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MARKERS OF DISTINCTIVENESS: ETHNICITY AND CULTURE IN SOUTHERN TYROL

The Paper I am going to present differs in title and content from the one announced in the Conference programme.

Instead of focusing exclusively on cultural policies among the Ladins and specifically on the forms taken by the relationship between 'custom' and 'tradition' in the Val di Fassa, I will conduct a comparative analysis of cultural policies in the Southern Tyrol.

I shall still keep the Ladins at the core of my argument, as the perspective on the ethnic confrontation in Southern Tyrol from that side is heuristically more interesting than the usual, dichotomizing view on 'German' and 'Italian' ethnicity in the area.

In particular, I will illustrate how cultural policies implemented by the German-, the Italian- and the Ladin-speaking groups in the Southern Tyrol are aimed at building 'markers of distinctiveness' singling out in the first instance each ethnic group from the others.

On the other hand, I will show how the German- and the Italian- speaking majorities in the area have to build an altogether different set of boundary-markers vis-a-vis the 'German' and the 'Italian' cultural hinterland laying at their external border.

Such articulation of external- and internal-oriented boundary-marking policies is not to be found among Ladins, who are instead busy building up a consistent set of boundary-markers with regard to both their former fellow Tyroleans and the external world.

That difference will be argued to be due to the different standing of the three ethnic groups within the Southern Tyrolean area on the one hand, and in the context of the Austrian, German and Italian State-formations on the other.

The historical synthesis presented in the first part of the paper will show how the developments of the 'national question' in the XIX century led to the crisis of the time-old Tyrolean cultural *koine* and to the raise of 'ethnicity' as the identification of markers of distinctiveness.

In the Conclusions it will be argued that ethnic boundary-reinforcement, far from being the product of deep cleavages between different cultural formations, is instead

stronger in areas where cultural affinities are to be recorded both in the historical and in the contemporary perspective.

That realization, in turn, calls for a theory of differentiated responses with regard to the problem of how, in an ethnic context involving *both* State-supported and State-less groups, ethnic boundaries are perceived and implemented.

1 – The historical Tyrol as a cultural formation

The Ladins of the Val di Fassa are a *territorial minority* settled in the Southernmost valley departing from the Sella massif at the heart of the Dolomites, in the Eastern Alps.

Following a long process of assimilation by neighbouring German- and Venetic-speaking populations, nowadays only approximately forty-thousand Ladins still speak idioms of the Ladin family: eight thousand of them live in the Val di Fassa,

Although linguistically closely related to the Romance-speakers of the Graubünden in Switzerland and to the Furlan-speakers of Friuli-Venezia Giulia, the Ladins of the Val di Fassa have been adjoined to the multiethnic, multicultural political unit known as the 'historical Tyrol' since the division of the XIII century.

The Tyrol functioned for many centuries as the *trait-d'union* between the Transalpine German and the Cisalpine Italian cultural areas. Located in-between two of the most influential cultural formations in Europe, it was for century a melting pot in which cultural, social and political elements pertaining to the two worlds met, mixed and finally gave birth to a unique, distinctive cultural formation bearing the influence of both the Northern European and the Mediterranean civilizations.

The Church and the Aristocracy moved their personnel between adjacent cultural areas, irrespective of ethnic and linguistic affiliation, so to promote multilingualism amongst the elite in the urban centres.

In the XIV century a wave of migration from Southern Germany brought into the Welschtyrol – i. e. the Venetic-speaking Tyrol – strong contingents of miners who nowadays still constitute German-speaking enclaves in the majority Italian-speaking Province of Trento.

Migrations, linguistic and cultural assimilation, reciprocal influences and other processes of that kind went on for centuries.

Borrowing and lending in all social realms occurred at the intersections – were they of a geographical, historical, political or social nature – between different groups.

Communities that shared the same language might be organized under different principles of political organization, whereas, on the contrary, groups with different ethnic and linguistic ascendancies were brought together under the same political and economical organizations.

Likewise, traditional legal and jural practices brought South of the Alps by German-speaking immigrants, *de facto* survived the attempt by the local authorities to bring the newcomers under the rule of a Roman-type jural system.

