the land through the roots of blood and family. Only prolonged residence of a family in Bergamo entitles one to the identity of an authentic Bergamasco. Consequently, many families engage in genealogical and residency histories, so as to lay claim to being true Bergamaschi and perhaps even local nobility. The comments by a local politician who was keen to establish his credentials illustrate this point:

My surname, Colleoni, is a historic surname that has extremely deep roots in the Province of Bergamo. The first Colleoni arrived in the area around Callusco d'Adda in the year 900. The first Colleoni surname is from this time, while Bartolomeo Colleoni is from 1400, and thus from 500 years later. My family has roots going back one thousand years.

The tropes of work, home, and terra not only are the symbols through which local identity takes form, they also are the means through which outsiders are kept out.

Given the stringent requirements for claiming a local identity, there are people who did not claim to be Bergamaschi. Many long-term residents, and even children or grandchildren of residents from elsewhere, still considered themselves to be outsiders. Many, however, extolled the virtues of the local culture, while not feeling part of it. For example, a woman from Calabria has lived in Bergamo for 20 years, is married to a Bergamasco, and has two children, yet feels herself an outsider. At the same time, she feels detached from the south. Her daughter, she says, feels a closer affinity to Calabria than Bergamo, although she has lived her entire life in Bergamo.

Elias and Scotson (1994) describe how a group in a community promotes itself as superior while outsiders come to accept marginalization and inferiority. This is done by stronger internal social cohesion with the established group, which allows it to monopolize positions of power and exclude outsiders. This is happening in Bergamo. Established social networks are promoted through legitimization of certain surnames, through social clubs that promote local culture, and the promotion of the local dialect. Local politicians come from established families and can speak in dialect, which is a requisite for success.

Social networks are maintained through lifelong acquaintances and familial relationships. As family size has drastically dropped, so have the extended familial networks that provided the main social relationships. Networks of friends that are often categorized as *la compagnia* (company or group) have replaced the more traditional kin ties. These groups of friends are usually established at school where children progress through grades as a cohort. They are further cemented at after-school church community centers in which most children participate. With such long-term contact and the lack of alternative social networks, the *compagnia* develops into a quasi-familial relationship. Someone who leaves

finds it is difficult to enter another group. For example, Emanuela, a university student in her 20s, recounted how her social group growing up were those she met in her scouting group, which in Bergamo is run through the Church. Most of the people from that group still socialize together. When Emanuela went to England as a university exchange student, many of her girlhood friends felt betrayed and stopped speaking to her. Now her social network consists of people she met when she was abroad whom she keeps in touch with via email. The only successful methods to enter a new social group seems to be by meeting the compagna of a boyfriend or girlfriend or by meeting people at the university.

LANGUAGE AND DIALECT

The symbolic boundaries in Bergamo are social networks that are hard to penetrate, the continued reference to the locality through a history of family residence, and the use of dialect. Language is something that brings Italy together, yet divides it into regions. People see a common language in Italian, but they also see Italian as something that competes with local dialects. Italian dialects have been resilient, and given the strong association between locality and dialect, regional stereotypes are also applied to linguistic variations. The regional stereotypes Italians have with regard to Bergamo also apply to its dialect, which is coarse and unintelligible, consisting mostly of grunts. Parks (2002) provides a comic moment at the soccer stadium when the fans get to taunting:

“*Pà-à-uh-a! Pà-à-uh-a!*” the Veronese chanted in Bergamo, imitating the way the locals pronounce the key word *pastasciutta* [dry pasta]. And then they broke out into the song that at some point gets sung at every game. The tune is the old favorite “Guantanamera.” The song has but one idea, which briefly translates as “We can’t understand what the fuck you’re saying” and implies: the centre of the world is our city, our language, our accent. (Parks 2002:168)

The Bergamaschi, as with other stereotypes, have honored the stigma of the dialect and make it something of which they are proud. They especially like the fact that other Italians cannot understand it and like to refer to it as “their language,” as opposed to their “dialect.” There is a qualitative difference made between Italian and the local dialect.

It is generally assumed that in Italy, at least since the Renaissance, a condition of *diglossia* (rather than *bilingualism*) prevailed, i.e., that a “High” and “Low” variety were available: literary Italian, used almost exclusively in writing being the High Variety; and a non-literary variety, and the local dialects, used in speech, being the Low one. (Lepschy et al. 1996:71)

This condition is not lost on local activists in Bergamo who are attempting to change the image of Bergamasco from a low dialect to a literary language.

Central to this activity is an association called *Il Ducato di Piazza Pontida* (the Duchy of Pontida Square). Its mission is to preserve the local culture with a strong emphasis on language. Along with poetry contests, choirs, and other folkloric events, they offer a yearly Bergamasco language course. Rather than being an avenue to teach Bergamasco to non-locals, the course is designed to teach locals already orally fluent in the language how to read and write it. They have also published a dictionary that translates Italian into Bergamasco, but not Bergamasco into Italian. The impression one gets is that Bergamasco is the domain of the local residents, not to be shared with outsiders. The general assumption is that outsiders are unlikely to want to learn the dialect.

