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"Tomorrow belongs to us": Pathways to Activism in Italian Far-Right Youth Communities

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On the cool afternoon of 29 April 2019, hundreds of far-right activists gathered on Piazza Susa in Milan to perform an annual ritual: marching to the house of Sergio Ramelli, a neo-fascist activist who died in 1975 after being attacked by a group of communist militants.[1] This year, the organizers had not received permission to march on the usual route leading from the square to the site of the commemoration. Further fueling their discontent was the fact that left-wing protesters had been allowed to organize their own march in the vicinity, which was interpreted as "yet another example" of authorities favoring the left.[2] Unwilling to give up the march, far-right activists showed up and spent a few hours in the square, waiting for events to turn while occasionally going into the surrounding bars for coffee or beer. The police blocked traffic as the square filled with activists, some of them wearing clothes with symbols and names of organizations, others dressed elegantly, and still others looking more casual. Mothers and fathers could be seen holding kids by the hands and, alongside the youth who dominated, there were elderly men and women as well as local politicians who came to converse with activists. In the meantime, leaders of three organizations

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[1] Sergio Ramelli was a member of Fronte della Gioventù, the youth section of the far-right party Movimento Sociale Italiano. Attacked near his home by militants of the communist organization Avanguardia operaia on 13 March 1975, he died from his wounds on 29 April.

[2] The commemoration takes place in a particularly tense period, four days after Liberation Day (25 April), which marks the end of the Fascist regime, celebrated especially by the Italian left, and one day after the anniversary of Benito Mussolini's death (28 April), observed by the far right.

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responsible for the event—Casa Pound, Forza Nuova, and Lealtà Azione[3]—tried to negotiate with police over how the march would take place.

Eventually, the assembled crowd was signaled to move from the piazza into one of the wide streets. People quickly reunited with their organizations and began marching together. I happened to be close to the Lealtà Azione activists and began walking with them, but just a few minutes later we were stopped and could proceed no further. From where I stood, it was impossible to see what was going on. Leaders in the organizations went back and forth, bringing somewhat confusing news. They called for everyone to stay calm, but they also asked a few well-built men to leave behind their glasses, wallets, and other precious belongings and move to the front and sides to guard the crowd. They repeated that women should stay together in the middle. People stared at the crowd from the windows of the adjacent houses, some throwing invectives or telling us to go home.

It grew dark as we stood in the middle of the street, and some of the activists busily searched the internet to find out what was going on. We heard that someone had been beaten up and that a policeman and an activist had been wounded,[4] and we saw an ambulance trying to pass through the street. Two young guys complained they had not eaten and speculated on whether the police would let an Uber Eats through with a pizza. Two other men, having given the hungry ones a disdainful look, fervently discussed the circumstances of Sergio Ramelli's death, with one emotionally explaining to the other: "They say he *died* in the hospital. *They* killed him! They would open the window to let in cool air and made him get pneumonia…. Attacked with monkey wrenches, he was alone against several attackers. And nobody really paid for it" (fieldnotes, 30 Apr. 2019).

The female circle I stood with was becoming tighter and tighter, and we suddenly realized that we were being pushed in from all sides. Women around me quickly stubbed out their cigarettes, with the more experienced looking after younger marchers, making sure that everyone had an ID and instructing them on how to behave during a police interrogation. I was four months pregnant at the time—a fact I still had not shared with my research participants—and I was making sure that I had plenty of space. I must have had a terrified look on my face because one of the Lealtà members, Francesca, grabbed my hand and said calmly, "All will be fine, Aga." After a while, the pushing ceased. Yet, the gathered crowd grew increasingly impatient.

It was then that Milo, the vocalist of one of the far-right youth bands, began singing *"Domani appartiene a noi"* ("Tomorrow belongs to us"), which the crowd immediately picked up. It seemed like everyone was joining in except for me: "We shall drive out those who exploit in the shadows / If we march united / We shall win over usury and the fist / Tomorrow belongs to us."[5]

[3] In English: House of Pound, New Force, and Loyalty Action.

[4] According to the press, two policemen and two demonstrators were wounded.

[5] Original: *Chi sfrutta nell'ombra sapremo stanar / se uniti noi marcerem / l'usura ed il pugno noi vincerem il domani appartiene a noi.* I am grateful to Laura Tradii for her help with the translation.

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The song, performed originally by the far-right band *Compagnia dell'anello* ("Fellowship of the Ring," a reference to J.R.R. Tolkien's book), was inspired by the song performed by a Hitler Youth member in the movie *Cabaret* (1972).[6] The next day, Milo told me he chose that song because everyone knew it, it had been important for the movement since the 1970s, and it captured the spirit of nationalist organizations and their mission of expressing love for the homeland while fighting injustices. Despite their enthusiasm, the crowd was quickly silenced. "It is a commemoration, and not a demonstration," a female activist shouted, worrying that singing would only lower their chances of being able to march further.

Eventually, after lengthy negotiations, the police allowed us to start walking, but only close to the sidewalks, pretending it was not a march. Men announcing this decision winked and said the marchers would do as they pleased as soon as it was possible. When we were turning onto the main street leading to the house of Ramelli, a woman standing at the corner distributed small packages wrapped in brown paper to those passing by, explaining with a smile: "It's just candles, not bombs." We walked fast and in silence, eventually spreading into the streets and marching in a well-organized manner. Those who were too slow or tried to converse with someone heard an angry, "Hold your row!" Dozens of police, equipped with helmets, shields, and batons, accompanied us along the way.

It only took about twenty minutes for the marchers to reach their destination. Activists encircled a wall with "Ciao Sergio" graffiti, which was situated in front of Ramelli's house to commemorate the site of the crime. After an activist climbed the ladder to decorate the wall with a wreath, we were commanded, "Attention!" and "At ease!" followed by a powerful *"Camerata Ramelli! Presente!"* (Comrade Ramelli! [He is] present!).[7] The crowd responded by performing a Roman salute and screaming out: *"Presente!"*

Soon after, people began to disperse. Standing near the wall, I saw numerous people approach the graffiti, place their hand on it, put a rose beneath, kneel, and make the sign of the cross. A young woman grabbed her son and handed him a rose, saying, "*Sergio*, let's go to pay respect to *Sergio.*"[8] The Lealtà Azione I marched with received the command to go back to the square where everything had begun. Back at the piazza, one of the Lealtà Azione leaders took out his smartphone and, seemingly amused, began reading press accounts of the event, purposefully assuming an alarmist tone. "Apparently, what we did was an 'outright challenge to the state' (*sfida frontale allo stato*)!" he scornfully quoted a headline from *La Repubblica.*[9] But then he concluded on a more serious note

[6] The important difference being that the original song states, "Tomorrow belongs to *me*," while the Italian one purposefully highlights the communitarian aspect. In the original version, the song's performance by a blond boy wearing a Hitler Youth uniform foreshadows the rise of Nazism.

[7] The exclamation "*Presente*!" in such contexts indicates that a dead comrade "is here." It is traditionally used—including by left-wing activists—to refer to comrades who sacrificed their lives for the cause.

[8] Another activist later confirmed that the female activist's son was named after Ramelli.

[9] *La Repubblica* is one of the most important dailies, representing a center-left stance.

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that they had showed their strength and that the next year it would be impossible to ban the march. He referred to a similar march in Poland which was growing stronger year by year.[10] He gave special thanks to the militants who had come from Rome, Sicily, and Calabria for that one night and had to rush back home to work.

It was nearly 1:00 a.m. when I found myself standing alone on the side of the now-emptied square, waiting for a taxi, asking myself: "What is it they want?"