The evidence for the persistence through time of a process of exchange of cultural items such as those mentioned above can be gathered at all levels of the social organizational realms.

Moreover, besides the strictly formalized, institutional elements mentioned above, a circulation of cultural traits pertaining in the first instance to the informal areas of

cultural practices went on in the remotest valleys at the periphery of the political and administrative centres located in the lowlands.

Such a process is particularly evident in the case of the Ladins: progressively withdrawing towards the inner core of the Dolomite bastions as the process of assimilation by the dominant cultural areas went on, squeezed in-between the Venetic- and the German-speaking majority, the Ladins forcibly had to assimilate, in turn, traits from both sides of the watershed.

Language itself, with its layers over layers of influences from Rhaetic, 'Celtic', Venetic, German and finally 'Italian' idioms shows the degree of assimilation – both in the active and the passive sense – undergone by the Ladins throughout their history (Heilmann).

In their dealings with their neighbours, the Ladins practiced a high degree of multilingualism: while Ladin was spoken within the valley communities, German and Italian idioms were the linguistic currency on the fringes of the Ladin territory.

Besides exchanges and reciprocal influences at the structural level, borrowing, lending, and 'trading' of cultural traits went on at the level of the superstructural cultural realms between all three linguistic groups.

As I have showed elsewhere, folk mythologies and practices originating in different groups travelled across ethnic and linguistic boundaries, over a vast area progressively including the whole Alpine region and according to a complex network involving linguistic, symbolical and ideological processes (Poppi, 1986).

In synthesis it is possible to talk about a 'Tyrolean Cultural *Koine*' cross-cutting linguistic boundaries, irrespective of what were to become, later on, the markers of ethnicity in the area.

To affirm the existence of a 'Tyrolean Cultural *Koine*' is not to deny differences – say I concede even 'contrasts'? – between different groups in the area.

Differences did in fact exist between what can be – rather vaguely – described as 'Italian' and 'German' cultural formations within the area.

Yet, a clear cut line consistently parting and grouping under a comprehensive cultural and ethnic label – say – social, economical, political and symbolical traits, appears to be rather difficult to draw.

Attempts such as the one conducted by Cole and Wolf (1974) to systematically relate *ethnic* dissonances between 'German' and 'Italian' communities in the Southern Tyrol to a consistent contrastive set of *cultural* traits fall short – in my view – of taking into consideration the vast shadowy area in-between the brightly contrasting overtones where dissonances appear blurred and faded.

As I have argued elsewhere, the pairing of 'ethnicity' and 'culture', that is to say the methodological assumption that they are necessarily and systematically to go together, leads to a vicious circle in which dichotomies in the one area necessarily appear co-terminous and consistent with dichotomies in the related field (Poppi, 1988).

The pairing of the 'ethnic' and of the 'cultural' under the same inventory is the result of specific, historically determined processes and not, *per se*, the sociological property of the relationship between social groups, nevertheless how different.

In the Tyrol, in particular, no 'ethnicity' would have been possible without the rise of the modern State formations North and South of the Alps, and no demand to produce evidence of a distinct 'cultural identity' would have taunted the Ladin social

formation once their fellow Tyroleans were compelled to decide – so to speak – to become either ‘Italians’ or ‘Germans’.

2 – The crisis of Tyrol: nationalism and language

The crisis of the manifold ‘Tyrolean Cultural *Koine*’ outlined above is an historical phenomenon dating back – roughly speaking – to the second half of the nineteenth century, when all over Europe the ‘National Question’ became paramount in the wake of the crisis of the Absolutists State and, for the Tyrol in general, of the Augsburg Empire.

At the time of the Napoleonic campaigns at the end of the XVIII and at the beginning of the XIX century, the Tyrolean peasantry fought the French armies in the name of a united, Roman Catholic and Augsburg-loyal Tyrol.

German-, Ladin- and Italian-speaking Tyroleans fought side by side ‘for the Emperor and the Motherland’ a war that was to be the last to see them united against a common enemy.

In the last quarter of the XIX century the ferments of nationalism started penetrating the Tyrol, reshuffling the balance of loyalty from the Tyrol to ideas of *Italianita* and *Deutschtum*.

