
Neo-fascist mobilization in contemporary Italy. Ideology and repertoire of action of CasaPound Italia.

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Abstract

Although the most researched extreme right actors take the form of political parties, social movements research has recently started analysing extreme right organizations that go beyond ordinary politics and that take the form of 'groupuscular' organizations. However, most existing contributions rely on secondary data and focus mainly on public networks and online activism of extreme right actors and their strategies of action. Very few ethnographic studies of extreme right social movements exist with the result that we still need a deeper understanding of their off-line mobilization, ideological discourse and militancy and how these in turn interact with the choice of specific repertoires of action. In this framework, the aim of this paper is to present the findings of a research project that explored dynamics of militant participation and forms of activism promoted by a neo-fascist organization: CasaPound Italia. Combining ethnography, semi-structured interviews and content analysis, we analyse the communicative, organizational and ideological nature of CasaPound's political engagement, and its heterogeneous, unconventional *melange* of political references, communication strategies and choices of protest action.

Keywords: CasaPound, ethnography, neo-fascism, social movements, political violence.

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Introduction

While most research on right-wing extremism focuses on political parties, their ideologies and electoral constituencies a number of social movement studies has recently addressed extreme right³ politics outside the institutional arena, investigating street-based ‘groupuscular’ organizations: the “lunatic fringe” (Camus 2007, 103) of this broad and controversial political family. Yet, most of this scholarship had to rely on secondary data due to the understandable challenges of approaching extreme right groups for field research and/or those originating from the complete lack of ‘political affinity’ between the researcher and the object of research (Blee 2003). As a result, when approaching groupuscular organizations of the extreme right, existing contributions tackle primarily their online activism and publicly visible activities (Caiani and Parenti 2013), whereas there are almost no direct ethnographic investigations of militancy and mobilization *within* these type of groups⁴. Although often valuable to study the public networks and online activism of extreme right actors, secondary data can say very little on the symbolic processes and actual practices of militancy among extreme right activists. Ethnography, instead, is probably the most appropriate research method for understanding how grievances are translated into public claims, observing how collective action is developed, sustained and discursively represented in extreme right organizations (Blee 2007; Di Nunzio and Toscano 2011; Koch 2013).

³ In the paper we use the terms “radical right” and “extreme right” interchangeably. In the literature the first one refers to actors that ‘oppose’ the Constitution but run for elections. The second to organizations that are ‘hostile’ to the Constitution and can hence be banned (Mudde 2000; 12). As a matter of fact CasaPound appears to be a combination of the two. On the one hand, it makes ideological reference to Italian fascism (although the “apology of fascism” is forbidden by the Italian Constitution) while at the same time running for elections.

⁴ See for exceptions: Blee 2007; Di Nunzio and Toscano 2011; and Bouron 2014. According to Caiani, della Porta and Wagemann (Caiani et al. 2012; p. 9-13) for long time social movements literature has focused exclusively on left-wing libertarian actors, leaving the ‘extreme right side’ of social movements mobilization relatively underexplored.

With the goal of contributing to the growing literature on the social movement side of extreme right politics, in 2012 we developed an ethnographic study in CasaPound Italia (Albanese et al. 2014), analysing the militancy, and mobilization strategies of a neo-fascist organization. The main objective of the project was to explore the relationship between the group and historical Fascism, the interpretation of the European crisis and the propensity to violence. The research team was composed of researchers from different disciplines in the social sciences, reflecting our ambition to bridge approaches derived from historiography, anthropology and political science.⁵ The project was composed of three work-packages corresponding to the mixed-methods, pluralist approach promoted by the research group that will be detailed in the next sections.

CasaPound Italia (CPI) is today the most visible neo-fascist organization in Italy, and probably one of the most visible extreme right movements in Western Europe. It first appeared as a groupuscular organization in 2002, when a group of young activists managed to squat a building in the city centre of Rome, and then progressively captured public attention in Italy and abroad. As a result, despite counting only a few thousands active militants, CasaPound today regularly runs candidates in local elections, it organizes national demonstrations and it has developed a joint strategy with one of the most electorally relevant populist party at the national level, the Northern League (NL). As will be discussed, CasaPound's mobilisation is one in which a public rhetoric based on a careful selection of elements from the Italian fascist doctrine is mixed with action and communication repertoires largely inspired by the radical left social movements of the 1990s. The distinctive feature of CPI – or “the fascist of the third millennium”, as they refer to themselves – is its use of unconventional, showcase forms of protests, combined with a

⁵ The project was initiated in 2012 and mainly based at the European University Institute. The members are: Dr. Matteo Albanese (ICS, University of Lisbon); Dr. Giorgia Bulli (University of Florence); Dr. Pietro Castelli Gattinara (University of Leicester) and Dr. Caterina Froio (University of Paris II).

rather original symbolic repertoire, at least for an extreme right organization. In so doing, CasaPound has successfully managed to construct its own, self-styled activism, which the mass media can now easily recognize and reproduce (Bouron and Froio 2014).

Despite the limited number of supporters, CPI enjoys important visibility in Italy and in the European extreme-right subcultural milieu. Observers interpret CPI's popularity as the result of "specificities" of CPI's activism (Bartlett et al. 2012). Until the late 2000s, the group was mainly engaged in expressive activities aiming at developing its network of associations and headquarters. At the same time, it emancipated itself from the existing actors of the Italian extreme right arena, and started gaining the attention of national media for its unconventional actions (squats) and uncommon blurring of symbols (Che Guevara and Mussolini). Besides that, media attention was driven by the groups' provocative political rhetoric and its frequent violent confrontation with left-wing and anti-fascist social movements. At the international level, CasaPound earned the headlines in 2011, when one of its sympathizers killed 2 Senegalese street vendors in Florence before committing suicide. In the following years, the group was involved in a number of showcase events, which increased in rate and visibility as the Italian political and economic crisis unfolded. After a sudden and unsuccessful attempt to build its independent electoral platform, from 2014 onwards the group is increasingly associated with the campaign activities of the vehemently Eurosceptics of Northern League. Hence, today CasaPound is split between the 'official' endorsement by one of the main actors in the Italian party system, and its persistent propensity to political violence which led to numerous violent confrontations with anti-fascist and the police in January 2015. CasaPound's ambivalence between conventional and violent politics and its unconventional communication strategies have captured the attention of journalists and researchers.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we provide background information about the research project, discussing the research design and the methodological choices of our work. Subsequently, we outline the landmarks of CasaPound's recent history, summarizing the main features of the group, and describing its specificities in terms of organizational structure and ideology. We will focus on the aspects of CasaPound that, in our opinion, have contributed to its emergence as the most prominent radical right actor in contemporary Italy: the political tactics mixing innovation and tradition in terms of semiology and campaign topics, the ambiguous relationship with violence, and the ability to balance between institutional and protest politics. In the final section, we discuss the implications of the recent choices of the group, before drawing some conclusive remarks and pave the way for future comparative investigations in this field.

