Indifference and Political Parties

Vasco S.C. Fernandes

Department of Anthropology, University of Durham

> *Indifference is the rejection of common humanity. It is the denial of identity, of selfhood* ." (Herzfeld 1993:1)

Abstract: The way people create and justify indifference to other humans could be seen as cultural phenomenon resulting from social processes. In this paper I will argue that the study of the way this phenomenon is lived and constructed reflects not only agents' experiences through socialization but also the construction and interpretation of these experiences, which occur through agents' interaction with different social structures. In other words, one's indifference depends on the diverse relationships in which the agents are involved. I will argue that the study of political parties could shed some light not only on the social production of difference that leads to indifference, but also on how this indifference is lived and experienced. To do so, I will focus my reflection on an Italian party, the Northern League which is stereotypically known for its aggressive political rhetoric.

Indifference is an interesting challenge for both anthropology as a science, which is concerned both with social change and human cross-cultural understanding, and ethnography as science which is interested in the description of the `real'.

1. Introduction

1.1. After the allied victory in the Second World War, terms such as equality, peace, tolerance and human rights were brought to the forefront of a worldwide public debate. They became part of a common `global' cross cultural heritage. All humans were symbolically recognized as having the same `rational' and unquestionable rights. However, as Amartya Sen pointed out these rights are only a political preposition, which are not yet institutionalised (Sen 1999). However, they have a strong symbolic connotation that unifies all humans under the same ideological status. At least in the constitution of the United Nations, all humans are `equal'. Following this thought my departure question is: how do people represent the contradiction between what are morally considered and accepted as their `rights', and the experience of living or not living them.

1.2. In other words, if the law is equal for everyone, if every human has their `rights', and if we all have a moral obligation toward `the other', how can one understand the dehumanisation of `the other' that emerges from political rhetoric in a democratic society? Furthermore, how is it possible that in European society, supposedly one of the most prominent defenders of these values, so many questions have recently emerged, for instance, about cultural discrimination in relation to immigration and religious differences?

1.3. In this paper, I will focus on the study of a political party, the Northern League. The Northern League (the N.L.) is one of the actors of the recently changed Italian political scenario. As a political party, it is known for basing its political discourses and stances against, for example immigrants, southerners, and more recently, Muslims.

1.4. Theoretically, I will argue that political parties are potent social arenas for understanding how indifference is lived, created, and institutionalised.

1.5. In order to make sense of this problem, I will draw my reflection from two different fields of anthropological knowledge. One the one hand, I will argue that political parties are social institutions responsible for the production of discourses that help agents to interpret the social world. On the other hand, I will focus on practice theory and the concept of *habitus* proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (1977) to understand why individuals join and choose these parties to express their political views.

1.6. Finally, this paper comes with the personal conviction that anthropology has a `moral' role. The social challenges presented by the presence of political discourses tend to explain the world in a rather distinctive and discriminatory way and deserves careful attention.

Hence, one could suggest that anthropology should try to promote inter-cultural communication, thereby helping to deconstruct and understand the roots of new doxas that allow the banalization of indifference. Doing so, we will avoid way becoming a Kafkian theoretical science.

1.7. The article will be organized in three different sections. Firstly, I will try to define what I mean by indifference. I will argue that indifference could be more than a word taken for granted, and that it can be perceived as an object of anthropologic study since it is dependent on a socially constructed process. Secondly, I will describe the theoretical framework that I am following to address the questions posed. This will comprise two sections. On the one hand, I will reflect on political anthropology and practice theory. On the other hand, I will reflect on political parties as social institutions responsible for the rationalization and narration of the social world. Then, I will focus on the Northern League's political strategies. Finally, I will reflect more specifically about the nature of my proposed doctoral research, combining theory, practice and methodology and my specific ethnographic situation the Northern League.

2. Part one: A Theoretical Problem

2.1. *How and why can political identities that celebrate the rights of individuals and small groups so often seem cruelly selective in applying those rights* ?" (Herzfeld 1993:1)

The production of indifference.