Overall, while the German-speaking peasantry soon came to somewhat identify the Tyrolean cause with the pan-Germanist ‘National Question’, in the Welschtyrol – that is to say in the Southern areas where Venetic idioms of the Italian family were spoken- it was above all the newly-born Italian entrepreneurial bourgeoisie (and to an extent the numerically even weaker urban working class) that saw in the Italian cause of national unification a chance to get rid of the political and economical burdens of the Augsburg Empire.

In the Welschtyrol the rural population remained largely either untouched by nationalist propaganda of both sides, or else clinged to the idea of a unified Tyrol loyal to the Augsburg.

As nationalist militants started coupling nationalism *and* ethnicity, so to suggest a partition of the area according to national-ethnic lines, a ‘scramble for the Ladins’ began, both sides arguing that the Ladins were in fact either Italian or German ‘hybrids’.

It is not possible to follow here the complex arguments put forward by both sides in their claims, nor time allows to enter into details concerning the often confused and contradictory relation the Ladins entertained with German and Italian nationalism.

Suffice it to say that in view of the partition the Ladins were the last in Southern Tyrol to give up hopes of and claims to an undivided Tyrol, as that appeared to be the only way to avoid being partitioned into separate administrative autonomous units (Alcock 1970, Palla 1987, Richebuono).

Those hopes and those claims came to nothing: nowadays the Ladins of the Dolomites are split within two Regions and three Provinces, two of the latter being Autonomous Provinces with special provisions and statutes to ward off interference by the State and by the neighbouring administrative units.

For the purposes of the present paper it is noticeable that since the very beginning the question of the national affinities of ethnic groups in Southern Tyrol took the form of a debate on language.

The 'national nature' of the language spoken by the various communities in South Tyrol was taken as the objective, watertight proof of their ethnic (and therefore 'national') identity.

Nationalist vindications had it easy to argue that the German- and Italian- idioms spoken in the Tyrol were the ultimate markers of distinction, so that the new national boundaries had to be drawn accordingly.

'Language' as the most abstract, time-persistent cultural trait was taken as the living evidence of the national affinities of the communities under dispute.

Linguists became busy working out 'language' as the foremost bearer of national consciousness. In the years leading to the First World War the issue of which language ought to be taught in the State-financed schools of the Welschtyrol became one of paramount importance.

But what about Ladin? Was it simply one amongst many of the Italian dialects, was it a language in its own right, or was it rather an ancient language heavily influenced by either Italian or German, so to legitimize the incorporation of its speakers within either nation-State?

When in 1873 a leading linguist thoroughly argued that Ladin idioms were to be considered as belonging to a distinct language-family of the Neo-Latin kind, the foundations for a distinct 'Ladin identity' in the terms posited by the very historical situation were cast (Ascoli 1873).

Thus, the Ladins could finally legitimize their presence — and future historical destiny within the contending State-formations — as an autonomous, distinct ethnic group.

It is not by chance that Article Six of the Italian Republican Constitution talks about minorities in Italy — and their right to have their needs acknowledged and tutelated by the State — in terms of '*linguistical minorities*'.

The very fact that the 'ethnic' — or the 'cultural' — labels do not figure in the provisions of the State for the minorities living within its administrative territory tells a great deal about the way boundaries are drawn and distinct social groupings are single out.

Such point of view is nowadays proper of the attitude the three ethnic groups show toward the maintenance and the implementation of language as the chief marker of identity.

Indeed, the right to use German as an official language in all sectors of the Public Administration, including the judiciary, has been one of the most disputed issues of the complex package of autonomy rights acknowledged by the Italian State to the Province of Bozen.

Likewise, in their turn, the Ladins of the Province of Trento are busy claiming full educational public services in Ladin so to match the situation of their fellow-Ladins of the Province of Bozen, where rights to education in Ladin have been granted to a greater extent.

In a situation of relative cultural homogeneity, as it was the case in Southern Tyrol in the last century, 'language' provided the clearest-cut, less controversial and controvertible marker of a distinct identity.

Once that major, most visible boundary, had been put firmly into place at the borders between the outer- and the inner-group, then the road was paved leading to the implementation of a number of other similar markers of ethnicity.