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The answer to that question may seem obvious: they wanted to perform a ritual, make a stand, testify. If it was important to me, it was because I knew many of the marchers and how diverse the seemingly uniform crowd was. Put differently, to understand Ramelli's commemoration we must grapple with the question: "Who are they?" This question constitutes the basic premise of this article. By presenting personal accounts of three activists and situating them within the milieus in which they are active, I illuminate a variety of factors that push youth to engage in far-right militancy and pursue the goals of their movements. The need for more in-depth knowledge about far-right militants has been emphasized by many researchers of right-wing extremism. For, first, we know more about biographies of leaders than about "average" members. An often-unintended consequence of this is the perception of far-right movements as composed of a charismatic leader and a group of followers. Second, even when explored in detail, activists' life stories are often divorced from analyses of wider contexts, including both in-group dynamics and interactions with other people. This article is an attempt to address these shortcomings.

In what follows, I first discuss the background of the research project on which this article draws. I then present three militants individually, then speak to the question of locating common denominators between them and other activists. Finally, I contextualize contemporary forms of activism through examples of militancy referred to by my research participants. As will become clear, these examples vary dramatically, representing the world of fantasy as much as the "real" one and provoking the question of what it means to be "real"; that is, to what extent is a certain projection of an interwar fascist leader "more real" than a beloved protagonist of a fantasy book that many activists cherish. For while there is an obvious difference between historical figures and fictive characters, it is important to stress that even the historical actors the militants refer to are a certain projection and an expression of what they want to see in them. In conclusion, I will address the broader implications of these issues.

[10] He meant the so-called March of Independence. Initially a small initiative, the march has been attracting increasing numbers of people. In 2015 and 2016, Forza Nuova and Lealtà Azione were among the foreign guests.

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ON RESEARCHERS AND THE RESEARCHED

This article presents findings gathered as part of a larger ethnographic research project on the transnational activism of far-right youth movements.[11] Here, however, I focus exclusively on Italian activists, and highlight the importance of recognizing a diversity of paths in what is often considered to be a homogeneous group. The reason why I have chosen Italy is twofold: First, given the two decades of Fascist rule and substantial neo-fascist activism in the postwar era, it is particularly interesting and important to understanding current developments. Second, by focusing predominantly on individuals from one country, I can highlight the diversity of personal trajectories within a single national context. At the same time, spotlighting one national context allows me to better show the transnational nature of far-right activism. Apart from contributing knowledge on the militants' pathways, I thus show Italian activists as at once using the (Italian) fascist grammar and being co-producers and sharers of a transnational ideology.

I describe the activists and the organizations they belong to using the term "far right," acknowledging that the term can be problematic. My research participants are aware of this inadequacy and emphasize that the "far right" (*estrema destra*) label does not well capture their agenda. Elaborating on this point, they stress that the ideas of "left" and "right" have become meaningless and empty (something many observers of the political scene would agree with); that their movements draw heavily on some versions of left-wing, socialist traditions; and that they see themselves as a revolutionary force and proponents of novel ways of thinking and doing politics, which the idea of "far right" can obscure. They tend to express their distance and reluctance to subscribe to this sort of terminology with phrases like, "In our environment, a so-called far-right one…," or "Our ideas, let's call them the far right…." By and large, individual members define themselves through membership in a specific community, as "militants of X," reflecting the importance of group identities and group formation. When pushed to describe common features, they tend to stress an identitarian (and not necessarily nationalistic)[12] orientation, related to a particular ethno-cultural and ethno-religious heritage ("Christian Europe," "Christian Italy," "Latin civilization"). As shall become clear, issues of labeling and self-labeling are tremendously important in these spaces.

This article's protagonists are members of two groups: Forza Nuova (FN) and Lealtà Azione (LA). The key formal difference between them is that FN is a political party (active since 1997),[13] while LA is an association that forms

[11] I conducted research among Italian, Polish, and Hungarian militants active in Slovakia.

[12] This is due to the strong regional identities many Italian activists express. An "identitarian" orientation enables activists to transcend the animosities between southern and northern Italy.

[13] LA supports selected politicians from the far-right party Lega.

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part of a broader network of similar far-right groups called FedeRazione.[14] While this has important implications, especially during electoral periods, it does not significantly affect their day-to-day activism.[15] In terms of ideological outlook, both groups draw on fascist legacies, are critical of liberal democracy, argue in favor of national autarchy, and link the defense of "traditional family" with the "national cause." They thus differ from the increasing number of European movements and political parties that embrace LGBT rights, secularist (or post-Christian) rhetoric, and the discourse on "Judeo-Christian heritage" as a weapon against Islam and a political strategy to form alliances with movements traditionally hostile toward the far right (Brubaker 2017; Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens 2010). Not only do they sustain strong anti-Semitic rhetoric, even if often in a veiled manner, but they also integrate it into other discriminatory discourses against Muslims or the Roma. This rhetoric in part reflects the importance of the interwar era as a point of reference and it also relates to a strong critique of Israel (as such, it is sometimes expressed as "anti-Zionism" rather than anti-Semitism). As for membership, while numbers fluctuate,[16] communities tend to average between one and a few hundred militants. Beyond the strict group of militants, both groups have large circles of sympathizers who attend events and tend to be active on social media. Most members are in their twenties and thirties.

Both groups engage in a wide range of activities. They provide social assistance to Italians in need; support animal shelters and orphanages; organize summer camps for children as well as regular mountain expeditions for group members; run cultural events such as book promotions, conferences, and concerts; and engage in campaigns against abortion, pedophilia, and persecution of Christians. The groups' cores interact and socialize on a regular basis, whether through spontaneous meetings for a beer, Friday evenings with music, Saturdays at the football stadium, or shared Sunday meals. At times activists' family members also attend. Beyond these settings, their calendars are filled with certain annual ceremonial events, such as Ramelli's commemoration.

Due to both the ideology and the diversity of undertakings of these movements, a researcher faces a vexing question: how does one engage with people one deeply disagrees with? A growing number of anthropological studies on far-right activists—as well as other individuals and collectives that are described as "unlikeable"—has led to lively discussions that highlight the problem of the

[14] *FedeRazione* is a play on words: it indicates a "federation" and at the same time a connection between "faith" (*fede*) and "action" (*azione*).

[15] Here I cannot offer a more detailed comparison of the two groups. Also, as I write these words, FN is undergoing some changes due to a corruption scandal. It is too early for me to engage with the consequences of these developments.

[16] This is an aspect that movement leaders stress, noting that in terms of numbers they have "better and worse years," and that decreases in membership are caused either by activists leaving the movement or by leaders' decisions to let "disappointing" ones go.

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anthropological bias, which translates into a reluctance to engage with the far right (Shoshan 2016; Teitelbaum 2019; Pasieka 2019; Cammelli 2021). However, this discussion has been limited by its disciplinary boundedness, and ethnographic research on the far right is not so scarce as has been claimed (cf. Bangstad 2017): while there has indeed been a dearth of such work in anthropology, qualitative sociologists have compiled a rich corpus of ethnographic studies (Blee 2003; Bizeul 2003; Ezekiel 1995; Fangen 1999; Pilkington 2016).[17] These have also demonstrated that one can carry out such research without compromising one's convictions, falling into the empathy-sympathy trap, or becoming manipulated by far-right informants (Blee 1996; Pilkington 2016: 34–36). Inspired by these contributions, I maintain that we must move beyond the tendency to agree or disagree with, or "like" or "dislike," particular research questions and subjects if we are to develop a more critical perspective on social scientific research practice. Doing so can help us to rethink the problem of researcher complicity, understood as the often troubling "commonalities of reference, analytic imaginary, and curiosity that fieldworker and subject so productively share—each for different purposes," and to recognize conceptual and intellectual, rather than moral, affinity and complicity (Marcus 1997: 102).