2.2. In a very interesting work on the anthropology of institutions, Michael Herzfeld (1993) reflects upon the creation and institutionalisation of bureaucratic state discourses. Using the Weberian concept of *theodicy* he argues that institutional bureaucracy creates explanations for an individual's life through the promotion of a fatalistic way of perceiving the outcome of their actions. Furthermore, he argues that the institutionalisation of this rhetoric gains a taken for granted value, which implies that it becomes *indifferent* to the individual, since this is typified into routine categories. Categories, as Alfred Shutz pointed out, are: *"the actual way in which men in daily life interpret their own and each other's behaviour"* (Schutz: 1962). Notwithstanding, Herzfeld does not just address the bureaucrats and the institutions they represent in power. He suggests that individuals also use the indifference of state officers to justify their own failures. In other words, this rhetoric creates and institutionalises a matrix of multiple individual fates inside the same social structure. However this *indifference* on the part of bureaucrats is embedded in something deeper, what he calls the roots of the Western Civilization (Herzfeld 1993). In other words it is the way individuals are taught to see and categorize the world.

2.3. The institutionalisation of bureaucracy is also suggested by Rukmini Nair (2002) as responsible for the promotion of indifference. However, in this case the study emphasises not the production of indifference, but the *idea* of indifference resulting from the legacy of colonialism in post-colonial India. She argues that the idea of the state, being detached from the individual through the bureaucratic system, is a direct consequence of the colonial structure of thought, which promoted an idea of state and politics based on rational premises (Nair 2002). In this sense, she agrees with the main ideas of Michael Herzfeld. What is original in her analyses is that she points out that the major change was the imposition of new forms of narrative production. Narratives and social answers, in her opinion, are not only characteristic of the rhetoric, and of the "high priests" that create, control and interpret it, but are also the way in which people `officially' narrate events. She observes that individuals and their own stories and accounts are excluded from these events, comprising what Anthony Giddens (1991) calls the *sequestration of experience*. In his words, " *for many people, direct contact with events and situations which link the individual lifespan to broad issues of morality and finitude are rare and fleeting*" (Giddens 1991:8). However, the process of indifference is not just determined by an agents' perception of the social world though pre-given categories and experiences.

2.4. The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze regarded indifference as " *the undifferentiated abyss, the black nothingness, the indeterminate animal in which everything is dissolved.*" (Deleuze 1968:28). He carries on and adds: " *But also the white nothingness, the once more calm surface upon which float unconnected determinations like scattered members: a head without a neck, an arm without a shoulder, and eyes without brows*" (Deleuze 1968:28).

2.5. By this statement he suggests that what is important is not how one becomes indifferent or *undifferentiated* , since this is the beginning of the process of difference and indifference. Instead, one should aim at understanding the process of differentiation; in other words, how things are related to each other. Difference in this case emerges as a concept of social analysis, as a social process, that he suggests is remembered through repetition (Deleuze 1968:28).

2.6. Deleuze draws attention to the mutual and interactive character of the indifference/difference phenomenon. The process of production of difference depends not only on routines, of the creation of a doxic world, but also of its interaction between agents, of social relationships, and recognizing the other not as category but as human being.

2.7. In short, one could argue that the dialogue between what is different and indifferent depends on the creation of biographic relations that emerge from agent's mutual interactions at a specific tempo. Consequently, it could be perceived as a creative and transmuting social process.

Political parties as producers of difference.

2.8. "*Understanding the social world means understanding the way in which men define their situation.*" (Schutz in Natanson 1962: xxxvI)

2.9. Given the above insights, it is clear that we can apply them to political parties as institutions that have the power to create a specific vision of the world, through the manipulation and influence in some of the prerogatives in which the social world is narrated. Recalling

the initial thought of Schutz (1962) political parties `contribute' to how individuals " *define their situation*" .

2.10. Pierre Bourdieu suggested in *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991), that the institutionalisation of political discourses are the result of not only individuals' experiences and perspectives, but also the reflection of a historical process that the individual accesses through socialization. In his words: " *the act of institution is an act of social magic that can create difference ex nihilo, or else (as is more often the case) by exploiting as it were pre-existing differences, like typologies, like the biological different between the sexes or in the case of an heir on the basis of primogeniture* "(Bourdieu 1991:120-121). By this Bourdieu advocates something similar to what Herzfeld called the roots of western civilization.