3 – Cultural policies, ethnicity and culture in Southern Tyrol

One of the major consequences of the recognition by the Italian State of the ethnic character of the Trentino-South Tyrol, culminating in the arrangements of the Post World War II period that granted a large degree of autonomy for the Provinces of Trento and Bozen, was the planning and the implementation of cultural policies aimed at stressing in the first place the distinctiveness of each Province vis-a-vis the other.

Moreover, the majority groups having as their political, economical and geographical background a fully developed Nation-State – that is to say the Trentini and the South Tyrolians – developed cultural policies aimed at differentiating themselves from the bulk of their fellow speakers to the North and the South of the watershed. The markers of cultural and ethnic identity presented to *internal* and *external* referents are built of different materials in a way consistent with the direction of their aim.

The German-speaking majority in the Province of Bozen appeals to its German affinities in vindicating autonomy from the central administration. In so doing it has sought throughout the difficult phase of the negotiations of the autonomy package the support of the Austrian State and of German cultural associations by appealing to German international cultural solidarity.

Historical and cultural allegiances to- and affinities with the German world are also put forward when justifying the attitudes, of separatedness and distinction vis-a-vis the former Welschtyrolians fellows in the Province of Trento.

At the same time, on the other hand, the image of the South Tyrol promoted in the German cultural world is that of a distinct cultural formation not to be merged with the 'German' world at large.

Following the post-War reconstruction of the local economy, tourism in the Alps has emerged as the most viable alternative to the irreversible crisis of mountain economy.

Nowadays, the income from tourist activities and what is left of the traditional mountain economy (itself linked double-way to the fortunes of the tourist industry), has made of the former Tyrol one of the highest pro-capita income areas of Europe (Lichtenberger 1975).

The image of a culturally and historically distinct Tyrol is promoted as an additional arrow, not devoided of political implications, to the bow of the local tourist industry in folklore, architecture, music, the mass media and the like.

For the South Tyrolians, 'Tyrol' is still today a powerful marker of a distinct cultural formation, firmly entrenched within the cultural mythologies of the German mainland and leisure industry as the Southern Land of Sun, Mountains and Jodeln.

Thus, the *ethnic* Tyrol, as it appears nowadays on the cultural map of Europe, is rather different from the *historical* Tyrol.

It in fact includes the Ost-, the Nord- and the South Tyrol, that is to say the German-speaking sections alone of what constituted in the past the unified Tyrol inclusive of the Welschtyrol.

The reshaping of the frontier between the Italian and the Austrian nation-States has – so to speak – handed over the notion of an historical, political and administrative Tyrol to a new identity, defined by its *ethnic* character, whereby by 'ethnic' is to be understood its allegiance to the German cultural world.

South of the provincial border between Bozen and Trento the presentation of

cultural identity toward the *external* and the *internal* frontiers varies accordingly, although it does take over different contents.

With regard to their Sudtiroler neighbours the Trentini stress their affinities with the Italian cultural hinterland.

Yet, the preoccupation to avoid being confused and merged with a different cultural and ethnic unit comes for the Trentini not so much by the confrontation with their German-speaking neighbours, as language alone is there to ward intruders off the borderline.

Rather, their concern is to differentiate themselves from their neighbours to the South – the 'Italians' properly understood, whose language and culture show a great deal of continuity with their own.

The effort to create a distinguished 'Trentino cultural identity' cannot rely entirely upon the claim to *ethnic* distinctiveness, as far too obvious would be in that case the historical – and therefore ethnically speaking rather dubious – nature of the Southern boundary of the Province.

Were the claim to autonomy made to rest entirely upon 'ethnic' arguments, as it is feasible in the case of the German-speakers of Sudtiroil, the very foundations of the autonomist ideology would be seriously threatened.

Under such conditions, the reasons put forward by the Trentini for their autonomist claims are mainly of a 'cultural' nature.

In recent years, the Provincial Administration of Trento has been implementing an image of the Trentino as 'a bridge across Europe'. On a number of official speeches and publications the Trentino has been described as 'the heart of Mitteleuropa' – the middle section of the European territory where German; Italian and Slav cultural traditions met and mingled for centuries.

Whether or not such image – and the numerous cultural initiatives of a political and cultural nature that go with that – do in fact correspond to a rather optimistic idea about the placement of the heart in the Mitteleuropean organism (or less) is a matter that does not concern this paper.