Research and methods

Although the most researched extreme right actors take the form of political parties (see Mudde 2007), social movements research has recently started analysing extreme right organizations that go beyond ordinary politics and that take the form of 'groupuscular' organizations (Klandermans and Mayer 2006). In this framework, however, most existing contributions rely on secondary data and focus mainly on public networks and online activism of extreme right actors and their strategies of action (Caiani et al. 2012; Caiani and Parenti 2013). Very few ethnographic studies of extreme right social movements exist with the result that we still need a deeper understanding of their off-line mobilization, ideological discourse and militancy and how these in turn interact with the choice of specific repertoires of action. In this framework, our principal aim was to understand the dynamics of militant participation and forms of activism promoted by CasaPound. Our goal was to uncover the communicative, organizational and ideological nature of CasaPound's political

engagement, and its heterogeneous, unconventional *melange* of political references, communication strategies and choices of protest action. Following the typology suggested by Mudde (2000, 12) CPI may be qualified as a neo-fascist organization which refers to historical (Italian) Fascism as its major ideological source.

The focus on CasaPound Italia was motivated by the wide recognition of the originality and timeliness of the group's action strategy, which differentiates it from other political groups of the same area. On the one hand, there is CasaPound's public rejection of 'partisan' forms of organization and its propensity towards 'social movement' activism. On the other, there is the group's undeniable ability to construct its own recognisability in the public sphere, especially if one takes into account the objectively limited size of the organization. In a few years, CasaPound was able to attract the attention not only of scholars and experts of radical politics, but also of the mass media and the public in general. For large shares of the Italian public opinion, CasaPound is by now unequivocally associated to its official symbol (the 'turtle') and label ('fascists of the third millennium').

Within the broad panorama of the European extreme right, CasaPound aims to represent (and it is also recognized as) an innovative 'example' not only from the point of view of its ideology, but also in terms of its organizational structures and action repertoires. Above all, other extreme right groups recognize CasaPound's ability to locate itself at the crossroads between institutional and protest politics. Although the leaders of CasaPound are very keen to discursively differentiate their organization from political parties, in fact, they also explicitly reject being identified with social movements. If CasaPound challenges the perceived 'rigidity' of official parties and the bureaucratic nature of their internal structures, it also defies the 'horizontal' nature of political participation characterizing social movement organizations.

From an ideological point of view, CasaPound's profile is built upon the strategic selection of key elements of historical Fascism, with particular attention being devoted to its socioeconomic dimension (Castelli Gattinara et al. 2013). Above all is the critique of usury derived from Ezra Pound, and the study of intellectual figures associated with the 'social' dimension of Fascism and neo-Fascism. The framework is the refusal of neoliberal economic theories and the neo-nationalist defence of workers' rights. Yet, the group is very keen at addressing symbols and practices that are generally considered distant from the extreme right culture. This 'recuperation' and 'appropriation' schemes are also applied to figures and practices traditionally associated with left-wing culture, and appear to be strongly influenced by the group's anticipation of the 'newsworthiness' of its own communication strategies.

In order to approach CasaPound's activism and rhetoric in all its complexity, we looked at the group from different angles with the goal of uncovering different aspects of radical right politics. Primarily, we approached CasaPound in the framework of the crisis of traditional forms of political participation, investigating the ability of the group to mobilize citizens and promote their civic engagement. In a second phase, we focused on the ideological platform of CasaPound, distinguishing the elements that correspond to the self-definition as "fascists of the third millennium" from the traits that are more common within groups and organizations in this political area. Third, we looked at the identitarian dimension of CasaPound politics, investigating identity-building practices and looking at the construction of emotions and comradeship.

In so doing, this research project was built upon a threefold set of work-packages, corresponding to the mixed-methods, multidisciplinary approach promoted by the research group. This research contributed to bridging methods pertaining to the historiographic and ethnographic tradition in the social sciences, with quantitative and qualitative content-

analytical techniques for the study of political activism. The pluralist nature of our research design is associated to an innovative conceptual approach to the study of extreme right politics. This implies an understanding of CasaPound's political activity as a multi-layer structure of activities, discourse and practices of mobilization, including (but not limited to) the more visible electoral politics.

In order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of activism within groupuscular organizations and subcultural milieus, one has to distinguish three dimensions by which the group interacts with the outside world. At a first level is the public discourse, which one can analyse starting from online material and the public activities and events organized by the group. At an intermediate level there is the discourse that the organization constructs for its members and for the outside world alike, which has emerged from the in-depth interviews with the leaders and militants of the organization. Finally, there is a dimension that is 'exclusive' to group-members only and that is generally precluded from external observers, which can only be approached in terms of ethnographic observation. In our research, the "triangulation" of research methodologies and data sources (Della Porta and Keating 2008) has allowed to investigate discourses and practices by which the organization addresses external and/or internal audience (Castelli Gattinara and Froio 2014). This conceptual and methodological distinction is particularly fruitful for the study of extreme organizations given the legal constraints (and close discursive opportunities) for political expression of these type of actors (Koopmans and Olzak 2004).