2.11. However, as Michael Carrithers (1992:106) pointed out: " *Everyone negotiates relationships in order to negotiate meaning* ." This negotiation of meaning in the case of the political parties has different dimensions. Parties are competitive institutions, propaganda machines that are involved in a struggle for meaning. This representation is taken in different angles within the social world. For example, they change and reinterpret history, they use symbolism, and they dispute the interpretation of the life world. In other words, they negotiate the relationship between individuals, events, and life world.

2.12. Parties are also in a relationship with individuals, and from this relationship they also change. As Renato Rosaldo (1989) suggested, one should be aware of the processes of historical change that results from the interaction between agents, structure and institutions, what he called the processual analysis. This also means that the agents give different meaning to their actions in specific social settings. In his words: "*... from a processual perspective, change rather than structure becomes society's enduring state, and time rather than space becomes its most encompassing medium*" (Rosaldo, 1989:103).

2.13. In this sense, an agents' interpretations are not just based on their own perception, or on institutional discourses or categorizations. Instead, they recreate, represent, change, transform, and adapt it to their own representational experience, which means that they also define their situation by taking into account the awareness of not only the `other', but also their representations toward of the `other'.

Political parties and political action

2.14. "*We must disclose the hidden agendas and instrumentalities behind the fictions of interpretative and explanatory totalization, and relate forms of knowledge to the existential contents which foreshadow them.*" (Jacksson, 1996:37)

2.15. The work of Pierre Bourdieu criticizes anthropologists' obsession with both rules and roles, with the need of making sense of an individual's practice through both cultural *maps* and *decoding operations* (Bourdieu 1977). Instead, Bourdieu presents the idea of the habitus as mediator between agents' practices and structure. In his words:

2.16. *To eliminate the need to resort to "rules", it would be necessary to establish in each case a complete description (...) of the relation between the habitus, as a socially constituted system of cognitive and motivating structures, and the socially structured situation in which the agents interests are defined, and with them the objective functions and subjective motivations of their practices.* (Bourdieu 1977: 76)

2.17. In order to understand social reality, Bourdieu proposes a theory of practice. (Boudieu 1977). In his perspective individuals are not just actors, they are agents. They are in constant interaction with world or structure in an interactive dialogue. Bourdieu conceives social action metaphorically as a game. In an interview with Lamaison (1986) he stressed the need to give an account of the ` *real principle*' of agents' *strategies* which agents acquire through their experiences playing the game, what he calls the *practical sense*. Therefore, instead of seeing strategy as a product of structural mechanical roles or rules, Bourdieu stresses the mutable character of these strategies, since agents look to maximize and change their options through social interaction.

2.18. The role of *habitus* as conceived by Bourdieu highlights several relevant facts that I think would provide us with a better understanding of political action. The *habitus* combines agents' experiences like education, culture, and individual motivations with a material-structural one (political systems, history, social structure). It is therefore embedded in the relationship between subject and object. The concept highlights the need to go a step further in the understanding of individuals' action through their practices. As Paul Roscoe argues, practice theory: "insists on incorporating nonmaterial circumstances into social process, stressing the role of individual agents in using this conditions and contingencies to create social life" (1993:111). Therefore, what contingencies led individuals to join the N.L.? How are these contingencies related with material and non material conditions? What is the influence of education and life experiences on the way one chooses to participate in democracy? What does political action mean to them?

2.19. Therefore, studying the process of social differentiation that occurs through the participation of agents in a political party could help us to understand the institutionalisation of indifference through individuals' perceptions of it. In other words, we ought to not only see them respond to different rhetorical narrative story-types that the state, the bureaucracy and the media use, which according to the discussion above, is partially latent, but we should also give an account of how individuals make their daily choices in relation to these rhetorical strategies. As a result, we should understand the way agents interpret and transform a rhetorical understanding of difference through their social relationship with the different structures that compose the social world. In other words, we should understand how individuals learn to make sense of social relationships, and consequently how they learn to be indifferent.

3. Part two: A changing environment, a metamorphic party.

The Lega Nord: a brief review.

3.1. The Northern League is one of the actors in the recently changed Italian political scenario. As a political party, it is known for its

aggressive discourses and stances against, for example immigrants, and southerners Italians, immigrants and modernization. This led to its categorization as a `right wing extremist party' (see for example Betz 1993 and Stolcke 1995). Another relevant feature about the N.L rhetoric is their open contestation of the idea of Italy as a nation state, and its focus upon the construction and institutionalisation of a `Northern identity'. Politically, they argue for a federalist reform that would give more decision-making power to regions (Diamanti 1993, Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001) .

