

BOOK REVIEW

Idee di Sardegna. Autonomisti, sovranisti, indipendentisti oggi,

By Carlo Pala. Roma: Carocci editore, 2016. 325p. 32 Euros.

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Idee di Sardegna. Autonomisti, sovranisti, indipendentisti oggi has the great merit of addressing an issue certainly understudied in political science, autonomist and independentist political parties in Sardinia. With the exception of the case of the Lega Nord, Italian academia has only displayed limited interest in subnational mobilization (Petrosino, 1992; Nevola, 2003; Stolfo and Cressati, 2016), and international scholarship of ethno-regionalism in Europe has only rarely systematically addressed the Sardinian case (Roux, 2006; Hepburn, 2009; Hepburn and Elias, 2011). The undeniable societal and political impact these political parties have exercised in Sardinia, and the recent rise and electoral successes of pro-independence parties on the island, renders this book a timely contribution. The author Carlo Pala, himself Sardinian, belongs to a new generation of Italian scholars involved in putting the study of ethno-regionalism on the agenda, arguing against Derek Urwin that this phenomenon is indeed more than a flea-bite (Urwin, 1991; Pala, 2016: 19–27). The book amply proves the interest of studying Sardinian autonomism, not only as a subject on its own, but also for a better understanding of ethno-regionalism on the one hand, the Italian political system on the other.

Idee di Sardegna provides in the first place a study of autonomist and pro-independence parties in Sardinia. It devotes much attention to the Partito Sardo d’Azione, the historically embedded autonomist party founded after the First World War, and outlines both its history and its recent evolution. One of the added values of the volume, however, is its overview of the recently formed pro-sovereignty and pro-independence parties. The book provides an in-depth and theory-informed study of all these parties, and provides for each of them information on their statutes, their membership, their electoral results, their ideology, their strategies and is hence a necessary source of information on all of them. The book outlines how these new parties are informed by a new vision on Sardinia, with an important focus on Sardinian language, culture and identity. They typically distance themselves from nationalism, associated with examples of violent conflicts, particularly the ones that occurred during and after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. While such discourses seem a typical rhetorical dissociation from a concept deemed to have a negative connotation, they also provide a positive message refusing to consider Italy or Italians as enemies. The author points out that the multiplication of these parties may be explained by the factionalism typical of ethno-regionalist parties, since they tend to incorporate activists from different ideological backgrounds. In Sardinia, however, this factionalism seems to have taken very outspoken forms that are in need of further research. The regional electoral system that conditions these parties to ally themselves with national parties appears in the book as one of the major causes of controversies within these parties and hence of their fragmentation.

The book does not only propose an in-depth study of the fragmented universe of pro-autonomy and pro-independence parties on the island, but also embeds its analysis in the literature on the political mobilization of minority nationalities in Europa, as well as in a solid

theoretical framework. The introductory chapters locate the volume within the framework of cleavage theory, and the present European revival of the centre-periphery cleavage (De Winter *et al.*, 2006; Álvarez Pereira *et al.*, 2018; Cetrà and Liñeira, 2018). This framework allows the author to embed his case study in a broader context, and to indicate more precisely the particularities of the Sardinian case. For this purpose, the author gives a brief sketch of the historical origins of the dynamics that have engendered the centre-periphery cleavage in the Sardinian case, and which were originally essentially based on economic issues. The focus of the volume, however, lies on the transformations this cleavage has undergone in recent decades. While the economic focus is still present, cultural and identity issues have acquired from the 1960s a much more prominent position with a focus on the defence of the Sardinian language, now considered to be in danger. Crucial is also an increasingly negative evaluation of the autonomy statute the region acquired after the Second World War, and which is considered insufficient by all autonomist political actors.

The author highlights that in Sardinia the activation of the centre-periphery cleavage has been characterized by its cyclical nature. This is not necessarily a surprising feature, if we interpret ethno-regionalism also as a social movement. The political expression of this cleavage, the electoral results of autonomist and pro-independence parties, have nevertheless been characterized by a particularly high volatility, certainly compared with the electoral trajectories of other ethno-regionalist parties. This raises the question of how these parties are embedded in Sardinian society. The author shows the importance all these parties attribute to membership, which distinguishes them from the presently predominant electoral-professional party model. Further research on how ethno-regionalist parties and ethno-regionalist mobilizations in Sardinia are embedded in society would certainly be welcome. The book already provides indications in this direction, showing how the desire for more autonomy and even independence are strongly present within the Sardinian population.

The author provides also a conceptual clarification of the terminology used to interpret and analyse the goals of ethno-regionalist movements, distinguishing protectionism, autonomism, federalism, independentism, separatism, secessionism, irredentism and annexionism. The only problem with such a clarification is that it is not necessarily very helpful to classify ethno-regionalist parties. These parties often are willfully ambivalent on their ultimate goals. Sardinian parties, as the book shows, are not exceptions to this rule, and the self-presentation of some of these parties as in favour of sovereignty for Sardinia only confirms this point, since the term ‘sovereignty’ is indeed particularly appropriate to maintain this ambivalence.

Idee di Sardegna will for sure in the near future be the standard work for anyone interested in ethno-regionalism in Sardinia, but it is also an exemplar case study that will be a reference for comparisons with other ethno-regionalist movements in Europe. In addition, it provides a perspective from the periphery to the on-going discussion of institutional reform in Italy. Discussions on these reforms tend to take a top-down perspective starting from central problems of governance. The political interest in federalism that characterized the period when the Lega Nord seemed a serious challenge to the Italian state seems to have faded, and recent proposals for institutional reforms in Italy have implicitly or explicitly endorsed re-centralizing tendencies, reinforcing the power of the national executive. Paralleling this trend recent years has also witnessed a certain revival of affirmations of Italian national identity and patriotism. *Idee di Sardegna* shows how, from the perspective of the island, an entirely opposed vision of politics is present where the centralism of the Italian state is perceived as a problem rather than as a solution, and as such the book is a timely warning against the uncritical endorsement of such a centralist perspective.

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