Given that my study cannot but take the historical context into account, it is important to remark on problems of empathy and biases also in relation to the historiographical takes on fascists. Historians are sometimes seen as "fortunate" because temporal distance allows them to enjoy a degree of detachment which is out of reach for anthropologists, especially those engaged in intensive ethnographic research. However, numerous historical studies make clear that the distance neither prevents one from passing judgements nor assures that one can provide a complete picture. First, despite the attempts to "take fascists seriously" or, to use George Mosse's famous formulation, "understand fascism in its own terms," historiography often fails to do so (see Haynes 2006). Second, outcomes of archival research are as marked by problems of selectivity and representativeness as ethnographic research tends to be. We all look for patterns and evidence that will allow us to identify broader trends, but no honest researcher will deny that we also look for "good stories" and "interesting protagonists." Wary of all these issues, in my anthropological research I turn to history understood in a twofold way: as an interest in the past as a dimension of the present, by studying my research participants' own engagements with history, and as a reflection on what has historically motivated people—to act, join, resist, and support alike.

To conclude, while I challenge implicit assumptions about the inherent difficulties my research subjects bring about (Pasieka 2019), I simultaneously

[17] Ethnographic study certainly *is* scarce relative to other approaches that dominate research on far right, such as analyses of voting patterns, politicians' speeches, and, increasingly, various internet-related subjects.

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acknowledge the manifold ways that my relationships with interlocutors have shaped the research process, the data I could obtain, and the ways in which I, too, may have contributed to "making" far-right activists via not only the ways I interacted with them but also what I possibly represented in their eyes. Among my individual characteristics three were particularly salient: my identity as a heterosexual woman and mother made many of them see me as representing "proper values"; my higher education encouraged many to engage with me in discussion and test my knowledge; and my Polish background inspired frequent conversations about a country Italians admire and in which they have collaborators. When I talk about "making" an activist, I thus refer to the complex set of discursive and non-discursive practices that lead to involvement in far-right movements—not necessarily indicating official membership but sharing similar worldviews. Drawing on Ziad Munson's work on pro-life activism (2009), I suggest that rather than searching for individual attributes or particular biographical patterns, it is necessary to explore complicated, multi-staged processes that lead individuals to get involved and form political subjectivities. Consequently, I approach these processes as ongoing and activists' pathways—as the following accounts will demonstrate—as dynamic and open-ended. Activists are "made up of" heterogeneous assemblages of experiences and aspirations. Since their readings of history are the key to these experiences, I begin by introducing a broader historical context within which they need to be placed and by explaining how they understand themselves in it.

FASCISTS AND N(E)O-FASCISTS

The subtitle of a comic book devoted to Sergio Ramelli, popular among FN and LA members and produced by their sympathizers, reads: "When killing a fascist was not a crime." Do the authors and readers acknowledge he was a fascist, or are they using the term in a polemical way, to accentuate how he was perceived by his opponents? And do they, in cherishing and admiring him, accept this label for themselves?

Discussion of fascism in contemporary Italy has important legal ramifications since "apology of fascism" is forbidden.[18] The activists' refusal to be described as "fascist" by the media can be partly explained by potential de-legalization of their movements and partly by the fact that their opponents wield the term as an insult.[19] I say "partly" because the reminder of the explanation entails taking into account their own interpretation of fascism: they see it as having been a socio-political response to particular circumstances and, while

[18] This is in accordance with the Scelba Law from 1952, which forbids reorganization of the Italian Fascist Party and public apologies for fascism. For controversies, see Heywood 2019.

[19] Historian Stanley Payne also points out that the descriptor "fascist" was more often used by fascists' opponents (1995).

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they consider it inspiring, they steadfastly reject its applicability to today's context. Leaving these explanations aside, however, it is obvious that the ideologies and activism of the movements under investigation demonstrate the importance of "fascist grammar" and "fascist vocabulary." The Roman salute and "*Presente!*," marches and torches, and order with a military stamp, are clear points that allow present-day activists to establish a connection with the cherished fascist predecessors. "Fascist predecessors" in this context include Second World War combatants, politicians, and fascist intellectuals, writers, and artists. Many of these figures are recognized beyond the far-right milieus, reflecting the complexity of the Italian society's approach to fascism and "fascist heritage."[20] These points lead us to the crucial observation that the ambiguity surrounding the question of whether or not the movements in question are "fascist"/"neofascist" depends on the very ambiguity of fascism as such.

Historical fascism meant both: it combined an obsession with culture with the cult of violence, and an emphasis on traditional values with the slogans of revolution, and it appealed to both intellectuals and the masses. Its economic agenda (or, according to some critics, lack of a clear economic agenda) also involved a combination of left-wing and right-wing ideas, or strategic navigation between the two, in order to gain the consensus of both the working class and the aristocracy. It was not only heterogeneous but also flexible in that it allowed its adherents to accept some elements of fascist ideology and practice while ignoring others. This flexibility was responsible for fascism's success in the interwar era, and it is this aspect that leads many contemporary activists to look into fascism and also beyond it—they draw *flexibly* upon fascism, which itself constitutes a rather *flexible* repertoire of ideas and practices.

What is it that they are most willing to appropriate from this repertoire? When analyzing their agenda, it appears clear that activists like to present themselves as drawing first and foremost on the "fascism-movement" period as opposed to the "fascism-regime" one (de Felice 1997[1975]). In providing this distinction, Renzo de Felice highlighted the vitality and the revolutionary character of the "fascism-movement," its emphasis on rebirth and orientation toward the future (ibid.: 28–29).[21] Present-day activists eagerly embrace this vocabulary, particularly the need to adhere to revolution and build a New Man, a new society, and a new civilization. Further, as the "fascism-movement" era was also the one in which the socialist component was accentuated, it corresponds with the view of far-right movements that they are the "true" defenders of the interests of their working-class compatriots.[22] If Mussolini's fascists talked about the

[20] Literature on the subject is abundant. For debates among historians, see Bresciani 2021. On architectural heritage, see Malone 2017.

[21] While I find this particular distinction helpful, I do recognize the controversies regarding de Felice's scholarship. See, for example, Knox 1995.

[22] Mussolini began his political career as a socialist. See Parlato 2000 for a fascinating discussion of left-wing fascism as a "failed project."

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hardship of the post-World War I era, present-day activists relate the nationalist-socialist agenda to the post-2008 economic crisis, austerity measures, and the European Union's alleged "destructive" policies.

In drawing inspiration from the revolutionary rhetoric of fascism, they stress the latter's anti-liberal and anti-individualistic character and an anti-communist orientation[23] (see Sternhell 1996). As in the case of the revival of nationalist-socialist policies, so too the "communitarian" spirit is presented by them as a panacea for the ills of contemporary consumerist, individualistic society. The celebration of communitarian spirit and comradeship does not preclude the importance of hierarchy and order. Further, the revolutionary visions are linked, as in the past, with the ideas of virility, fight, and youth which shape the movements' constituencies and aesthetics (see Mosse 1996).

One might infer that far-right activists refer to the revolutionary phase to distance themselves from the regime and its crimes. Yet this explanation falls short for two reasons. First, even if activists do not acknowledge it, they *do* embrace many of the ideas promoted in the fascism-regime period, including the emphases on Catholic values and the traditional family. Second, the explanation they provide is quite different: if they distance themselves from the regime, it is because "it did not go far enough" and betrayed the ideals of the revolution. For this reason, international fascist influences become very important. Contemporary activists are more likely to list Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, the leader of Romanian Iron Guard, as their most important source of inspiration. They praise Codreanu for his "hands-on" approach and his attention to actions ("deeds") rather than ideas and to self-discipline and self-improvement. They claim to find in his writings a spiritual dimension—Christian mysticism and a religious-national mythology—that Italian fascism lacks. For a similar reason, in referencing the postwar (neo)fascism they rarely speak about parties (such as Movimento Sociale Italiano) but instead concentrate on grassroots politics (such as the student group Ramelli belonged too) and cultural influences on the main right-wing musical scene and poetry.

To conclude, an event such as the commemoration of Ramelli keeps "fascist tradition" alive and at the same time signals what is new and specific about today's activism. As Douglas Holmes suggests, this activism can be understood "as fascism of and in our time, a fascism that has distinctive contemporary features that are not fully or necessarily congruent with its historical manifestations" (2016: 1). An examination of three militants' biographies will show these different strands of contemporary far-right activism.