For the present purposes what is relevant is that no mention of the 'Tyrol' is currently made in the official political and cultural discourses of the Province of Trento.

Firmly entrenched within the Italian State formation and yet in need to legitimize its claim to autonomy, the Trentino ideology claims its own cultural distinctiveness by representing the area as a transnational, culturally 'mitteleuropean' formation.

'Tyrol' as a marker of distinctiveness is bypassed altogether – handed over to the German-speaking neighbours who have vindicated (an won) its symbolical implications on ethnic grounds as their own. Cultural policies in Trentino jump across regional issues altogether and go straight for the big, European target, vindicating for the Trentino a leading role as the forerunner of a future European integration.

What constitutes the mark of distinction of Trentino vis-a-vis the bulk of the Italian speaking cultural formation, is thus not its role within a multi-ethnic, historical Tyrol, but rather more ambitiously its role within Europe, historically legitimized – it might be added – by the period of Augsburg domination when Trentino, far from being the heart, was indeed the Southern frontier of the Empire.

We have so far briefly analyzed the state of the matter with regard to the claim to the recognition of distinctiveness of the two majority groups within the Trentino.

Sudtiroi.

We have noticed that the division of the ethnic labour prompts Trentini and Sudtiroi to play a double-hedged game according to whether a distinct identity is to be vindicated at the *internal* or at the *external* boundary.

In that respect, the case of the Ladins is somewhat different.

Unlike German- and Italian-speakers they have no National State to whom they can call upon to see their claims to autonomy recognized and implemented.

The appeals put forward by the Ladins of the Dolomites, and more specifically by the Ladins of the Val di Fassa, to international agencies – such as the European Court in Bruxelles and the United Nations – have had no practical results.

Moreover, the fact that they enjoy different degrees of tutelage in the three Provinces between which they have been partitioned (a tutelage that comes to nothing at all in the Province of Belluno) does not help to create a common policy toward the reinforcement of the ethnic boundary.

While in the Province of Bozen the full recognition of the *ethnic* status of the administrative area had to forcibly take the 'Ladin Question' into account in view of regulating the relations between the German- and the Italian-speaking majority groups, in the Province of Trento the existence of an *ethnic* question was never acknowledged despite Ladin efforts to do so.

Having failed to obtain their objectives many times over, the Ladins were left with the problem of creating – each valley community on its own account – their own territorial, cultural and ethnic boundaries since none was provided by State sanctioned policies.

Somewhat contented with the umbrella provided by the Sudtiroler Volkspartei – the interclassist, majority political party that has fought for the recognition of the rights of the German-speakers in Sudtiroi in exchange for Ladin political loyalty – the Ladins in the Bozen Province have to a large extent dropped their claims to full Ladin autonomy or unification.

The valleys of Gardens, Badia and Marebbe, although threatened of fast assimilation by the ever-expanding German influence in the area – have found their ethnic identity granted by definition and sanctioned by law in the set of provisions made for them at the Provincial level.

Elsewhere, in Fassa, Livinallongo and Cortina d'Ampezzo, the claim to distinctiveness and the fight for recognition have no institutional grounding, and are therefore entirely a matter of local militant cultural policies aimed at reinforcing and implementing those markers of ethnicity that nobody is prepared to take for granted.

While the Ladins of the Bozen Province have no problems in being acknowledged as a separate group by their German speaking-neighbours who are only too eager to grant the Ladins a high ethnic profile so as to reinforce *their own* claims to autonomy, the Ladins of the Val di Fassa must in the first place reinforce the boundaries of ethnic distinctiveness as their Venetic- and Italian-speaking neighbours are not prepared to acknowledge their existence as a separate group.

In the post-World War Two period, the struggle for recognition in the Val di Fassa has been conducted on a number of different issues.

In the first place there has been the struggle over language and education. Since 1976 the Provincial Administration has agreed to make Ladin the first language in kindergartens and to provide a weekly hour of teaching of 'Ladin Language and Culture' in primary schools. The Ladin political organization is now claiming the

extension of the weekly lesson, having as the ultimate objective the recognition of Ladin as *the* teaching language in primary schools.

