

# THE MANAGEMENT OF LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL MINORITIES IN A NATIONAL STATE

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The management of individuals or communities different from the prevalent religious, ethnic, linguistic, political or sexual groups has always been one of the most problematic issues faced by national States. The liberal conception of State privileges individual in detriment of collective entities as a subject of right, excluding *a priori* community rights.

Historical linguistic groups represent one of the most ancient and complicated questions for testing the capacity of a National State to manage domestic differences, since they have been seen as a threat to the process of unification and nationalization of the masses and individualization of the right.

International organizations too have had many difficulties in dealing with this subject. Only in recent times, namely after the tragedy in the former Yugoslavia, international organizations have approved measures to protect and respect historical linguistic minorities (Hoffmann, 2005). United Nations approved their first declaration on this specific issue only in 1992 (*United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic Religious and Linguistic Minorities*), then OSCE created the *High Commissioner on National Minorities* in the same year, and thirdly the Council of Europe approved the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* also in 1992. European Union started a long but very bumpy path only from the early 1980s, with the initiative of the Italian socialist deputy, Gaetano Arfè.

Italy is not an exception: in fact, since its political unification (1861) and despite the fact that this question has remained almost unknown at an international scale, Italy has been historically one of the European countries with the richest linguistic diversity (Bussotti, 2013). This dichotomy, deriving from the contrast between this linguistic variety and a strong centralization in political and administrative terms, provoked various shocks and the actual incapacity of Italian institutions to manage this intricate mosaic.

This short reflection aims to present how Italy has managed the linguistic and cultural differences inside its national territories, considering three fundamental historical steps: the first period of unification; the Fascism; the period after the end of the Second World War, culminating in the approval of the first organic law that protects its historical linguistic minorities.

## *The Management of Linguistic Minorities in the Post-Unification Period (1861-1922)*

Today Italy hosts about 2.5 million people who belong to historical linguistic minorities, distributed in 14 regions. They are minorities which lived in the Italian territory before its political unification: hence the adjective “historical”. At the beginning of the 19th century, only a little minority spoke Italian fluently: between 2.5% and 9.5%. The basis for a unitary initiative seemed very fragile (Banti, 2011).

For this reason, the management of linguistic and cultural minorities in the aftermath of the Italian political unification was out of the agenda of the ruling classes. It was, in a word, an absence. Nevertheless, the actual intention of Italian ruling classes was a “soft” but at the same

time violent removal of all the main obstacles for the completion of a cultural and “ethnic” unification.

The ideal of a new motherland, which had to be politically united, spread quite quickly, also influenced by the spirit of European romanticism, which saw nationalism as one of its fundamental axis. This is true as for moderate as for democratic tendencies: their common principle became the identification of Italy as a political entity based on *Ius sanguinis*. The lineage represented the element that all the inhabitants of Italian territories had to share. It is an “ethnic” conception of nation, based on the blood. Italy became a “bio-political” entity. Mazzini, Manzoni, Gioberti, De Amicis and many others thought to Italy as a cultural homogeneous entity, despite its administrative contingent divisions.

The process of “masses nationalization” (Mosse, 1975) was applied as the basic principle for the new Italian State. How did Italian government manage the rich linguistic diversity in the aftermath of independence?

Through a politics of assimilation, but in a double meaning. From an administrative point of view, the State which lead the process of independence, the Savoy Kingdom, adopted the centralization: no tolerance was admitted and violence was used, especially in the South, to put in row “unsubordinated” people. From a cultural point of view, Italian language had to be affirmed as the only idiom spoken at the national level.

Extemporaneous but meaningful initiatives had been taken in order to eliminate the undesired presence of linguistic minorities. For instance, Vegetti Ruscalla wrote a pamphlet against the use of the French in some valleys of Turin’s province (Vegetti Ruscalla, 1861), meanwhile De Amicis insisted on the idea that “foreign people are hostile presences” (Banti, 2011: 76). In legal terms, no minority enjoyed protection, with the exception of the Francophone minority, inside the territory of the former Savoy Kingdom.

Anyhow, the process of “Italianization” did not proceed quickly, because of the lack of educators able to teach the official idiom of the new Kingdom. In 1864 only 30% of Italian men and 18% of women went to school; in 1871 the illiteracy rate was again of 37% (Salvi, 1975). With such a weak school system, the only way to nationalize the masses was military service and repression, especially in Southern Italy. The First World War was a formidable trump to uniform Italian peoples.

In fact, what united the different peoples of Italy was the hate against the common enemy, the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. The demonization of the stranger was carried out by various movements, including the nationalists and a small party lead by Mussolini. It will be Mussolini to define the concept of nation, excluding every form of tolerance regarding foreign people: national community had to have as its basic elements a common descendant, territory and identity. It had to be well distinguished from other ethnic groups and nations.

With this ideological apparatus Mussolini was getting ready to deal with the linguistic minorities question once he came to power.