[23] I emphasize "revolutionary rhetoric" rather than "fascist revolution" since the latter concept is highly contested.

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PATHWAYS TO ACTIVISM

Leo

My first encounter with Leo occurred at the very beginning of my research after a common acquaintance put us in touch. Leo would admit later that he was furious at my acquaintance for arranging the meeting and was far from excited about the prospect of talking to "yet another journalist." He disclosed that only after what was intended to be a "short interview" turned into a much longer discussion.

When I arrived at the place we had agreed upon, which was in the vicinity of the department of political science where Leo studied at the time, I saw a neatly dressed young man wearing a perfectly ironed shirt, New Balance sneakers, and dark glasses. With his tall posture and short blond hair, I thought that he could easily pass for Scandinavian or German. Leo was accompanied by a fellow activist who assisted with our first meeting, sometimes adding a few words, but for the most part staying busy with his smartphone—a strategy of "double-checking" that I had become used to by then. Leo chose a bar in the vicinity and, to my initial surprise, expressed no hesitation in answering my questions in the middle of a busy public space. Our conversation, as often happened during the course of this research, slowly evolved from his reciting official statements from the movement to presenting a more personal and sometimes even critical perspective.

Leo explained that he had been an active member of Forza Nuova since late high school, when he joined a meeting after a short encounter with an FN member. Prior to that, he neither held views close to those of FN nor knew much about the group. The first thing he appreciated about it, and at the same time found to be most crucial, was the community's desire to "break the mold" (*uscire dagli schemi*): to *believe in* and create a political alternative. To illustrate this, he mentioned one of the projects that was particularly important for youth, called "FN Università," which aims at "re-conquering" Italian academic contexts that have been traditionally dominated by left-wing thought and left-wing intellectuals. Although the "wind was slowly changing," as he said, he did not expect the project to be successful; instead, the main goal was to challenge the taken-for-grantedness of certain assumptions about academia. It was also intended to raise awareness that things can be different: that the "values destroyed by the generation of 1968" can be restored, that Italy can again be a sovereign country, and that the problem of immigration can be dealt with differently. Such convictions implied a critique of the "usual suspects"—left-wing politicians and ideologues, the various "radical chic," the EU, the banks—but also Italian society more generally. Leo would get quite emotional when talking about Italians' diminished capacity to "rebel against injustices" and the state of "social anomie" dominating the country.

A second issue he talked at length about was FN's concern with "everyday problems," meaning that anyone can bring about change and do things that are close at hand, such as collecting food for Italians in need and organizing summer

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camps for kids from poor families. These are undertakings in which young volunteers' involvement matters a great deal. At the same time, he was quick to admit that it is not standing in the front of a supermarket to collect food that attracts new, and especially young, male members. Militancy needs to provide young members with adrenaline, risk mixed with fear and excitement, and adventures, for instance by taking night escapades into the city center to illegally or semi-legally distribute and hang posters and stickers. Events such as Ramelli's commemoration also contribute to this, and paradoxically, the obstacles caused by authorities may only make them more attractive due to the aura of uncertainty, semi-legality, and common front against enemies.

Leo's initiation into the organization occurred precisely through the "night adventures" he described to me, allowing him to experience strong emotions and quickly develop a sense of belonging to a community.[24] When he looked back, he realized that joining the FN made him become much more diligent and disciplined. "I got back into line" (*Mi sono rimesso in riga*), he declared. His grades at school improved when he became friends with militants who were senior university students and became role models for him. Despite being highly engaged militants, they performed well in their studies. It was, as he said, a matter of "internal growth" and learning to be responsible. That was also the reason his parents—initially skeptical toward his activism due to the risk it entails—eventually accepted it. Leo explained his father's hesitation to me by the fact he had experienced himself the so-called "years of lead,"[25] which made him wary of political activism.

Our first conversation was marked by a mix of conflicting emotions from him (my own conflicting emotions have been ever-present throughout this research). He was probably surprised that I refrained from expressing judgement on the activities he described, limiting myself to asking for clarification and additional information. At the same time, he was able to identify some biases in my thinking about the movement. One piece of information that Leo shared with me that day related to his long-term friendship with a member of a Polish far-right group and their summer camp, which he visited each year. He showed me some pictures and stressed that he had regular communication with the friend via social media. Deeply interested in the question of transnational networking, I kept asking questions with the aim of better understanding what he perceived to be the main benefits of those meetings: was it about exchanging ideas and tactics, or did it create international far-right solidarity? Although Leo's reaction did not

[24] Leo never reported violence occurring during such night actions, nor did I observe acts of violence when doing research. I am fully aware, however, that "night adventures" may involve violent encounters and attacks.

[25] The term "years of lead" (literally *anni di piombo*) refers to two decades of political struggles and terrorist attacks committed by both the far right and far left between the late 1960s and late 1980s.

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invalidate these hypotheses, I will never forget his annoyed response: “Can’t you understand that we have simply *become friends*?”

In the following weeks, I had an opportunity to get to know Leo as an extremely devoted activist and a very attentive person. He would always find time to talk to me when I arrived at the FN headquarters, make sure to introduce me to other people, and offer me a bottle of water or coffee. He was meticulous in his tasks, supervised work that had been assigned, and paid attention to details, for example, by taking over the production of the FN posters and flyers in order to make them more playful, smart, and attention-grabbing. My recollection of Leo during the first weeks and months of our acquaintance revolves around certain seemingly contrasting images. The first is one of him trying to maintain control over a small demonstration that had been blocked by a group of left-wing protesters. Only several dozen FN activists had gathered that night, and the risk of losing in case of a clash was real. Leo ran back and forth, demanding order from the people under his command and repeating that they should not be provoked (to fight). He grew impatient only toward the end, when he became angry about the police force’s supposedly more favorable and lenient attitude toward the protesters. He lunged at one of them with a belt in his hand, only to be calmed down by the head of the police unit. The second image comes from the time when Leo picked up the phone in the middle of one of the FN charity events I attended. I will not forget the humble expression on his face when he apologized to his mother for not making it home for dinner. “I am a wayward son” (*Sono un figlio disgraziato*), he told me a minute later with a weak smile, before rushing back to his duties.

Over the next two years, I observed Leo change profoundly. Due to a sudden vacancy, he was nominated to the position of the regional leader, a role that was quite unusual at his young age. As regional leader, he would still welcome my requests to attend events and visit headquarters, but he rarely made time to talk. He seemed stressed and sometimes expressed being annoyed about all the things he had to organize and take care of. If, in the past, we used to chat about this and that, sitting at the small bar in their headquarters, he was now always busy answering text messages, phone calls, and frequent questions from other militants. His style of dress also changed, becoming more “military-inspired” and darker. Due to his responsibilities, he eventually had to interrupt his studies. Throughout, he has remained much admired and respected by both younger and older members of the regional FN chapter. Not a charismatic speaker, he has instead won sympathy and support due to his organization skills, devotion to his work, sense of humor, and—I am guessing here—his unusual ability to be both “tough” and “soft.”

At the bar in the FN headquarters where we used to sit and chat, Leo always selected a high chair, which, from my perspective, placed him directly in front of a portrait of the leader of the Romanian fascist organization Iron Guard, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu: a well-known, black-and-white reproduction of the young

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leader looking confidently into the camera lens. Leo is obsessed with this figure. He made all the FN members read "The Nest Leader's Manual" (Codreanu 2005 [1936]), periodically assigned them additional pieces, and quoted from him on a variety of occasions. National territory? Codreanu carried a small container of Romanian soil on his neck. Religion? Codreanu showed its importance as roots and a way of belonging. Values? He helped to bring them from the underground and demonstrated the relevance of spirituality in the fight. Nationalism and Antisemitism? Codreanu made it clear that anti-Semitism was a necessary response when your own nation is endangered.[26] Never were those references more frequent than when it came to his discussions on national heritage and national continuity: "Because when we march, the dead march next to us." Had the person expressing it not been a subject of this study, I would qualify that sentence as an expression of nationalist sentimentalism. But, stuck in my head, it returned every time I participated in demonstrations, commemorations, and other events that I would define as related to the past and which, in the view of my research participants, were oriented toward the future. It was true also for the 2019 commemoration of Ramelli, when I saw Leo for the last time: busy as usual, he was trying to keep things under control, telling "his people" to keep order.