3.2. According to Messina, the League: *"was the most significant new element in the Italian political scene of the 1990s"* (1998 463 -464). The fall of the Berlin Wall liberated Italian voters from the `anti-communist stigma' and led to a major refocusing on the internal situation (Gundle and Parker 1996, Ginsborg 2001). During this period, Italy also experienced the spread of regionalist parties. The regional parties, or the Leagues, started at the beginning of the eighties in the region of Veneto (Diamanti 1993, Gold 2003). The Venetian League strived for the recognition of both the distinctive Venetian historical features as a `nation' and the recognition of their own dialect (Diamanti 1993). They came to prominence with distinctive and explosive slogans against Rome and the central government, and focused mainly on the lack of decision-making power of the regions.

3.3. Meanwhile, in the Lombard region, another League was created: the Lombard League. At the beginning the Lombard League followed the same pattern of the Venetian League stressing ethno-regionalism based on an idea of common language. However, in the case of the Lombard League, the redefinition of a region as an identity-space was more complicated due the presence not only of diverse dialects, but also due to the lack of an historically common past as a `nation'. Still the Lombard League used historic symbols to support their claims. For instance the party name was inspired by the medieval *Lombard League* that fought the German Emperor Frederick I in 1176 (Coleman 1996). This previous Lombard League was also a source of inspiration for other symbols used by the League to create an historic connection between their goals and the achievement of their predecessors. For example the *caroccio* , a war chariot that at that time was used in battle, is how the N.L. is currently known in the press. Sometimes, this symbolism is simplified to the warrior that appears in the league symbol (Alberto Giussano), the leader of the League in the battle of Legano (Coleman 1996).

3.4. The Lombard League was led by an innovative an audacious politician, Umberto Bossi. Bossi was strongly influenced by the Russeauian idea that `true democracy' could only be achieved in small communities (Bossi and Vimercati 1992). Furthermore, he also opposed himself to the supposed lack of moral values of the industrial era, denouncing the substitution of traditional values for those of `consumism' (Bossi and Vimercati 1992). Again, using a Russeauian representational metaphor he portrayed himself as `the noble savage'. He stressed the fact that he grew up in a peasant family that espoused values of hard work, honour and community, contrasting this with the perverse and corrupt political class in Rome and the South (Bossi and Vimercati 1992).

3.5. In 1991 the regionalists movements where united under the same name, becoming the Lega Nord. Bossi emerged as the uncontested leader of the League, and expanded the values that had been previously presented as particular of the pure Lombard's, as a general value of the `Northern People'. Following an extremely pragmatic agenda, to distance the N.L. from mainstream politics, Bossi took advantage of the general discrediting of the internal political system to distance the N.L.

3.6. Modelled on rhetoric of the Venetian and Lombard League, the N.L. based its discourse on simple language and clear and strong slogans that Osvaldo Croci (2001) called the ` *gentese* '. The discourses were also replete with colloquial, jargonistic and aggressive language. This rhetoric was in clear contrast with the normally extremely formal Italian political discourse (Croci 2001).

3.7. The League was composed in part by young and enthusiastic militants, and found support among the small entrepreneurial community due to their platforms for less taxation and bureaucratic efficiency (Diamanti 1993). The campaigns were made on a face-to-face basis, which contrasted to the more distant stance that traditional parties took. As Carlos Ruzza and O. Schmidte (1993) described, the meeting places for the League campaigns could be anywhere, and were normally informal. Places like bars, night clubs and football stadiums, were transformed through rituals into places of dissemination of the League ideals. Moreover, although at the beginning the N.L. was dismissed by the media, with time, Bossi and his protest movement gained an exponential projection in press coverage.

3.8. In 1996 the N.L. changed its political stance, arguing for the total secession of the north of Italy (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001). The `new' imagined nation they wanted to create was called Padania. In September 1996, the N.L. organized a ritual ceremony, and declared the `independence and sovereignty of Padania' near the river Po in the Veneto Region. The threat to the integrity of the Italian national state was now more real.

3.9. The League, however, abandoned the secessionist claim due to its overall lack of support. By 2001 they realigned themselves with their former coalition partners and shared government responsibility.

