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Who are 'they'? Continuities and changes in the discourse of CasaPound Italia on migration and otherness

This is the 23. article in our series *Trouble on the Far-Right*. For more information on the series, please click here.
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by Caterina Froio

According to several observers new waves of refugees' arrivals could increase the popularity of far right organizations.[1] In these interpretations electoral and political support should be promoted by societal resonance of ethnocentric discourses. Recent data from the Eurobarometer illustrates that in EU-member states migration from non-EU countries is now considered to be the most important concern that the Union is facing. This is a sudden shift with respect to the results of the 2013 Eurobarometer where – in the middle of the euro crisis – EU citizens seemed to be more concerned about the economy and unemployment. I propose to place the magnifying glass on the arguments developed by these organizations by focusing on the least researched members of the far right family: nonparty organizations. After introducing CasaPound Italia (CPI) it will be discussed what fuels its anti-migrant's discourse by highlighting continuities and changes with respect to classic nativist far right rhetoric. Digging into the arguments is crucial to getting a better assessment of their potential appeal especially in a favorable context.

CasaPound Italia on the far right stage

CasaPound is a hybrid in the far right scene. It behaves like a social movement but it also runs for elections. Its references include the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini and the anarchist sailor-adventurer Corto Maltese. It is made of "men of law and order " that occupy buildings. One of its sympathizers killed two Senegalese street vendors in Florence, while the organization advertises activities of international

cooperation. Since CPI was born (in 2003 with the occupation of one building close to the main train station in Rome) this contradictory combination of references and repertoires of action has been the main source of the group's popularity in Italy and abroad. Despite being a small group more similar to a social movement organization than to a political party, CasaPound enjoys important visibility in Italian far right politics and it is often considered as a model by other far right nonparty organizations and subcultures in (Western) Europe.[2] Starting with the campaign for the 2014 European elections, the self-proclaimed "Fascists of the Third Millennium" approached the better known Northern League. This alliance enabled addressing topics such as migration that – until then – had been relatively marginal in the rhetoric of CPI. Before, CPI used to be focused around the economy and the housing right for Italian citizens. Even if political agendas of far right organizations should not be reduced to immigration issues[3], migration politics play a prominent role in far right's discourse. CPI's rhetoric on migration results from the combination of classic far right nativist and nationalistic arguments such as "identity threats" and more unusual forms of prejudices inspired by reframing anti-globalization arguments and Third Position stances that are less common in the far right milieu.[4]

Bild: Heiko Koch

The classic shades of far right anti-immigration rhetoric: economy, culture and security

CasaPound shares elements of nativism with other far right organizations, e.g. the idea that states should be inhabited only by the native group and that non-native elements are a threat to the homogeneity (*and development*) of the nation-state. The 'foes' are ethnic minorities even if this does not exclude xenophobia towards nonimmigrant ethnic minorities. In line with the classic Schmittian friend-foe distinction that characterizes far right organizations, CasaPound delineates boundaries between natives and nonnatives, between the ingroup ("us") and the outgroups ("them"). Both categories are, quoting Cas Mudde's reference to Benedict Anderson, imagined, in the sense that they are socially constructed.[5] This means that 'foes' refer to real existing groups (such as the Roma people in Italy) but the characteristics that CPI attributes to these groups are stereotypical constructs. According to classic arguments, common to most extreme and radical right populist parties, in the discourse of CPI migration is framed as a threat for natives in economic, cultural and security terms.

Given the primary importance that socio-economic issues occupy in the ideology of CasaPound[6] it comes with little surprise that migration is first of all framed as a threat for the "economy of the nation", for native workers, and for natives' housing right. Three major arguments are used to illustrate these supposed evidences.

1. Migrants would steal natives' jobs and in times of economic hardship the national priority – employment (only) for Italians – must prevail.
2. Migrants are portrayed as being ready to accept working conditions and standards that are inacceptable for native workers.
3. Migrants would be the primary beneficiary of public housing at the natives' expenses.

By not considering that inhuman working (and living) conditions are also signs of discrimination by the majority population, in the 2013 electoral program CPI writes that: "They [*immigrants*] are a resource for the Confederation of Italian Industry [*Confindustria*] and for the employers who are the primary beneficiary of this new slavery-based economy and of an 'industrial reserve army' made of growing unprivileged masses looking for jobs […]". In the same document CPI adds: "we must stop exposing our [*Italian*] corporations to this competition [*by immigrant workers*]. This will make useless the contribution of immigrant workers, and it allows the protection of our workers, now bypassed by 'the competitive workers' par excellence: immigrants". In this framework, the targeted groups are both migrants coming from the EU (Eastern Europe and Romania in particular) and from outside the Union (mainly China and Northern Africa).