Francesca

Francesca's attitude during the demonstration was very different. Sure, she did not have the same level of responsibility as Leo, but observing her calmness and at times near stoicism that evening made me reflect on the position she had come to occupy within the far-right movement. With oversized glasses and long loose hair, elegant shirts, and a favorite pair of straight jeans, Francesca looked like a girl you would more likely see leaning over books in a university library than at a far-right demo. She had no tattoos and could rarely be seen with any symbols suggesting links with Lealtà Azione, the movement she had been part of for several years.

Francesca was born in southern Italy into a solidly middle-class family, and now lives in a city in the north where she attends college. Her father was an accomplished doctor who was able to support the educational aspirations of his three children. Her grandfather was the city mayor. As Francesca underscores, politics have always been important in her family, although she is an outsider when it comes to her political views. Still, she was deeply attached to her family and hometown and did not hesitate to prioritize family events over LA ones.

[26] He would elaborate that Codreanu saw Jewish dominance among the upper classes and saw them as a source of cosmopolitanism that put "Romanianness" in danger. Needless to say, Codreanu's views on Jews were much more complex and radical.

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The family had traveled the world, and Francesca had very fond memories of those trips. Sitting over a plate of exquisite Italian cheese, she would tell me about her love for Thai cuisine, Argentinian steaks, and sushi, only to conclude, "But what's better than this?" Her attachment to Italian heritage, expressed through its cuisine, and conviction about its uniqueness, led her to ask me many questions, like: "Do you remember what you *felt* when you had pizza for the first time?" She explained that her travels were "co-responsible" for her decision to join a far-right movement. "The reason I joined is that I have always been fascinated by how other people think," she would tell me, explaining how having moved to the north and begun her studies, she began searching for a platform for political action. What at first sounded more like an explanation for why someone would become an anthropologist than a far-right militant became clearer after further encounters and conversations.

Francesca recalled her travels whenever we talked about immigration, one of the key subjects tormenting far-right activists. Immigration tended to be understood as the "illegal business" of boats, with migrants arriving from Africa, the Italian state's incapacity to provide jobs, as well as the lack of cooperation amongst EU countries. Most activists strived to present themselves and their movements as rational rather than racist. They explained that limiting immigration and/or sending immigrants back to their home countries is not only the best possible response but one that ultimately benefits immigrants themselves, who are victims of an impossible mission to fulfill promises for a better life. This strategy has been aptly described by Michael Herzfeld (2007) as "tactful tactic" and "compassionate racism." Some activists, including Francesca, came up with more intricate explanations, seeing in immigration a means of dangerous cultural mixing that threatened the world's existing diversity. "Why travel if the 'difference' no longer exists, if we are all similar, or even the same? I love traveling, but I love doing it because it gives me an opportunity to get to know something different." "We cannot cancel 'the other,'" she would declare. This way of turning the idea of immigration upside-down as rendering societies less diverse, I have come to realize, is quite common especially among students and graduates who support their views with carefully adapted anthropological theories and quotes from the dystopian novels of Renaud Camus and Jean Raspail.[27] A soon-to-be graduate in history, Francesca complemented her explanation with the idea of "boundaries" as something "natural," in a diachronic perspective that began with Romulus, ancient Rome, and the Roman idea of *limes* (a system of frontier defenses).

I remember well the talk about *limes* from our very first encounter. We met in the regional LA headquarters: a dark basement, with walls decorated with

[27] Raspail is primarily known as the author of *The Camp of the Saints* (1995), and Camus for his conspiracy theory of the "great replacement."

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pages from Dante's *Divine Comedy.* At first surprised, I soon realized that the "decorations" were related to many of our discussions. Francesca, like her boyfriend (and fellow LA member) and most of the activists who accompanied us that evening, enjoyed talking to me about art and beautiful churches in the area. She spoke sophisticated Italian, reaching for metaphors and idiomatic expressions, and suggested places that I should visit, continuously stressing the uniqueness of Italian culture and the need to defend it. Activists were convinced that their role was to educate and raise cultural awareness by transforming their headquarters into "mind-blowing laboratories" in which to experiment with different forms of activism, from poetry readings to historical battle reenactments and thematic dance parties. At the same time, they would accuse left-wing groups of mediocrity and lacking culture. (Commenting on a picture with anti-fascist graffiti written with a mistake and spread via Facebook, someone said: "Poor Dante must be turning over in his tomb!")

Francesca began her career within the movement as a rank-and-file member, but her organizational skills and knowledge were quickly recognized by the main LA leaders, and she became the head of the unit that organizes international missions to aid persecuted Christians. The group was involved in Palestine, Kosovo, and Syria, working with schools (attended by Christian kids), local churches, and authorities and helping with renovations, repairs, and material assistance. Francesca's tasks ranged from the administration of social media and internet platforms related to the project, to maintaining contact with people at the international sites. In describing the group's goals, she presented a well-crafted picture, detailing the scale of religious persecution, describing the socio-political situation in the localities where they work, and accusing religious authorities (such as the leaders of Italian Catholic Church) of inaction. She would not deny that there were political aspects to their involvement—for example, that their activism in Kosovo translated into support for Serbian claims to the territory, and that they considered Syrian president Bashar Hafez al-Assad to be the legitimate president and deserving of support. She seemed prepared for all my questions, which implied a different perspective on the long-term conflict in Kosovo or the Syria civil war.

This is not to say that she mindlessly repeated the political stances that dominate far-right movements and parties, which have been increasingly aligned with Vladimir Putin's policies. Francesca would admit that, at the end of the day, all parties involved were realizing their interests ("Putin is not a disinterested volunteer, he will have his returns"), but she and her collaborators explained that they simply needed to ensure the cooperation of those who made pushing their own agenda possible. Therefore, having become responsible for the project, she was very proactive in trying to reach local journalists in Syria and spreading the information they provided on social media. She considered this to be an act of surfacing the truth about the conflict: "This is a picture of a Muslim woman, reading Quran next to the coffin of a Christian neighbor. It needs to be made clear

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that the only real war in Syria is that being fought between Civilization and the barbarities," read one of her widely shared Facebook posts, presenting Christians and Muslims as civilization and the rebel groups as the barbarians. While such accounts did at times provide a more nuanced picture, they also tended to have a clear political edge. The conviction that "fake news" dominates mainstream (read: left-wing liberal) discourses, for example, is widely shared within these spaces.

Apart from becoming the head of one of the units, Francesca also developed her own initiatives. One of her LA chapter's recent achievements is the establishment of a collaboration with a small archive that collects documents related to the Italian Socialist Republic and its soldiers, as well as a variety of World War II memorabilia.[28] Curated by a group of former combatants, the archive was going into decline and the presence of a group of young people eager to steward it has enabled restoration work. One Saturday, I had the opportunity to join them during such activity. Francesca was the only female activist present, and she was the person everyone listened to; she was the one the elderly custodian consulted when making plans for the day; she was asked to supervise shopping for the meals to be cooked, and to pick up at the train station a historian who was to give a guest talk; she assigned tasks and scheduled responsibilities for the upcoming week; and she carried and moved furniture just as the men did. She was fittingly referred to as "*capa*" (boss lady). She was calm, spoke slowly, and when planning further activities would recite the local LA chapter's plans for the weeks to come from memory. Whether at the Ramelli commemoration or a conference where she had to take the floor, she gave the appearance of a composed, cool-headed group leader.