### *The Management of Linguistic Minorities during Fascism*

If the “liberal” Italian State had partially failed its process of cultural and linguistic homogenization, Fascism adopted a stronger line, accentuating the elements of a common belonging to a homeland using mass propaganda together with violent methods. Mussolini stated that in Italy alien groups had already been assimilated and that they constituted a very small part of its population. In 1918, an observer noted that Italy was the nation all over the world whose features in terms of language, history, traditions are the most homogeneous and compact (Ghisleri, 1918). An observation with no scientific bases, but that reflected the ideological climate of that time in Italy: a story of a common past and a common identity had been created. Fascism implemented measures for its affirmation at the national and European scale.

Just to give an idea of the way in which Fascism dealt with linguistic minorities, it is worth remembering how it faced the South Tirol question. It was (and continues to be until today) the most complicated issue for Italian government inside the minorities question in Italy. First of all, a wild process of Italianization was carried out; secondly, the Senator Tolomei was the protagonist, in 1926, of an absurd linguistic operation, directed to Italianize all the German names, including the Ladin ones, which Italian public administration was not able to distinguish from the German ones; thirdly, the school system too was englobed in the general process of linguistic destruction of minorities. The Law 1601/1922 had, as one of its main bases, some elements of linguistic pedagogy, whose central motto was “from the dialect to the language”. In this case, the aim was to overcome local dialects, but, for the first time, they entered the Italian official school (Salvi, 1975). This “mistake” was corrected by the DL 2191/1925, which abolished the teaching of local languages in Italian school.

The press and other important public opinion makers accepted and spread this approach: the daily newspaper “La Stampa” wrote, some years later, that Italy offered the spectacle of a very compact nation, in which national minorities represented a very exiguous portion of its whole population (La Stampa, 30/09/1930).

Despite the attempt carried out by Fascism to mute Italian minorities, in the aftermath of the end of the Second World War they tried to recuperate a specific role in Italian cultural and political scenario, only obtaining specific and not organic measures of protection.

#### *The Management of Linguistic Minorities after the Second World War*

The National and International right suffered radical changes after the end of the Second World War. However, the same *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) had, as its pivotal principle, the idea that the individual is the central subject of right. So, protection for local communities had not to be openly established, since the general principles of tolerance, respect for human being regardless for ethnic, sexual, political, religious belongings incorporated this necessity too.

Italian Constitution adhered these liberal principles, but the question of linguistic minorities resurrected from the ashes of Fascism. So, the Italian new Constitution, approved in 1948, had to incorporate some specific protections to linguistic minorities. The main issue was represented by German minorities in South Tirol: the risk of *Anschluss* to Austria was very high, so that these minorities leveraged on this option to obtain a regime of special protection. Since other linguistic minorities began to claim the same treatment, Italian Constitution granted the institution of five Special Status Regions (Trentino Alto Adige, Friuli Venezia-Giulia, Val d’Aosta, Sardinia and Sicily).

Before the approval of the Constitution, international peace treaties had forced Italian authorities to concede a regime of special protection to Francophone groups in Val d’Aosta (Lieutenant Decree 545/1945), to German minorities in Bolzano Province and to Slovenian minorities in Trieste and Gorizia.

Nevertheless, these measures were dictated from political issues. The majority of linguistic minorities enjoyed no legal protection, since they were not affiliate to national State, as German or Austria and France. In 1967 a group of activists created the Italian Association for the Defence of the Threatened Languages and Cultures (AIDLCM), which received the sustain of the Italian Communist Party: it considered the question of national minorities as a part of the struggle against capitalism, but, at a Parliamentary level, almost nothing was made to protect these minority groups positively. Italian State continued to be strongly centralized: federalism was not considered as a possible way to solve historical problems, including the protection of linguistic minorities. So, only at the end of the 1990s the Italian Parliament approved the first, and until today only, law in favour of historical linguistic minorities (L. 482/1999).

This law establishes the protection for 12 linguistic minorities, excluding – because of the

pressure of the right-wing parties – the languages of historical communities, as Rom and Sinti, alleging their nomadism.

The question here approached did not finish its route with the approval of the L. 482. Right-wing exponents, as Giovanardi, together with “pure” linguistic experts, as many researchers of Accademia della Crusca, continue to point out the necessity of implementing actions for the defence of Italian language, ignoring the multilingual mosaic present in Italy, now enriched from the provision of new migrants and new languages.

The analysis of the management of linguistic minorities here proposed tried to stress some of the difficulties a European National State have been tackled from its foundation to today. It showed that this subject exerted an actual impact on the legal and constitutional principles that inform liberalism and modern democracy, and that it is far from finding a consensual and definitive solution. The European case, with the tragedy of the former Yugoslavia, and the Italian case too, showed that only through an equilibrated politics of Affirmative action and a decentralized institutional structure linguistic minorities can represent a richness inside National State, instead of a constant and dangerous threat.

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