A number of steps have been taken to boost Ladin out of the ghetto of primary linguistical intercourse at the level of the family and the village so to grant it the status of an official language.

Besides private initiative to name houses, hotels, shops and other public places with Ladin names, town councils in the Valley have now restored Ladin toponyms in road signalling. Ladin toponyms will also figure in the forthcoming official map of the Province of Trento.

The revival of the 'Ladin Question' at the grassroot level is most noticeably illustrated by the reappraisal of practices pertaining to popular culture that had become obsolete in the period after the II World War, when the Valley underwent a series of major, dramatic social and economic changes.

As I have analysed elsewhere (Poppi 1983, 1 & 2), folk calendrical events such as the Carnival are being deliberately revived by institutional and semi-institutional agencies and associations aiming at bringing back the 'authentic' traits of 'Ladin Culture'.

What survived the process of social and economic change in the form of *customary* practices, themselves constantly changed and adapted to meet the requirements of new social contexts, is now being reshaped to produce a distinct, supposedly 'unchanged' and therefore 'authentic' *traditional* Ladin culture.

During the crowded winter and summer tourist seasons the Valley becomes a stage upon which Ladins perform rituals of cultural authenticity representing elements of the 'traditional' way of life, mythology and folklore, so to build the boundaries of ethnic distinctiveness otherwise blurred and overshadowed by the growth of a tourist industry that has assimilated the Val di Fassa to the social landscape of European holiday resorts.

In that sense 'ethnicity' is increasingly more a matter of *representation*: elements of the precontemporary way of life, wiped off the scene by the process of social and economic change, are re-produced and presented as specifically 'Ladin'.

In general, the adjective '*Ladin*' has come to qualify and designate objects and practices previously devoided of ethnic significance: architectural and artistic styles in painting and carving, cooking recipes, Carnivals and Masks have all come to bear the mark of ethnic distinctiveness.

The process through which ethnicity becomes a *subject of representation* was most clearly displayed during the 1986 pan-Ladin parade held in Ortisei to celebrate the 'Second Ladin Millennium'.

On that occasion, episodes of 'Ladin' history from the Roman Conquest to the present were staged and paraded in the streets side-by-side with scenes from Ladin mythology and folk practices. 'Ladin Cultural Identity' come to the forefront in the form of symbolical – and therefore representable – markers of distinctiveness, so to support the claim to recognition in face – and in spite of – the Italian- and the German-speaking majorities in the region.

As the older generations, still loyal to the idea of a bygone, unified Tyrol, slowly give way to younger Ladin generations, the identification of the Ladins with the historical Tyrol weakens.

The need for a distinct, unique and exclusive identity promotes *ethnicity* as a comprehensive system of boundary markers encompassing all fields of social life.

The very fact that language as the safest and foremost of such boundary markers is itself under threat by the infiltration in all areas of social intercourse, calls for reinforcement from all quarters.

Yet, the process of homogenization to the world at large that changed the social and economic scene of the Valley in the last fifty years or so, renders the task rather tantalizing.

Under such circumstances a realm of 'Ladin Culture', representable and re-producible at will, is created and shaped after those amongst the traits of the traditional culture that are available to such treatment.

Unlike their German- and Italian-speaking neighbours, the Ladins have no need to differentiate the implementation of boundary-markers according to whether they are meant for the 'internal' or for the 'external' frontier.

Forced by historical circumstances to give up the only goal that might have saved them from partition – i. e. the idea of a unified Tyrol – and confronted with the fact that that very idea had been appropriated by their German-speaking neighbours and set at their external frontier, the Ladins could do no better than playing the game along and search for *their own* markers of distinctiveness.

Unlike their Italian- and German-speaking neighbours, the Ladins do not have to face the homogenizing pressures coming from the national-State cultural hinterland.

The building of the ethnic frontier demands a thoroughly consistent, unitary set of markers warding off – so to speak – all intruders, irrespective of ethnic affinities.

Yet, the pervasive, encompassing assimilation of Ladin culture and society to the World System – ever stronger in view of the growth of the tourist industry – finds the Ladins in want of a specific, clear-cut cultural identity to set at the ethnic borders.

Nor can they, following their luckier neighbours, monopolize historical and national ascendancies appropriated by the nation-States backing the demands of their respective minorities at the borders.