Her attitude contrasted with the behavior of other female LA members I observed, which tended to indicate a willingness to fulfill tasks assigned by men and tacitly accept that they needed men's permission to do certain things like leave demonstrations early. Francesca's example, in contrast, seemed to well illustrate Kathleen Blee's (2003: 134) call for recognizing "centerwomen," and more broadly, that "leadership, in the sense of providing group cohesion, mediating conflict, developing political strategies, and nurturing collective identities is concentrated in the middle and less visible layers of racist organizations." The acknowledgment of these different forms of leadership helps us to better comprehend the ways in which (some) women reconcile their willingness to be at the forefront with the rigid gender hierarchies that such organizations uphold.

[28] The Italian Social Republic (Repubblica Sociale Italiana) was created in September 1943 in Northern Italy and existed until Germany's surrender in the spring of 1945. It was led by Benito Mussolini but depended on Nazi Germany. The popular name—the Republic of Salò (due to its headquarters in Salò)—is rejected by far-right activists as offensive and purportedly ignoring the Republic's legitimacy.

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Yet another thing that made my encounters with Francesca different from those with many other women, who tended to more strictly guard the borders of their female circles, was that she accepted my presence as something "natural"; she quickly understood the way I worked and gathered data, and created space for it. This is why my interactions with her were also so polysemous. On the afternoons we spent together in her cool shady apartment that protected us from the Italian heat, I would sit at the table, scribbling down her accounts on volunteering abroad, while she stood in the open door between the room and the balcony, talking with cigarette in hand and looking out the window towards the mountains visible in the distance. When we got tired, we would head to a nearby café for ice cream and take walks along the river, talking about everything from Isabelle Allende's novels to the politics of recycling. It was the latter, less formal part of our meetings that made me—I could not deny it—irritated by her "lectures" in history and politics.

Livio

It was thanks to Francesca that I got to know Livio. Like Francesca, Livio also studies history, and the two of them occasionally meet at the university. Unlike her, Livio restrained himself from joining a movement; he claimed that he had not found one that fully corresponded with his views. He used to be a member of FN but dropped it due to the fact he considered himself to be "atheist, pagan, and anti-Christian" and he could not stand that the party gave such prominence to Catholicism. He explained that Francesca's community, LA, was the closest to his own views at that moment, but he did not feel ready to commit.[29] Nonetheless, he considered regular interactions with others holding similar views to be critical, and he attended various far-right events as a sympathizer.

Livio was a late child of very politically active parents, who were shaped by the 1968 sociocultural revolution and engaged in left-wing politics. His mother linked her politics with her interest in Buddhism and Hinduism, and his father was a communist militant. While Livio seemed proud of his father's "genuine" beliefs in communism, he considered his mother to be unreflective and unable to recognize her own privileged position. "We had a servant at home and she wasn't aware that this made her activism possible," he said. "She was a 'radical chic.'" After his parents' divorced, Livio went to live with his mother. Things went well until middle school, when he became politically active himself and fascinated with fascism and Nazism, having first discovered music groups connected with far-right movements. His interest in music led him to seek out literature on the subject and attend his first political demonstrations. Finding Livio's views

[29] LA also advocates for the importance of Catholicism, especially as a cultural heritage and tradition to be defended. However, in comparison with FN, it includes less religious rhetoric in its actions and rituals.

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despicable, his mother told him she was ashamed of giving birth to him and made him move in with his father, who lived in a small mountain village at the time, unemployed and barely making ends meet.

Livio's views did not please his schoolteachers either, and he dropped out at the age of seventeen. He and his father, an architect, began developing a plan to establish a small commune in the mountains and undertook a lot of physical work in order to earn a living. He recalls that period of his life with fondness, considering it to be a crucial, formative experience that allowed him to understand that "a life in which you need to face problems is more meaningful." Finding his father's plans to be tainted by his interest in communist ideology and eco-sustainability, Livio fantasized about establishing a small, monocultural commune that would be a model for others and, in the long run, lead to the spiritual and moral rebirth of European, white civilization.

The latter constitutes an obsession for Livio. He strongly believes that what we are experiencing today constitutes an attempt to destroy "racial diversity" and that the people responsible for that are, first and foremost, Jews. How do they do this? Livio blames "stupid Hollywood movies" that cause brainwashing, "wild capitalism," the promotion of "uncontrolled migration" from Africa, and the worst enemy of them all: *individualism.* No matter what example you take, in his view, Jewish people or Jewish lobbies are behind them. When I responded by referencing deep-rooted anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, he would go on, countering, "Let's think logically. It must be something wrong with Jews if no matter where they settle, people have something against them." At the same time, he claimed that he agreed with some Jews, just as he agrees with some Muslims or any other person who makes a strong argument against racial or cultural mixing. "In short, Jewish or Muslim or African cultural fundamentalists are our biggest allies!"

I first met Livio at a community dinner organized by LA. I spotted him immediately due to his distinctive look: green cargo pants, oversized knit sweater, Dr. Martens boots, and long curly hair. I had been doing research for a while at that point and had become aware of the diversity of people that far-right movements attract, but otherwise I would probably have thought that he had shown up there by mistake. He, in turn, became interested in talking to me when he heard that I was anthropologist. "Anthropologist. How cool! I've seriously considered studying anthropology." He sat down next to me and for the rest of the evening and, together with two fellow guys, bombarded me with information and questions. He proved to be quite up to date with current anthropological theories and often introduced his thoughts with: "As an anthropologist, you will be surprised to hear that…." Given his wish to establish a self-sustainable mountain commune, he was especially interested in anthropological writings on "primitive societies," and he kept talking about various ethnological exhibitions he had seen and enjoyed. Due to his especially garrulous character, the LA dinner transformed into one of those evenings you remember as if you were in a fog. I know

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there were dozens of people occupying the tables around us, and I remember the LA team bringing food and drinks, but I was unable to notice much else as Livio kept talking and talking, entering in heated arguments with me and the people sitting next to us, leaving the table only briefly to smoke a cigarette. Despite being a strong believer, Livio's main goal was to be contrarian. Well-read and familiar with the debates on all sides of the political spectrum, he liked to challenge and provoke.

His peculiar valorization of racial and ethnic diversity and cultural traditions manifested in different ways over the following months. We walked a lot through the city and, no matter if we stopped at the Christmas market or went to eat pizza, I was sure to get a short lecture about the background of a particular dish or the different ingredients typical of different parts of Italy. A "purist" when it comes to contemporary cultural ideals, he was fascinated by the different "cultures," especially during the Middle Ages, that led to the development of what is considered to be "Italian culture" today. A predilection for the Middle Ages manifested in yet another hobby he had been faithful to since adolescence: the "fantasy world," entailing a commitment to particular readings (with J.R.R. Tolkien's books at the top) and to community events involving group role-playing games such as Dungeons & Dragons. Notwithstanding its purely entertaining aspect, Livio's hobby fits his broader outlook, since the protagonists of the books and games he values perfectly illustrate the well-ordered, hierarchical world he seeks.

Livio spent a good deal of time reading and planning; his aim, again, was to establish a micro-commune in the mountains, a place where people would sustain themselves with whatever they produced or exchanged with neighbors. He was aware that such a project could only function nowadays on a micro scale, but he hoped to eventually replicate it across various settings. When listening to his enthusiastic description of the project, I could detect both the influence of his father's views and anthropological readings about "primitive societies" that he claimed to be inspired by. Although to many the project may sound utopian, a few years ago Livio was quite close to putting it into practice, and it failed only because of his disagreements with fellow collaborators. Now, he is busy looking for new ones, and especially for a woman with whom he could run a household and start a family.[30]

Until then, he continues his studies. He reconciled with his mother, and as far as I understood, she supports him financially. He introduced me to her one day when she came to visit him and proposed we grab an ice cream together. She was apparently puzzled that a reasonable woman wanted to listen to his "*cazzate*" (bullshit). When we met, she did not even ask about my work. Like Livio, she

[30] Livio's valorization of rurality and his pronatalism are a good example of the importance of "fascism-regime" ideology (and not only "fascism-movement" one) in the studied milieus.