Migration is also perceived as a threat to the homogeneity and distinctiveness of natives' culture and to traditional values of the "Italian nation". The groups that are targeted according to this argument are mainly migrants coming from outside the EU that according to CPI do not belong to the "Europe of Nations" or to the "People(s)'Europe". These expressions make reference to an alleged homogeneous Pan-European identity based on shared history and traditions that would be at the origins of Europe's cultural distinctiveness.[7] In a book written by one of the leaders of CPI there is a section dedicated to diversity and its challenges.[8] Here, CasaPound writes: "we fight for a plural world where differences – under whatever form – are protected and incremented. We want a world with people that are different, with different languages, different cultures, different religions and different food. […] We oppose the model of a multiracial society […] and the ethno-masochism of the idiots" (p.107-108). In this framework, in the

platform for the 2013 general elections CPI proposes "to stop the flows of migrants" (p.3). Like most contemporary far right organizations (better known political parties included) CPI's discourse on the "cultural threats" brought by migration disavows biological racism but emphasizes cultural and historic differences between human beings. While traditional racist far right organizations embrace biological conceptions of race, cultural racist ones adopt the "ethnopluralist" version of it. Yet, the two are not necessarily disconnected. CPI's ethnopluralist interpretations emphasize the need of preserving the uniqueness and purity of the cultural identities of different ethnic groups. This conception presupposes the existence of incompatible cultural differences that could disappear through the mixing of different ethnic groups within the same society.[9] On this ground, CPI portrays migrants as a threat to "cultural differentialism" and "ethnopluralism" in line with theories derived from the experience of the French *Nouvelle Droite*.

Last but not least among the classics of far right nativist rhetoric, CPI associates migrants with criminality, drug dealing, prostitution and street fights. Migrants are also portrayed as the major responsible of urban decay since they would be "foreign to our [*Italian*] land and history". The targeted groups might vary. These include both non-European ethnic minorities (more recently the refugees) and domestic minorities (the Roma in particular). In CPI's discourse special emphasis is put on the Roma people, commonly referred to under the derogatory term "Gypsies" against which CPI mobilizes frequently. Roma are portrayed as criminal, social parasites and as exploiting state anti-discrimination benefits a position strongly shared with the more institutional Northern League.

After the attacks in Paris and Brussels, CPI's interpretation of these massacres is not consistent with Lewis' and Huntington's theory of the "clash of civilizations". On the online magazine of CPI (*Il Primato Nazionale*) the group explains that cultural incompatibility has not to do with Islam per se, but rather with immigration and the multiculturalist ideology. European countries should not rally to defend the "fake progressive values" of Charlie Hebdo, but rather ally with the social-nationalist Arabs to solve the problems of immigration. In this interpretation the carnages are not only the result of the war between "Islam" and the "West" but also a war within Islam. While CPI recognizes that "there is a problem with Islam" it also argues: "The real problem is that Oriana Fallaci's[10] theories have led us to embark in a senseless crusade that ended up hurting the last strongholds of secular and nationalist Islam, such as Saddam, Ghaddafi and Assad".

Reframing classic arguments: Globalization and "people's uprooting" rhetoric

In addition to classic nativist arguments, CPI's propaganda offers some unusual perspectives on xenophobic discourse. These originate from the reframing of another leitmotiv of far right rhetoric: anti-globalization combined with Third Position arguments advocating equidistance from both the Marxist left and the conservative right. In CPI, globalization is seen as an economic and cultural process of deterritorialization, denationalization and technological interconnectedness. It is associated to increasing homogenization of ethnic and cultural differences deriving from peoples' movements, but also from the diffusion on a global scale of similar consumption and communication standards. The group calls for the re-establishment of the authority (and borders) of the nation-state to stop international free market, while simultaneously proposing to keep a market-based economy within the nation-state. CPI adds an extra specific argument inspired by Third Position rhetoric rejecting both communism and capitalism, and that CPI calls the "fascist alternative". This type of discourse is particularly common among Italian fascist and neofascist organizations (such as the *Movimento Sociale Italiano*, *Forza Nuova* and initially *Alleanza*

Nazionale). In the European far right scene, Third Position discourses are rarer and mainly spread among nonparty and subcultural organizations. In this interpretation, without expressing solidarity, CPI sees migrants as victims of globalized capitalism and labels migrants' movements to the West a form of "new slavery". Always in ethnodifferentialist terms, migrants are also described as the victims of processes of "peoples' eradication" that "impoverish" both migrants and the arrival countries from the social, cultural and existential points of view.