Such activities that attempt to formalize the dialect into a literary, written language in order to save it may be counterproductive. While Bergamasco is a vernacular language spoken by a majority of the residents, the efforts to create a formal language can be discouraging its use. Individuals who are fluent or proficient in Bergamasco were reluctant to publicly use the language, claiming that they did not speak a “true” or “pure” Bergamasco. Furthermore, the language has subtle geographic variations, with differences from one town to the next. One of the most common activities prior to the language class at the Ducato was to compare different words or pronunciations from the different areas around Bergamo. Such variation is not open to standardization. The malleability and variation in the language, however, is what will keep it in the vernacular and alive despite the alarmist claims that Bergamasco, as with other regional languages/dialects, is disappearing. Consequently, even though most Bergamaschi now speak Italian, there is little acknowledgment of the national language as a symbol of belonging. Instead, it is the vernacular dialect that has strong connotations of inclusion in a particular community, and thus has come to stand as a symbol of the locality.

RELIGION

There is no denying the pervasiveness of the Catholic Church in everyday life in Italy. Whether people are believers, whether they practice, or whether they reject Catholicism, the Church impacts their lives. The influence of the Church is evident in the Italian landscape where the center of almost every town and city is designed around a church, and where another church is never far away. The incessant ringing of bells is a constant reminder of the Church’s presence. The display of crucifixes in public offices, schools, and courtrooms emphasizes the link between the Church and the nation, despite claims that Italy is a secular state. Due to its omnipresence, one might think that religion serves as a unifying symbol for Italy. This is not so, however. Rather than functioning as a national symbol, religion is experienced as a local phenomenon with global ties. In other

words, it allows the local community to express its particularity while placing it in the universal reach of the Church. Every town and even every neighborhood in a city has its own patron saint. On the saint's day there are festivities that include a mass and a procession. People see these traditions as part of the local way of life. Thus religion becomes associated with the local community.

In Bergamo, references to religious aspects of local culture are prevalent. For example, there is great pride in believing that it is the province in Italy that sends the most missionaries abroad. The strongest symbolic tie between Bergamo and the Church is Pope John the 23rd, who was born in a small town in the province. People take pride in his local roots, and also point out that he was an extremely popular Pope, widely referred to as *Papa Buono*, the good Pope. Given the importance of the Church in Bergamo, there is a consensus that to be a good Bergamasco you also have to be Catholic.

The symbolic tie between Church and locality is strong in Bergamo, but the symbolic association between Italy and the Church is not. The northeastern tier of Italy is known as the "White Belt" due to the strong influence of the Church there, which helped the Christian Democratic party dominate local politics. This area contrasts with the "Red Belt," the central tier of Italy where the Communists dominate local politics and many strongly disavow the Church in their lives (Kertzer 1980). This regionalization of politics, where the Church was either a strong supporter or an opponent of local leadership, compromised the Church's role as a pervasive influence in Italian society. Thus the Church's involvement in the locality is seen as natural and even essential to the construction of a legitimate local identity, whereas the Church's involvement in the Italian state is seen as overstepping its bounds and its social function, despite its ubiquitous presence.

CONCLUSIONS

Scholars who study nationalism focus on what brings diverse people into what constitutes a large, symbolic, and imagined community. Few have addressed how, as in the case of Italy, people stubbornly resist the process of imagining themselves as part of a larger whole, even though they share a history, language, religion, and other cultural traits. They prefer instead to regard themselves as belonging to small communities or regions. Italians recognize the need for the larger state, as it validates their place in larger entities they want to belong to, such as Europe and the modern industrialized world. For the residents of Bergamo, Europe holds both promise and fear. A united Europe made up of multiple cultural regions, each with its unique way of life, can guarantee the survival of the Bergamasco way of life and help it break away from impositions determined by the Italian state or by the threat of bureaucratic power in Brussels

and its ability to dictate regulations that may infringe on quotidian cultural practices. For example, new food safety regulations may require local cheese producers in Bergamo to change how their products are produced (see Castellanos and Bergstresser 2006).

The rise and success of the Lega Nord in the area around Bergamo illustrates the sentiments towards the local (positive) and nation (negative). Without understanding the local and national dynamics of how a sense of community is created and sustained, it is difficult to discern the complex and often chaotic nature of Italian politics. The lack of a strong national identity is in part a result of the successful appropriation of community symbols and rituals by regions and localities in Italy. Consequently, without symbols and myths, Italians are left with the bureaucracy of the Italian government as the principal symbol they associate with Italy.

NOTES

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2. Unless otherwise noted, translations for all interviews and cited sources are my own.
3. The San Remo Festival is a popular song competition held every year in the spring.
4. *Terra* translates as dirt, ground, land, homeland, and country. Italians and Bergamaschi use the term frequently for its multiple meanings.
5. Fallaci was a well-known journalist in the 1960s and 1970s, and later became a successful novelist. I have translated *furbo* as “slick,” a word meaning clever, smart, cunning, and sly.

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