Accordingly, the main work-package of the research were nineteen in-depth interviews granted to the authors between February and November 2012. The interviews were conducted in the headquarters of CasaPound across five Italian cities (Florence, Turin, Verona, Rome, and Naples), they were recorded and lasted on average between one and a half hours and two hours. Additional conversations with militants and sympathizers of

CasaPound took place during ethnographic sessions. Life-histories constituted a hermeneutical mode of understanding militancy (Linden and Klandermans 2007) and public discourse on salient political issues. Hence, in our research interviews provide a frame of reference for investigating group understanding of external reality and political action.

This material was complemented by ethnographic sessions at conferences, celebrations, concerts and demonstrations organized by CasaPound. Access to these events was negotiated with CasaPound leaders at the national and local level, and all the activists involved in the research were informed of our position as researchers and of the main objectives of the research. Of course, we participated exclusively to legal events, in which we could confront with sympathizers and militants of CasaPound without being ‘monitored’ from local cadres and leaders. The direct experience of interaction with militants at rallies, concerts and sports events allowed to reconstruct the processes by which collective emotions are built in the group, investigating their expression in the codes of CasaPounds’ subcultures. At the same time, the ethnographic experience was important in assessing the extent to which the external discourse is internalized by militants and supporters. This data was then combined with the qualitative content analysis of text material produced by the group, such as propagandistic documents, books, and leaflets, as well as song lyrics which previous literature indicates as a fundamental element for the definition of collective identity in groupuscular organizations of the extreme right (Mudde 2000; Brown and Dobrin 2004).⁶ This material was collected during the ethnographic study and complemented with documents retrieved online during 2013 and 2014. The third work-package involved the exploration of CasaPound’s mobilization based on the quantitative

⁶ In particular, we analyze the lyrics of songs from *ZetaZeroAlfa*, the music band of “identitarian rock” founded and headed by CasaPound’s leader Gianluca Iannone.

content analysis of mass media reports of their ‘protest events’ and ‘claims’ (Castelli Gattinara and Froio 2014). Similar to previous studies on the transformation of European political systems (Kriesi, 2013) and extreme right mobilization (Caiani et al. 2012), we recognized that political competition is increasingly transferred to the public sphere, and analysed political statements and protest action through the coverage they received in the mass media. In particular, we focused on ‘protest events’ and ‘claims’ by extreme right-wing actors in Italy over the last 20 years, e.g. since when data exists.

CasaPound Italia: Origins and Ideology

CasaPound Italia describes itself as a ‘fascist movement’. Its identity is rooted in the Italian fascist tradition, from which the group derives its “revolutionary” style. The goals and actions of the group are openly inspired by the Italian fascist ideology: CPI claims its legacy in the fascist ‘social doctrine’ and interprets its self styled neo-fascism on the basis of a carefully selected share of the social legislation produced by the fascist regime (Castelli Gattinara et al. 2013).

Despite the stated admiration of CasaPound for Italy’s fascist past and neo-fascist tradition, however, the group rejects to self-identify on the basis of the traditional ‘left-wing’ and ‘right-wing’ categories. Instead, it builds its political narrative upon the framework of the so-called “metapolitics”: a counter-cultural power for which, similar to Gramscian approaches to politics, cultural change is expected to precede political change (Toscano and Di Nunzio 2012; Albanese et al. 2014). This is also confirmed by the groups’ preferred modes of activism, which encompasses (but also goes far beyond) formal political engagement and traditional electoral politics. On the contrary, CasaPound engages in a number of different arenas, and makes use of a repertoire of action including demonstrative and protest actions,

expressive events, unauthorized marches, squats, riots and violent clashes with opponents and public authorities.

In order to understand CasaPound's heterogeneous mobilization strategies, one must go back to the origins of the group. Although the group took the official denomination of *CasaPound Italia* (CPI), and registered its public status as 'association for social promotion' only in 2008, the real birthdate of the organization is December 26th, 2003. On that day, a group of disenfranchised extreme right activists seizes an abandoned building in the core of Rome's Chinatown, with the stated goal of converting it to housing purposes. That was the first of CasaPound's occupations of empty buildings for the purpose of housing (*Occupazioni a Scopo Abitativo, OSA*).

Since its very origins, therefore, the group stood out for its attention to the issue of affordable housing, engaging primarily in struggles on the social and cultural right to adequate shelter for Italian families.⁷ As a matter of fact, the name of the group is composed of two elements: "Pound", with reference to the American poet Ezra Pound who supported Mussolini's dictatorship (Redman 1991), and "Casa", the Italian for "house". In so doing, the name of the organization explicitly connects with one of the pillars of the group's ideology, Ezra Pound's theory of housing rent as 'usury' (Pound 1985). It is on this basis that CasaPound develops its policy proposal and frames its engagement with respect to the issue of public housing (Albanese et al. 2014).

The first activities of the movement, however, have little to do with militant engagement: they were groupuscular cultural activities, revealing some of the underlying dimensions of

⁷ The housing issue is at the heart of the political debate in the region of Rome, the city where CasaPound was born and is most rooted. The largest number of eviction orders in 2008 (when CasaPound changed its status to 'association for social promotion') were issued in Rome (7,574), among which almost five thousands were for arrearage. Over the past five years, the evictions were over 31,000 of which 19,273 for arrearage. In Rome over the past five years, the evictions were 11,612, among those 2,209 have been executed in 2008, with an increase of eighteen per cent compared to 2007.

conflict, hierarchy and engagement that would subsequently emerge in CasaPound as an organization (Bulli and Castelli Gattinara 2013). Upon reconstructing their groups' history, the members of CasaPound identify the 'origins' of CPI in the late 1990s, coinciding with the foundation of the rock band *ZetaZeroAlfa* by the future leader of the movement, Gianluca Iannone, in 1997. The idea of Iannone, who was a militant in *Fiamma Tricolore* (the main neo-fascist party in Italy),⁸ was to put his vision of life into the music of the band: his main messages dealt with globalization, denouncing the failures of market economy and urging to revolt against the establishment (Bartlett et al. 2012).