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would just bombard me with information, inquiring about the art I liked, making suggestions on the must-see exhibitions in town, and being critical of the ice-cream place I chose (which was not "authentic" enough).

Due to his knowledge, Livio was well-respected by many LA activists, who would have been glad to count him amongst their members. But his "intellectual pose" can annoy people. As Francesca's boyfriend puts it, when talking about Livio and his reluctance to join them, "In order to understand what real militancy means, one also needs to get their hands dirty cleaning toilets; it is not enough to play the wise guy."[31]

And who is *a real militant* to Livio? I asked him that question during one of our last meetings, and he looked at me and said, "You." I choked and started laughing, but when I realized he was not making fun of me—he knew my views well by then—I asked for an explanation. He replied, "You are pregnant with your second child and so many people today are not even capable of deciding on one."

DIVERSITY AND UNIFORMITY OF FAR-RIGHT PATHWAYS

Why have I chosen to highlight Leo, Francesca, and Livio? When I think back to Ramelli's commemoration, I see the faces of so many people I could have introduced here: M., the proud grandson of a fascist mayor who was later persecuted by communist partisans; L., a half-orphan who manages to reconcile the tasks of being the main breadwinner, continuing her studies, and being a highly engaged militant; J., whose relatives were victims of the ethnic cleansing in Istria, the memory of which has had a profound impact on his activism; or F., a skinhead whose body is covered with so many tattoos, you can hardly see his eyes, and who eagerly glorifies war and violence. Their backgrounds and stories at first seem to be so distinct as to make it difficult to identify any clear biographical patterns that have led them to activism. Fervent Christians and "cultural Catholics," diligent students and permanent wanderers, those continuing their relatives' paths or rebelling against them—all of them claim to have found "a safe harbor" in far-right militant communities. A similar recognition of the diversity of far-right actors' paths informs numerous publications based on life stories and biographical interviews (Fangen 1999; Pilkington 2016). Historical works also make it evident that the biographies of fascists and Nazi party members were quite diverse (Haynes and Rady 2014).

This is not to say that it is impossible to indicate some important common features in the militants' stories, even if those are manifest differently. Despite their uniqueness, they do indeed represent larger trends, which are important for understanding not only the Italian context but youth far-right militancy more

[31] Such comments bring to mind how fascist ideologues accentuate the importance of manual work (see, e.g., Carstocea 2017).

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broadly. I will first summarize my observations on Italy and then relate them to my observations on Polish and Hungarian activists, to provide some concluding thoughts on the pathways of far-right activism in contemporary Europe.

Let us start with the initiation. When studying "entry" or "conversion" moments, strikingly common across the narratives I gathered is the *randomness* of choice. While it may seem to indicate *that I see a pattern where there is none,* the issue of randomness appears to be quite emblematic not only of the movements studied here, but for social movements more broadly. In fact, few activists admit to having held strong nationalist, identitarian, or right-wing views prior to joining one of the movements. Rather, they emphasize a "search" for something: a community of reference, examples to follow, and a platform on which to be active. This fact indicates the necessity of understanding various mobilization strategies that occur *within* the movements themselves (Munson 2009; Blee 2003): community-building practices such as the "night adventures" described by Leo, the volunteerism abroad narrated by Francesca, or demonstrations which often entail a "promise" of a violent confrontation. Factual and imagined clashes with police and political opponents play an important role and can be easily manipulated to attest to either the movement's potential or the violence of the opponents and necessity to defend the movement (see Cammelli 2015). All these forms of activism are supposed to reinforce two aspects: the strength of the community and its uniqueness.

Apart from constituting a network of support, community is seen as an elitist collective pursuing a particular mission. A good illustration of such views and experiences are the T-shirts they wear at large gatherings, which bear slogans like: "Join the revolution!"; "We can achieve the impossible because we believe in the incredible"; "Dig out a trench and make of it your life!"[32]; and "And when they ask you: 'Where are you heading?,' you will answer: 'Everywhere!'" The slogans thus combine a conviction of uniqueness, separation from the rest of the world, sacrifice, and vocation. They feature the idea of a community that transgresses divisions through common values, and which stands in stark contrast to the outside world. Also very relevant in this context, therefore, are in-group narratives about other actors such as the state, ("hostile") mass media, and oppositional groups. It is plausible to assume—even if far-right leaders would be reluctant to admit it—that they *want* certain activities to be banned, or at least limited, because that enhances group mobilization and cohesion and identity-building processes. As suggested in the description of Ramelli's commemoration, such occurrences do serve important functions, enabling leaders to intertwine their narratives of superiority and scorn towards state representatives with

[32] The idea of trenches refers to the fact that fascism developed during the First World War. "*Trinceristi*" were thought of as elite fighters, and "*trincerocrazia*" as the rule of war veterans.

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accounts of permanent discrimination and victimization. One needs also to point out to the *mutual benefits* to be drawn from such clashes. For the far right, such events are, as Mabel Berezin observes (1997: 246) in reference to fascist rituals, "vehicles of solidarity—communities of feeling—in an ideological project." For their opponents, as suggested in a poignant analysis by Nitzan Shoshan (2016), they are a means of producing "extremism."

My observations from other contexts confirm many of the point made above, which suggests that Italian activists share a certain generational (pan-European?) experience. As in Italy, many Polish and Hungarian activists claim that they joined a far-right movement by chance, or that it was a result of them "searching" for something in life. To recognize that there is a certain "randomness," however, does not deny that there are some important factors that inspired their "search." Crucial in this regard are the various experiences of diversity that appear in activists' stories, experiences which appear to be an important pattern in radical nationalists' trajectories (Teitelbaum 2017). They claim to represent a generation that has experienced the unprecedented effects of migration, caused by a series of events, including wars in the Balkans, EU expansion, increased economic migration from Northern Africa, and the 2007 economic crisis. Whether they met immigrants in school and workplaces, or only heard about them on the news, their presence has had a profound impact on their views, and their actions that follow. What I have found particularly revealing is how their narratives about encounters with religious and ethnic "others" so adeptly intertwine expressions of hostility and admiration. Perceived as competitors for scarce resources and threats to their native culture, foreigners are at the same time respected due to their attachment to their own cultural background and tendency to maintain ethnic and religious traditions. As such, they are said to be a source of inspiration for treating their own national cultures more seriously and, as has been shown in the accounts above, to guard boundaries and cultural purity. Generally, a growing number of scholars are discussing youth's emphasis on national heritage and national belonging in terms of a generational shift (Feischmidt 2020).

Similar observations apply to the discourse on emigration. No matter if experienced by themselves or by their peers, emigration constitutes a fundamental common point of reference. The necessity to go abroad in search of employment is discussed in terms of violations of one's right to live and work in the place where one was born, as a coercion rather than choice, and fundamentally, as damaging for the nation. Echoes of fascist discourse on migration are no doubt detectable here (see Ballinger 2020). Both the discourses on religious and ethnic "others" and those on youth immigration are linked with perceptions of various forms of *injustice*, which are heightened through involvement in numerous activities organized by the movements. Discourses about the "prioritization" of foreigners' needs in contemporary Europe, city authorities supposedly

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favoring left-wing activism, and unavenged crimes committed against fellow militants constitute compelling material for mobilization and provide activists with the sense of mission. The idea of a mission, in turn, goes hand-in-hand with the idea of being chosen and a sense of exclusivity and a kind of elitism. "The life *we have chosen* is not made everyone," is a sentiment echoed in various forms by many activists, presenting themselves as warriors, the people who have discovered a particular vocation, and who are ready to sacrifice for the "cause."