The Ladins can thus only resort to a pool of internal resources, that is to say to the re-presentation and the re-production of cultural traits that the very same historical process leading to the collapse of Tyrolean inter-ethnic identity has disposed of.

4 – Conclusions

In recent years literature on ethnicity has increasingly focused its attention onto a series of phenomena having to do with the search for 'cultural distinctiveness' (Peterson Royce 1982, Gross 1978, Gubert 1976 – the latter with specific reference to ethnic identity in the Trentino-South Tyrol).

The effort produced by minority groups to retain, implement or even create anew a distinctive *image* of their culture, vis-a-vis the surrounding majority society, is specifically recorded in situations of ethnic confrontation in which marks of distinction are a necessary requisite to legitimize claims to various forms of tutelage and positive discrimination from the State and its agencies.

The promotion of 'cultural distinctiveness' is moreover proper of ethnic contexts in which the level of the conflict is relatively low.

Low conflict levels, in turn, seem to be proper of situations in which a relatively high degree of social, economical and political homogeneity between ethnic groups is to be found.

When and where the ethnic struggle does not take the form of a struggle against

ethnic *discrimination*, there each ethnic minority – paradoxically as it might sound – conducts a struggle for the *recognition* of its distinctiveness and separatedness from both other minorities and the non-ethnic majority.

In other words: once the process of economic, political, and cultural assimilation within the wider societal frame has done away with the very foundations of negative discrimination by rubbing off, so to speak, all (or many) ethnic distinctive characteristics at the cultural level, then a new phase of the ethnic struggle begins.

Not only the markers of ethnic distinction – or, rather, what is left of them – are once again brought to the forefront, but claims are also put forward for them to be acknowledged by the State, in turn called upon to implement policies of *positive discrimination*, so that the markers of distinction themselves might be salvaged from ultimate assimilation.

As the case of the Ladins of the Val di Fassa illustrates, the need for 'cultural distinctiveness' is the direct result of the process of integration (and assimilation) of the minority group within the majority society, or, rather, of the threat that the process posits for the survival of the Ladin social formations as a distinct unit within the Trentino-South Tyrol region.

As it has been observed, the growth of an ethnic awareness and the ensuing struggle for recognition under circumstances leading to increasing assimilation and homogenization between the in- and out-group, is directly proportional to the degree of integration reached by the minority group itself (Allardt 1979: 48).

That type of remark works as a corollary to the by now seemingly widely shared view that

'...ethnicity can only happen at the boundary of 'us', in contact or confrontation or by contrast with 'them'.' (Wallman 1979: 3, but also – of course – Barth 1969).

Following that view of ethnicity as an interactive, relational social phenomenon, more recent literature has analysed the relationship between ethnicity and the rise of the modern Nation State, pointing out that the one is unthinkable without the other (Gellner).

The case of the ethnic confrontation in Southern Tyrol confirms both theories of ethnicity: Italian-, German- and Ladin-speaking groups, having shared for centuries many cultural traits, at the end of the XIX century parted ways under the influence of the impending National question.

From then onwards a rush started towards the appropriation of cultural traits claimed to be exclusive and unique of each group, to be set at the borders as markers of ethnicity.

Yet, as we have seen, the German- and the Italian-speaking group are implementing a differentiated policy of distinctiveness according to whether such markers are to be set at the internal or at the external frontier.

The Ladins, on the contrary, are implementing a thoroughly consistent policy of distinctiveness.

The difference is due to the different relationship that the three ethnic groups maintain toward their neighbours on the one hand and the hinterland represented by the Italian and Austrian nation-State, (and by the Italian and German cultural areas at large) on the other.

The existence of such an articulation suggests that the nature of the relationship

between the contending groups *as well as* the nature of the relationship between them and the Nation State formation are crucial in determining which markers of distinctiveness – amongst many – will be selected in the process of boundary-marking.

If the formation of a realm in which the 'us' and the 'them' can be singled out as different is a result of the historical process, then it must also be argued that ethnicity in that sense is not simply the result of that process, but also a function of the different institutional nature – be it a Nation-State or a State-less community – that the 'us' and the 'them' take over as the process moves on.

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