The lyrics of *ZetaZeroAlfa* met the grievances of numerous young neo-fascists who perceived that most parties of the extreme-right of the time were, to say the least, outdated in terms of ideological references, communication and proposed activism. Iannone and his group quitted the *Fiamma Tricolore* in 2008, after lasting tensions between the rigidity of the party's apparatus and the flexibility demanded by the youths. Officially, the split took place after the leadership of the party rejected the request of Iannone to organize a party congress.

Meanwhile, the disenfranchised group headed by Iannone was protagonist of a series of demonstrative actions. These included the occupation of a state-owned building in the periphery of Rome in 2002 (*CasaMontag*), the setting up of a number of 'non-conventional' squats, the attack against the emission 'Big Brother', and numerous violent riots involving *Blocco Studentesco*, the newly-born student organization of the movement. Due to the disruptive nature of its actions, the recognisability of the symbols and slogans deployed, and

⁸ The Tricolour Flame - Italian Social Movement (MS-FT: Movimento Sociale Italiano – Fiamma Tricolore) is the main radical right party that emerged after the transformation of Italy's post-fascist party (MSI- Movimento Sociale Italiano) into a national-conservative alliance (AN-Alleanza Nazionale) in 1995. For a detailed analysis of the position of CPI in the Italian neo-fascist tradition see Bulli and Castelli Gattinara (2013).

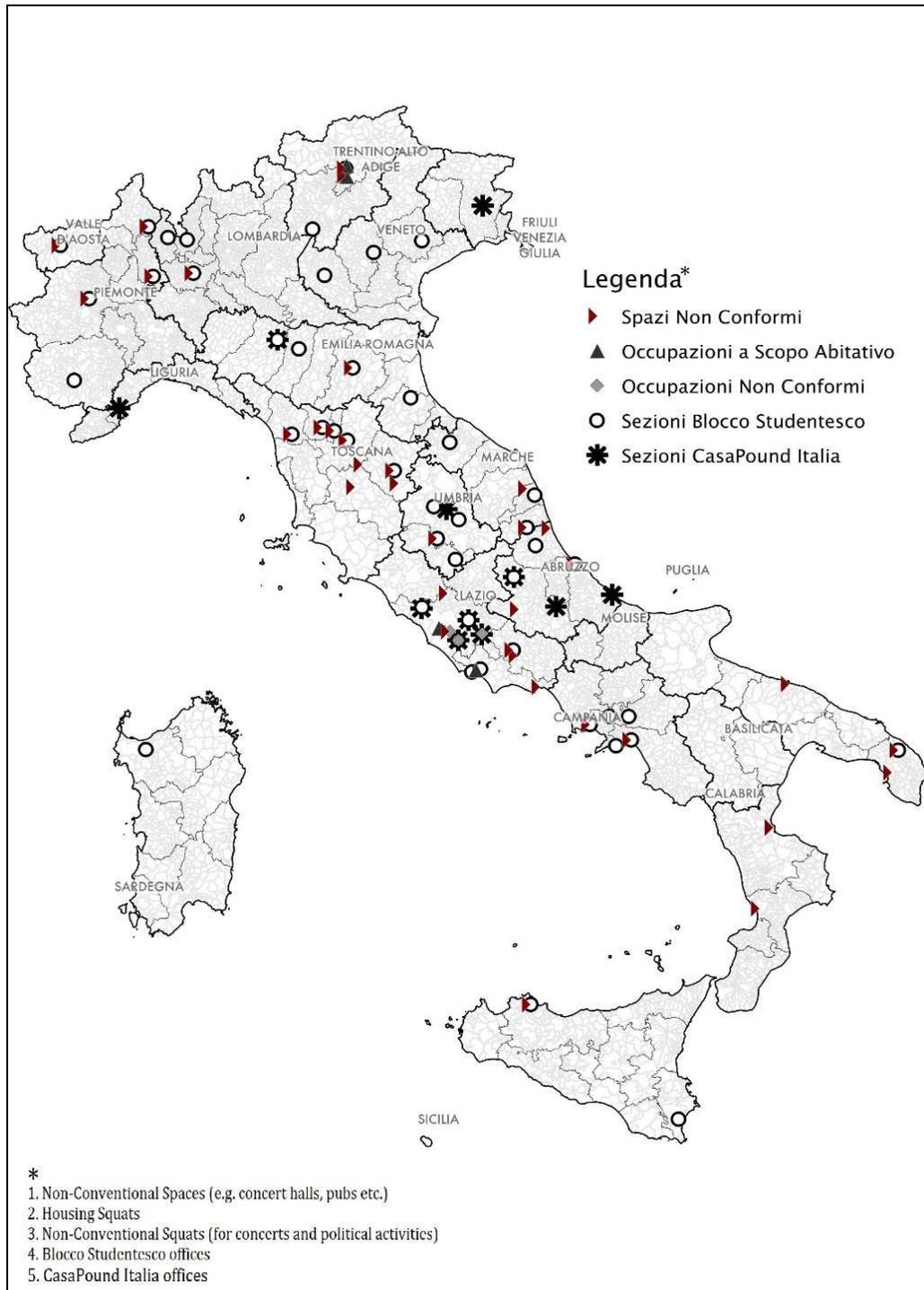
the undeniable unconventionality of the action repertoires vis-à-vis the traditional forms of mobilization of extreme right parties, CasaPound gained substantial visibility in the media.

Over the following years, the group has progressively settled outside Rome and in the rest of Italy: thanks to the support of about 2.000 official active members,⁹ they set up more than 150 conferences across the country and developed a network of libraries, pubs and sport associations. CasaPound is also producing publications such as the monthly magazine *L'Occidentale* and the quarterly *Fare Quadrato*, and the social centre in Rome sponsored an association of civil protection, and promoted a number union and recreational activities. Consequently, as reported in Figure 1 below, by today CasaPound headquarters can be found on the whole of the Italian territory, even though overwhelmingly so in the regions of central Italy, and more precisely in the region of Rome where the movement was born and national leaders live. Not surprisingly, during the last national elections CPI concentrated most of its votes in this area (Albanese et al. 2014, p. 116).