3.10. However, the League also changed its rhetorical strategy. In the struggle for difference, the League's 2001 campaign recovered old platforms, such as emphasising immigration control, and maintaining local regional power. But a new attitude was adopted towards the E.U. What initially was considered to be a successful and desirable structure was now portrayed as extremely centralized, bureaucratised and corrupt by the N.L. Bossi calls the E.U. the `Soviet Union of Europe' since it overtakes the decision-making powers of regions and nation-states (Giordano 2003). The N.L. has also become a more conservative party. The initial neo-liberal impulses were substituted by an anti-globalization and anti-modernization discourse. Globalisation and modernisation are considered to be the export of the American way of life. More recently, anti-Muslim discourses and parades have emerged.

3.11. Despite the fact that the N.L. is a recent political party, its impact on the Italian social scene has been strong. By highlighting the idea of a pure northern identity, based on the values of hard work and community, the N.L. has been changing the way individuals perceive other individuals. In other words, the rhetoric of the N.L emphasises and gives voice to social differences, through the construction of a set of complex categories and typologies that help to justify their indifference toward the `other'.

Theory and Practice: A Research Proposal

3.12. *"All projecting", Dr. Schutz writes, "consists in an anticipation of future conduct by way of phantasying". In phantasying, I visualize in anticipation the action I am projecting as though it were already performed, completed"* (Natanson 1962: *XXXVIII*).

3.13. I plan to conduct fieldwork in the Region of Veneto. There are several reasons why I chose the Veneto region. So far, the extant studies of the N.L. have drawn attention to the fact that, after 1994, the N.L. has been having problems in gaining votes in urban environments. (Wild 1997, Giordano 1997). However, in the region of Veneto, the N.L. still has a considerable influence in some urban centres such as Vicenza, Treviso, Belluno and Padua. Veneto is one of the richer Italian regions. Its economy is predominantly based on small entrepreneurs and the unemployment rate is low. This is interesting because normally the N.L opposes itself to modernity, supposedly giving voice to the victims of globalisation (Woods 1995). This leads one to question why one would choose a political party that promotes this kind of rhetoric, since its normally taken for granted that anti-immigration discourse is normally strong in areas with higher rates of unemployment.

3.14. Methodologically, studies on the N.L. have focused mainly on interviews, questionnaires, and analyses of party rhetoric (see Diamanti 1993, Giordano 1997, Gilbert and Cento Bull 2001 Gold 2003). I plan to carry out fieldwork for one year. At the core of my research methods will be participant observation, interviews and life stories. Although I plan to combine these research techniques with historical and media records, I will give strong emphasis to the collection of life stories of individuals' engagement and participation in the party. Life stories also give an account of how individuals construct their narrative plot and justify their actions in a specific social setting. In a sense, it allows us to go back in time and perceive the aspects which individuals consider central to their interpretation and construction of their social world; in others words, how they represent causality.

3.15. Life stories, therefore, will shed some light on the process of the creation of `the taken for granted' through experience (agency) or socialization (structure). I expect to see how individuals describe the influence of their previous political experiences, the role of family, friendship, kinship, and social environment, and how this creates an idea of naturality/morality in their options. Moreover, life stories will create the possibility of seeing how people use pre-given categories about the South, immigrants, democracy, participation, family and government. Recalling the thoughts of Schutz, it will allow me to see how individuals represent their experiences and how they construct the typologies of difference when constructing their political narratives. As Michael Carrithers argued:

3.16. *Story telling points to what is perhaps the most powerful human capacity, which is to understand one's own and other moods, plans and beliefs, and the metamorphosis of those mental states, in a long flow of action* (Carrithers, 1992: 74).

3.17. Individual's accounts provided by life stories will also help to make sense of the idea of unity/community, based on an idea of common/similar experiences, since the informants may perceive certain events as important. This is in sharp contrast with the data collected in previous studies, and will allow me to understand the reasons why people choose a political party that, through its anti-democratic rhetoric within a democratic regime, contests the rights of other people.

3.18. Indifference is a mechanism of power, which is resultant of the interpretation of individual experience, and through discursive categories which neglect the individual. As a result, it is important to understand individuals` options and how they are related to social and political structures. In other words, my proposed study will shed some light on how people create, live and justify indifference by understanding the multifaceted relationships that create and justify the social and cultural processes of differentiation.

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