Bild: Heiko Koch

Conclusions

CasaPound is not innovative in the far right panorama when it comes to nativist interpretations of migration and otherness in economic, cultural and securitarian terms. Yet the "Fascists of the Third Millennium" pair this classic rhetoric with a more unusual one, combining globalization and Third Position arguments. Even if the extreme right might be "atypical" when it comes to migration, the boundaries between the xenophobic rhetoric of party and non-party organizations in this area seem to fade. It is hard to tell whether this will have an impact on the political success of the group, but some of the frames used by CPI to politicize migration are not exclusively a priority of such marginal neo-fascist organizations and do

not only appeal to old-style skinheads. In a post-Holocaust world, it is hard for the far right to capitalize (only) on classic racist ideas. In contemporary far right organizations like CPI, the range of anti-migrants' arguments is not limited to economic, cultural and securitarian threats. It results from a combination of classic and new elements on the basis of which – without expressing compassion or empathy – the criticism against migration is built on a discourse that portrays migrants as victims of the same processes that natives are opposing.
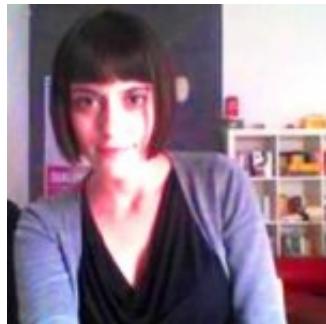
Caterina Froio is a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre d'études européennes of Sciences Po, Paris. Her research deals with political parties, far right organizations, party government and agenda-setting dynamics in a comparative perspective. More information about Caterina's research and publications is available here.

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1. As explained by Cas Mudde (2007) the term far right refers both to extreme and populist radical right organizations. The former refuse the constitutive principles of democracy (majority rule and people's sovereignty) proposing alternatives to it inspired by historical experiences of fascism and Nazism. The latter accept to run for elections while opposing fundamental features of liberal democracy, such as minorities' rights. CasaPound belongs to the first group and it can be qualified as a neofascist organization, ideologically inspired by Mussolini's fascism while at the same time running for elections. ↩

2. Albanese, Mateo et al. (2014): Fascisti di un altro Millennio? *Crisi e Partecipazione in CasaPound Italia*. Bonanno: Acireale. ↩

3. Mudde, Cas (1999): The single-issue party thesis: Extreme right parties and the immigration issue. *West European Politics*, 22(3), 182-197. ↩

4. For an overview of the politicization of migration in Italy, see: Castelli Gattinara, Pietro (2016): *The Politics of Migration in Italy. Perspectives on Local Debates and Party Competition*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge. ↩

5. Mudde, Cas (2007): *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 65. ↩

6. CasaPound defines itself as the heir of the fascist social tradition, see Castelli Pietro et al. (2013): The Appeal of neo-fascism in times of crisis. The experience of CasaPound Italia, *Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies*, 2, 234-258. ↩

7. In line with neofascist Italian tradition. See Bar-On, Tamir (2011): Transnationalism and the French nouvelle droite. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 45(3), 199-223 and Bar-On, Tamir (2013): *Rethinking the French new right: alternatives to modernity*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 138–9. ↩

8. Scianca A. (2011) *Riprendersi Tutto. Le Parole di CasaPound*. Cusano Milanino: Società editrice Barbarossa. ↩

9. Carvalho, João (2013) Impact of Extreme Right Parties on Immigration Policy. Comparing Britain, France and Italy. Routledge: Abingdon: New York. ↩

10. Oriana Fallaci was a controversial Italian journalist and writer. In 2002, she published a book "The Rage and the Pride" that denounced the presumed islamisation of Europe. ↩

Tags: [CasaPound](), [CPI](), [EU](), [far right](), [Italy](), [Migration](), [Northern League](), [Third Position]()

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