During the interviews, the leaders of the organization argue that CPI was not born on a purely ideological basis, but rather as a result of the social problem associated with the lack of housing spaces for Italian families. Since its origins, CasaPound has conceptually associated its political engagement to Ezra Pound's conception of 'holiness' of the 'house', which is defined as the only safe place for any person. The groups' opposition to market capitalism has to do with this, since the house is given a symbolic value that goes beyond its material 'price'.

⁹ In 2011 the group self-reported 5,000 total members. See: Tom Kington, "Italy's fascists stay true to Mussolini's ideology" *The Guardian* (6 November 2011). Retrieved 17-02-2015.

Figure 1. *The distribution of CasaPound on the Italian territory (2013)*



Source: Albanese et al. 2014. *Fascisti di un altro Millennio?* p. 26

Similarly, CasaPound reproduces a number of traditional nationalist and anti-imperialist elements of Italian Fascism. Interpreting the economic crisis as a direct output of liberal capitalism, CasaPound suggests to control international markets by means of a strong state capable of balancing the inequalities generated within the market economy. These ideological traits reconnect with the ambitions of economic autarchy that characterized historical Fascism, from which CasaPound also derives its moral opposition to technocracy. As a result, the political activities of the group are defined in function of a clear ‘enemy’: Italy’s economic crisis, be that framed in terms of unemployment, austerity measures (and technocracy), or opposition to the financial markets (Castelli Gattinara et al. 2013).

This operation of recuperation of the fascist doctrine takes place through the strategic selection of the ideological and policy options made available by the vast fascist tradition in Italy. Indeed, CasaPound interprets the fascist social right primarily in terms of the *Manifesto di Verona* [Verona’s Manifest, approved in 1943], the founding document of the Italian Social Republic. Yet, they only focus on those aspects of the *Manifesto* that dealt with the protection of workers’ rights, whereas they avoid to discuss the explicitly racist connotations of the document. At the same time, traditional Fascism justified its autarchic and antidemocratic ambitions on the threats posed by internal and international enemies (namely the communists and the ‘plutocratic bourgeoisies’). In the present day, however, CasaPound cannot approach this issue publicly without incurring in repressive measures, which explains why most of the efforts of the group are dedicated to opposing neo-liberal doctrines and market economy.

In particular, our research identified three activities of CasaPound that can be considered directly crisis-related: ‘B.L.U.’ (*Blocco Lavoratori Unitario*), which is CasaPound’s union; ‘Stop Equitalia’ (*Ferma Equitalia*) which is a policy proposal challenging the practices of

Italy's tax collection company;¹⁰ and the 'Social Loan' (*Mutuo Sociale*) campaign. These activities are of great importance, not only because they address a broad audience of potential supporters, but also because they grant CasaPound the possibility of framing its public image by focusing on specific dimensions of fascism (the social and the labour legislation), whilst avoiding aspects upon which the group would risk stigmatization (above all, racism and violence). Each of the proposed activities is directly related to specific political actions that may be conceived of as either institutional ('conventional', in the language of CasaPound) or not-institutional ('unconventional') (Castelli Gattinara et al. 2013, 252).

In this sense, our study concluded that CasaPound has opted to build what we called a fascist ideology *à la carte*, meaning that it picks the aspects of traditional Fascism that could better fit today's moods and necessities, while it leaves aside those that could endanger the group's legitimacy in the public sphere and be more easily stigmatized. Hence, the group has used the economic crisis to reinvigorate the role of the struggle against economic austerity in its political activism, so that today the defence of the 'national economy' against international speculators and foreign intruders plays a fundamental role in the movement's self-understanding.

Repertoire of action and militancy

CasaPound's propensity towards organizing cultural events on themes as diverse as Italy's Futurist movement, Che Guevara, gay rights and the Beat Generation served the group to construct a public image disconnected from Italy's street-fighting and terrorist tradition of neo-fascism¹¹. By presenting its social centre in Rome as a cultural 'point of reference' the

¹⁰ Equitalia is the public company in charge of tax collection.

¹¹ For an overview of the neo-fascist tradition in Italy see Cento Bull (2007).

group has avoided it being evicted by the city administration. In a similar fashion, CasaPound has officially condemned Mussolini's racial laws as a mistake, yet adding that this has to be understood in a context in which anti-Semitism was a worldwide phenomenon and not an Italian specificity.

Peaks in the visibility of CasaPound, however, are rarely related to the cultural activities that take place in its headquarters, sections and pubs, and more frequently associated to the violence perpetrated by the activists and sympathizers of the group. Symbolic and physically violent activities have accompanied CasaPound since its birth, and include attacks against militants of other organizations, occasional assaults to individuals and groups, and violent clashes with the police and left-wing students, generally attributed to the youth-wing of CPI Students' Bloc/*Blocco Studentesco* (Castelli Gattinara and Froio 2014).

When dealing with political violence, existing literature has primarily focused on explaining the contextual circumstances leading to pathological violence, such as economic crises and the collapse of social ties (cf. Bjorgo and Witte 1993; Olzak and Shanahan 1996). In addition social movements scholars have investigated the use of narratives, frames and symbols used to legitimize violence by left-wing organizations (Tilly 1978 and 2003; della Porta 1995 and 2008; Tarrow 1998; della Porta and Diani 2009; Bosi et al. 2014) and more recently the share of violent actions in the mobilization strategies of extreme-right organizations (Caiani et al. 2012; della Porta 2013; Koehler 2014). In this context, the goal of our research was to complement existing knowledge on violent 'strategies' by analysing the role of violence in CasaPound on the basis of a threefold analytic grid distinguishing: a) the discursive dimension of violence, related to available opportunities at the context level (Koopmans and Olzak 2004); b) the aesthetic dimension emerging from the reproduction of the violent myths and symbols of fascist Italy (Payne 1996); and c) the identity-building

dimension of violence originating from activities strengthening the sense of comradeship between group members.

Although our study on CasaPound did not allow to develop a systematic model of how and when activists decide to make use of violence to achieve their political goals, our approach helped disentangling the different functions of violence within the group (Castelli Gattinara and Froio 2014). The newspaper based analysis of CasaPound's repertoire of actions shows that about one third of the mobilizations attributed to CasaPound and reported in the media involved violence, generally targeting political adversaries (especially in counter-movements) and in the framework of attempts by the group to radicalize the political campaigns to which they attribute particular importance.¹² On the one hand, the group is often involved in 'light' forms of violence such as damages to buildings and property, symbolic violence and threats. On the other, CasaPound has been protagonist of a number of events involving 'heavy' violence, such as clashes against political opponents, riots during demonstrations and marches, and other acts of violence perpetrated by CasaPound members either individually or collectively in other contexts.

Besides its instrumental use as a form of action, violence also plays a fundamental role in the group's narrative and political discourse. In particular, our study highlighted the strategic fragmentation of violence in the communication repertoire of CasaPound, by which the group differentiates its internal and external framing strategies. When approaching the outside world, CasaPounds' members emphasize the violence that is perpetrated *against* the group, and justify the use of violence in terms of self-determination and self-defence.

¹² Previous research recognized that the content analysis of newspaper material, despite a number of limitations, provides reliable measures of protest activities and mobilization (e.g. Caiani, della Porta and Wagemann 2012). Our analyses were based on the quality newspaper *La Repubblica* because of the space it dedicates to local news in the Rome region, where CasaPound is most active. It is generally acknowledged that *La Repubblica* has a progressive and liberal political views. In order to address potential ideological biases, we counter-checked the data from *La Repubblica* with the same data from the more conservative *Il Corriere della Sera* for 2011. The results showed no relevant cross-newspapers differences.

Violence, in other words, is rationalized as a form of resistance against an oppressive and ‘intolerant’ anti-fascist society. Yet, when approaching internal audiences, violence emerges as a fundamental tool to strengthen solidarity and camaraderie among group members. In so doing, the communication strategy of CasaPound enables accommodating legitimacy constraints while simultaneously reifying the symbolic and emotional connection between its activities and the ideological cult of violence of historical Fascism.

The ethnographic sessions in CasaPound meetings and concerts also suggested that violent practices play a crucial role not only as strategies of political contention, but also as experiences of militancy, facilitating group formation and substantiating the ideological tendency of the group towards action. In this sense, ‘legendary stories’ of fights and battles with left-wing militants have an educational function, since they represent “lessons of kicks, fists, and life” (Di Tullio 2010, 137, translated) by which militants are taught the values of heroism and bravery (Castelli Gattinara and Froio 2014). In addition, ‘Moshpit’ practices generally take place during gigs and concerts organized by CasaPound, and are often associated to ‘Fight Clubs’ by the militants and leaders of the group. The idea is that of fighting the society also by rediscovering physical pain: the experience of risking one’s life and pushing oneself to the ‘extreme’ is therefore a way to explore a dimensions that contemporary societies do not allow for.

Although the leaders of CasaPound explained that they are aware of the ethical condemnation for these practices in the outside world, participation to this type of experiences emerged continuously in our interaction with group militants and young activists. Above all, fight clubs, martial arts and ‘moshpit’ dancing in which participant whip each others with their belts, worked as aggregators between militants. These and other practices of socialization, such as excursions and combat sports, connect the individual with the collective, strengthening the sense of belonging in the community through the

experience of ‘pain’. Individual and collective physical pain is in fact described as a way to help activists to rediscover their own body while simultaneously connecting with the collective body of the group.

Although disruptive and violent actions play such an important role in CasaPound, its engagement is not limited to rioting, hooliganism and violent politics. On the contrary, the group has been able to carve out a space for itself which enables it to stretch from street activism to institutional politics. Our protest event analysis of CasaPound between 1995 and 2013 (Castelli Gattinara and Froio 2014)¹³ reveals that 48.5% of the actions of CPI are legal and conventional, i.e. they are associated with established politics (such as legislative actions, petitions, and electoral campaigns activities). In contrast 51.5% are confrontational and violent, i.e. they are illegal and aggressive in nature, or associated with symbolic and physical violence against things and people. Through this differentiated platform, the group addresses primarily younger generations, which is why its activism is systematically presented as innovative and ‘original’. In so doing, the goal of CasaPound is twofold: on the one hand it aims at capitalizing – from the right – the consequences of the economic crisis; on the other, it promotes a ‘new’ idea of extreme right mobilization, which goes beyond the traditional activism of radical right parties in Italy and Europe by challenging their very organization as political parties.

Its activism aims primarily at renovating the forms of political mobilization, by changing traditional forms of participation in an attempt to integrate younger generations and the social categories that are most hit by the crisis. The increasing popularity of the group, hence, must not be understood exclusively in terms of the nature of its ideological references and the symbolic and political use of violent practices and narratives, but especially in

¹³ In order to analyze the repertoire of action of CasaPound, our protest-event analysis replicated the coding rules and scheme developed by Manuela Caiani et al. (2012) to study extreme-right mobilization.

function of the way in which these are transmitted to, and through, the mass media. As a matter of fact, the popularity of CasaPound derives from its 'showcase' political activism, which is used to promote the group's ideology through the mass media while simultaneously obtaining legitimacy and recognisability in the public sphere.

It is in this sense that one has to understand the self-styled "fascism of the third millennium" promoted by leaders and militants of CasaPound. Hence, the group is primarily involved in the organization of highly mediatized events and actions, tackling ongoing problems and public concerns while reconnecting with the ideological pillars of historical Fascism, using new vocabularies, innovative symbols and unconventional forms of protest, at least for the extreme right. These showcase, highly spectacular initiatives of the group have the main goal of increasing the visibility of CasaPound in the media. In a context of closed political opportunities for fascist mobilization, CasaPound leaders have realised that media recognisability may represent a fundamental tool for survival.

In a similar fashion, the group has been very efficient in taking advantage of the ongoing transformation within its own political area, and it has repeatedly and loudly 'opened' to social and political environments that are generally distant from the extreme right tradition. This involved dialogues with more moderate political actors as well as with parties and organizations belonging to other political areas. More broadly, CasaPound has successfully proposed a renovation of the extreme right in terms of issues, symbols and practices, and it has actively engaged to overcome the long lasting isolation of the neo-fascist right in Italy, which characterized its cultural and political evolution since the early post-war years (Tarchi 1995; 2010).

Among other things, CasaPound joined the heterogeneous extra-parliamentary arena of right-wing and civil society groups opposing austerity measures in Italy. This wave of

mobilization was composed by a mix of groupuscular organizations and social movements, most of which did not have an explicit ideological profile and were generally brought together on the basis of radically anti-establishment platforms of mobilization (the so-called Pitchfork movement).¹⁴ CasaPound has been actively engaged in organizing, sustaining and promoting the ‘spontaneous’ demonstrations and rallies that took place throughout 2012 and 2013. Its communicative and expressive strategies in this area have been very successful in attracting the media attention, so that now the group is publicly associated to a certain number of policy proposals regarding exit-strategies from the Eurozone and monetary sovereignty.

In particular the group contributed significantly to shifting the focus of the protests towards the EU: although these originally addressed the inefficiency of national political élites, CasaPound organized unauthorized rallies outside the European Commission’s offices in Rome. Showing no symbols of the organization, but only wearing masks painted with the colours of the Italian flag, CasaPound’s activists rapidly gained media coverage. In the course of the protest, moreover, CPI militants exposed white nooses around the neck symbolizing the effects of austerity, and took down the European flag (for which the vice-president of the organization was also charged by the Italian authorities).

The ‘social movement’ rhetoric and the engagement in disruptive forms of protest did not prevent the simultaneous engagement of CasaPound in institutional politics. As a matter of fact, the group’s leadership announced in October 2012 that it would participate to the local elections in Rome and in the Italian region Lazio, and subsequently to the national elections, with an autonomous list of candidates. This came as a surprise to many observers who had underlined the non-electoral nature of CasaPound’s activism. Indeed, although there are

¹⁴ Based on a strongly Eurosceptic and anti-austerity platform, the Pitchfork Movement (*Movimento dei Forconi*) enjoyed a short period of visibility in late 2013 due to the numerous confrontational events it sponsored throughout the country.

several aspects of CasaPound that differentiate it substantively from traditional definitions of social movements, especially with respect to the internal organization, the allocation of responsibilities and the role of hierarchies (Albanese et al. 2014), at the rhetorical level, the group had always claimed its difference from traditional parties, privileging the organization, repertoire and practices of social movements.

During our ethnographic research, we could follow the main moments of the process that led to the choice to run for elections. The choice was not considered as a real innovation by group members, since candidates of CasaPound did run for local elections already in 2006 and in 2008, generally supporting right-wing parties and lists. Yet, the critique of the EU, austerity policies and Italy's consensual technocracy appeared as the most important elements driving CasaPound's choice of running as an independent, autonomous list. In other words, due to the convergence of the mainstream left and right-wing parties in Italy (within the short technocratic government of Mario Monti, which lasted from November 2011 to December 2012), CasaPound leaders perceived that a window of opportunity could open for an outsider, protest actor on the right-wing side of the political spectrum.

The choice to run as an independent party for local and national elections, however, did not prove particularly successful. In terms of electoral support, CasaPound did not emerge as a relevant competitor in the Italian party system, with a score of only 0.14% between the Italian House and Senate, and less than one per cent at the municipal and regional elections in Rome. The modest electoral performance was also acknowledged by the group in the first public declaration after the elections. Yet, CasaPound's electoral participation (together with a number of disruptive actions that accompanied the campaign) contributed to further increasing the visibility of the group at the national level, as well as its reputation as the main non-partisan actor mobilizing on the issue of national sovereignty, and opposition to austerity and the EU.

In consequence, the subsequent months saw the emergence of an unprecedented electoral alliance between the neo-fascist CasaPound and the regionalist populist party *Lega Nord* (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005). The ambition of the two groups seem to be that of emulating the French experience of the *Rassemblement Bleu Marine*, the electoral coalition created by Marine Le Pen to aggregate and network actors, parties and personalities struggling for the restoration of national sovereignty under the common denomination of ‘patriots’.¹⁵ As a matter of fact, CasaPound has recently launched an ad-hoc online platform, ‘Sovereignty’, by which it promotes its joint activities with Lega Nord.¹⁶

This unofficial electoral cartel was first tested in the occasion of the European Parliament elections in May 2014, when CasaPound explicitly supported one of Lega Nord candidates. By joining forces, the main populist actor in Italy and the emerging subcultural organization of the extreme right had converging interests: Lega Nord needed CasaPound and its network of associations, sport clubs and concert halls to extend its influence on southern regions in Italy, while CasaPound benefited from the nation-wide visibility offered by the joint-venture with a formerly governing party. For Lega Nord, this meant abandoning its original secessionist stances in favour of a new, nationalist rhetoric based on full-fledged Euroscepticism. For CasaPound, instead, this alliance enabled approaching topics that – until then – had been tackled only marginally by the group, most notably the immigration issue. With the emergence of an actor exclusively devoted to opposing immigration and the EU, this hybridization project might have simultaneously activated a process of ‘normalization’ within the Italian extreme-right populist area. Going beyond the regionalist populism of Lega Nord, and the self-styled neo-fascism of CasaPound, this coalition seems

¹⁵ See: Jean-Yves Camus, “A quoi sert le Rassemblement Bleu Marine? A intégrer ceux que le FN dédiabolisé n’assume plus”, *Slate.fr* (19 March 2014). Retrieved 17-02-2015. Marco Damilano, “Così Salvini si allea con il Sud” *L’Espresso* (8 December 2014). Retrieved 17-02-2015.

¹⁶ See: Marco Brusini “Sovranità: l’associazione politico culturale di Casa Pound che appoggia Matteo Salvini”, *The Huffington Post Italia* (13 January 2015). Retrieved 17-02-2015.

to have much in common with the ideology of other extreme right and populist parties in Europe, most notably the *Front National*.

At the current stage, however, it is difficult to assess whether this is due to a progressive moderation of CasaPound's claims and demands, and its definitive dismissal of protest politics or, more worryingly, to a substantial reshaping of the political environment of the environment around CasaPound. After all, the success of extreme right actors is not exclusively related to their immediate results in a given electoral campaign. As it has been pointed out by the 'contagion effect' literature, contemporary extreme right activism strives for the radicalization of mainstream values and political agendas, more than for an immediate transformation of the status quo (Lubbers 2001; Minkenberg 2001; Norris 2005; Rooduijn et al. 2012; Mudde 2013). From this perspective, the success of the group under study would only be visible in a few years, as it would emerge from long-term cultural changes. Yet, the unique newsworthiness of CasaPound, its public legitimacy and recognisability, seem to have allowed the organization to network with populist parties in the institutional and protest arena.

Conclusion

In a few years, CasaPound Italia has emerged as the most prominent extreme right-wing actor in Italy. Never before there was in Italy an explicitly neo-fascist group enjoying the strategic viability and the marge of political manoeuvre that was secured today by the leaders of CasaPound. Although "apology of fascism" is legally recognised as a crime in Italy,¹⁷ CasaPound can state publicly that Mussolini's brand of Fascism is its primary point

¹⁷ Legge Scelba, 20.06.1952, n.645 (concerning the transposition of the XII disposizione transitoria e finale, comma primo, della Costituzione Italiana).

of reference. As we have shown, CasaPound's growth has much more to do with processes of mediatization in contemporary politics than with traditional measures of party success. In other words, although CasaPound remains substantially marginal from an electoral point of view, its visibility in the Italian system is symptomatic of the ability of the extreme right to assimilate populist and alternative agendas in order to increase the attractiveness of their communication campaigns.

In the first place, the group has been able to take advantage of the general crisis of political parties as actors of representation, and the confusion and instability that has characterized the extreme right in Italy over the past 20 years. In order to carve out a space for itself within the extreme right milieu, CasaPound opted for a strategy of differentiation: rather than identifying a clear-cut organizational model of its own, it engaged primarily in delineating its difference from the existing competitors. In this sense, the main goal of CasaPound so far has not been the development of a concrete organizational alternative for extreme-right activism, but rather the promotion of a claim of generic 'otherness' from all existing political organizations of its area.

The lack of a clear-cut organizational design emerges from the evolutionary stages of CasaPound. In its early stages the need of the group was primarily that of differentiating itself from the prevailing structures and practices of its 'partisan' competitors, which is why the group turned to social movement forms of action. Yet, already in its early years, the group remained open to electoral collaboration with more institutionalized actors, often from the mainstream right. In this sense, the recent decision to run for elections as an independent party, and the emerging cartel with the populists of *Lega Nord* does not represent an 'exception' to the nature of CasaPound, but more of an evolution of its strategic approach to political activism.

CasaPound turns out to be similarly eclectic also from the point of view of its ideological profile. Despite the rhetorical efforts to underline the integrity and contiguity of the group to the doctrine of historical Fascism, our analysis identified the contours of what we defined an ‘à la carte Fascism’ (Albanese et al., 2014). The leaders of the group strategically select aspects and elements from the history of Fascism depending on the available opportunities, with the result that, quite often, they end up in taking contradictory positions in order to accommodate the needs of their different audiences. ‘Fascism’ remains the backbone by which the group substantiates its criticism of supranational institutions, globalization and the establishment, yet CasaPound approaches it by making a strategic mix of different elements depending on the issues that are debated, selectively emphasizing some relevant aspects and omitting others.

In this sense, CasaPound is particularly effective in interacting with the logics of news production and media communication. Newsworthiness appears to be the primary motivation for its choice of showcase activism, explaining the recuperation of fascist vocabularies and the appropriation of radical left symbols and practices. In this sense, the group’s growing visibility has to do with the tendency of the mass media to give attention to highly spectacular news stories that can be connected to clearly identifiable actors. There is an impressive convergence between the activism of CasaPound and its communicative strategies, since both of them focus on the media logics of identification and spectacularisation of political conflict. In this sense, it appears that the framing and action choices of CasaPound are first based on an accurate study of the mechanisms of news production and only subsequently integrated and justified ideologically.

In so doing, CasaPound today is more than simply recognizable, it is a ‘trademark’ that can be identified well beyond the traditional audiences of the neo-fascist right. Vast shares of the Italian public opinion are by now very familiar with CasaPound’s stylized turtle with an

octagonal shell, as well as with the lightning inside a circle, the symbol of the youth-wing of the group which resembles those used by left-wing squatting movements. Similarly, the label of ‘modern-day’ fascists represent a real brand for the group, so as it is its alleged propensity for social movement activism and its focus on non-conformist politics and behaviour. Through this attentive communication strategy and the ambiguity of its political and symbolic references, CasaPound has obtained a relevant position in the political space of the extreme right.

Despite its limited size in terms of active militants and its ‘blurred’ ideological profile and political choices, moreover, CasaPound is becoming a reference point also at the European level, attracting the attention not only of the observers of political extremism, but also of the mass media, and parts of the public opinion. What is more, there is evidence suggesting that other extreme-right organizations in Europe are increasingly looking up at the experience of CasaPound: in November 2014, the leader of CPI was invited to the international congress ‘The Awakening of Nations’, organized by the French *Groupe Union Défense*, along with other extremist groups such as the Greek Golden Dawn (and its Cypriote branch ELAM), the Belgian *Nation*, the Spanish *Movimiento Sociale Republicano* and *Liga Joven*, the French *Mouvement d’Action Sociale* and some representatives from the online platform *Synthèse Nationale*.

Similar to other European groups, CasaPound looks at the support of people which have lost trust in public institutions, the government, the mass media and trade unions. Rather than being interested in changing these corrupt institutions, however, CasaPound is primarily engaged in promoting alternative ones of its own: its web radio, magazines and TV-channel, its sports and cultural associations. Most notably, these also include numerous ‘para-welfare activities’ addressed to Italian families facing difficult times, ranging from food distribution

to health assistance for disabled and elderly people, as well as a CasaPound-specific service of civil protection.

At the same time, similar to other populist movements, CasaPound presents itself as the agent that will bring back a mythical past to regenerate the present. In this way, the unprecedented *mélange* of old and new claims, symbols, practices and repertoires of action makes CasaPound one of the most challenging phenomena for researchers of extreme right politics.

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