Such attitudes explain the "transnational" popularity[33] of figures like Codreanu, perceived as an uncompromising individual and a martyr who died for the cause.[34] He is further cherished as a visionary, for his idea of "nest" and "legions" forming a parallel society (Haynes 2008) and his emphasis on "deeds" serving the construction of a new society "on the ruins of today" (Carstocea 2017: 185). In activists' accounts, their self-perception as new legionaries may be intertwined with the image of activists as courageous *fellows of the ring.* The idealization of fascist leaders and other radical right-wing ideologues makes it possible to "blend" historical figures with the protagonists of books and movies, since what matters is not how "real" they were or are but what examples they supposedly set. For what is continually stressed is the need to defend certain lifestyles and values and, at the same time, promote them widely. "You are a member of X no matter where you go: whether you are with other members, at home or in the workplace," is yet another leitmotiv in members' accounts. This emphasis on exemplary figures and core values leads to a final question concerning the relationship between values, beliefs, and actions.

Studies exploring moral claims and ideologies of far-right movements frequently expose inconsistencies and demonstrate how certain ideals are conveniently abandoned depending on the context. This is evident, for instance, in studies of the radical right-wing ideas of "New Man" and its implementation (Dagnino, Feldman, and Stocker 2018). While such a focus is helpful for understanding why certain political projects fail and why believers become disillusioned, it does not in itself bring us closer to better explanations for activists' pathways and what they want to achieve. In his poignant analysis of Codreanu's legionary movement, Eugen Weber (1966) reverses the question of compromises and inconsistencies and instead takes them as *given.* Many scholars make similar points in relation to Mussolini's followers, highlighting "the contrast between what [the Fascist party] was and what ought to have been" (Lupo 2000: 24), the "relentlessly contradictory" character of Mussolini's ideal of New Man (de Grazia 2020: 7), and "overlapping collusions" characterizing fascist and neo-fascist discourses (Herzfeld 2007: 266). That what people do and say do not necessarily "add up," and that there are contradictions and

[33] Apart from Hungary, due to anti-Romanian sentiments.
[34] Codreanu was imprisoned and assassinated in 1938.

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inconsistencies, must be taken seriously (Astuti 2017). Young far-right activists may want to march to claim their rights and faithfulness to a tradition while being perfectly aware of the purely performative aspect of their actions; they may be very serious about "the cause" and at the same time playful and ironic; they may claim the necessity of a "different tomorrow" and a fight against "the system" and yet make compromises when convenient or necessary. Male activists may revere women's militancy but turn female activists, girlfriends, and wives into subordinates; and they may talk about freedom to "come and go" yet threaten and punish the "dissenters." They will still claim to be coherent (*essere coerente)*—a trait they regularly underscore—in line with the values and lifestyle they have chosen.

Henceforth, engaging with far-right claims and practices enables us to see especially clearly that understanding why people invest themselves in certain projects or relations cannot be understood by assessing the naiveté or practicality of their political ideas, or for that matter the correspondence between their idea(l)s and practices. Instead, they can and ought to be understood by exploring why and how individuals pick specific ideas to engage their immediate world and choose them to shape their lives.

CONCLUSIONS: RETHINKING FAR RIGHT, ACTIVISM, AND FAR-RIGHT ACTIVISM

Scholarship examining the far right has moved away from psychological and psychoanalytical analyses centered on the issues of personality disorder, "authoritarian personality" syndrome, experiences of trauma, and other explanations that can be subsumed under the label "victims of the system" (Blee and Creasap 2010). A growing body of work presents far-right activists as middle-class, well-established citizens, as people who have dense networks of social ties and by no means feel excluded; and as students, intellectuals, and entrepreneurs. Similar observations are applicable to cases of far-right activism in the past, since historical analyses often highlight "middle-class" aspirations to gain political power and "humanistic bourgeoisie" as the major demographic of emergent fascist movements. Although I have argued against drawing simple analogies between fascist and contemporary far-right activists, this observation is crucial in that it points to the very constituency of *a socio-political movement*, and not only the fascist one. Consequently, I posit that an understanding of far-right militants' pathways demands that we study young activists' pathways by at times bracketing the adjective "far-right" when trying to understand them. My discussion here of the commemorative event and my presentation of Leo, Francesca, and Livio show characteristics found in any "radical" movement or militant: the discourse of revolution and utopia, a black-and-white worldview, and an emphasis on comradeship and unity. The question then is what makes *right-wing* radicalism particularly appealing.

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My analysis suggests three key factors. The first is the kind of community the far-right promises: this community is presented, and experienced, as having an educational and ethical mission, as focused on "doing," as providing members with an unconditional support and, fundamentally, as a community that transcends here and now. It is a community grounded in some ideas from the past and simultaneously constituting a model for the future. This aspect best explains people's fascination with fascism as a movement, such as Codreanu's grassroots activism. The second factor is that the actions of this community address "injustice"—taking care of neglected co-nationals or forgotten Christians—and speak to the injustice militants claim they too experience. As I indicated, this relates to their experiences of and with ethno-religious diversity and migration which lead them to reevaluate the importance of being rooted in and valuing "national culture." The community is thus a vehicle which recasts social solidarity in terms of cultural particularism (Feischmidt 2020). The third factor is a lofty vocabulary marking the community discourse: the weight given to altruism and sacrifice, and on their heroic mission and arduous path. Such a rhetoric further reinforces the value of belonging to the community and, by extension, helps to "identify" political opponents (as individualistic, disregarding hierarchies, and lacking any broader vision).

I have used the evidence from the Italian case study of my transnational research to better accentuate the tension between idiosyncrasy of activists' paths and some observable common denominators. However, the key factors driving far-right activism in Italy are also found in other contexts I have been studying. Similar convictions and ways of acting characterize kindred movements abroad. Certain issues may be more or less accented but the keywords—"community," "injustice," "revolution"—remain the same. This observation is important for understanding both individual national cases (i.e., how they expand their frame of reference) and the wider European scene: "Fascism in our time is emerging … as a dispersed or distributed phenomenon that reverberates across the continent nested within the political and institutional contradictions of the European Union" (Holmes 2019: 82).

Why does evidence of this sort matter? On the one hand, there is a discrepancy between the findings provided by scholars studying the far right and a perception among many intellectuals, journalists, and others of who far-right activists are. In some cases, data demonstrating relatively complex portrayals of far-right militants seem to be treated more as exceptions that confirm the rule. In others, recognizing that a right-wing activist might be an educated, curious, and smart person translates into an attempt to discredit them as "pseudo-," "fake," or "pretend" intellectuals. By extension, far-right activism in its entirety may be described as such—the suggestion being that those committed to it have a "false" conception of charity and ethics.

On the other hand, it is common for critically acclaimed works on the far right to proclaim the intention of "taking them seriously." But what does "taking

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them seriously" mean? Berezin (1997) examines social experiences of fascism by "taking the fascist project on its own terms"; de Grazia (2020) spotlights individuals' moral and political choices "behind the façade" of the fascist state; Holmes (2019: 85) calls for an attention to "how fascist ideas and sensibilities have become enthralling once again, capable of recruiting young activists intent on recasting the future of Europe." Thus, rather than "assessing" political projects' potentiality and "coherence," they emphasize an understanding—of the boundary between the personal and political, of the relationship between individual agency and wider social processes, of the importance given to certain ideas and their persistent force. Concurring with these observations, I contend that it is our unwillingness to engage intellectually with alternative scenarios, utopian visions, and ideas of radical change that prevents us from better comprehending the appeal of the far right, and the territory they are able to capture precisely by filling the void left by this refusal (Tamas 2000; Traverso 2017). If we are to take these movements seriously, as we should, then the words *"tomorrow belongs to us"* is a call for greater boldness on the part of scholars, as well.

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Abstract: Based on long-term ethnographic research, this article contributes to the growing scholarship on far-right social movements by presenting an in-depth account of the Italian far-right scene. In presenting personal accounts of three activists and situating them within the milieus in which they are active, it sheds light on a variety of factors that push youth to engage in far-right militancy. Many researchers of far-right extremism have asserted the need to provide more in-depth knowledge on far-right militants, yet there remain important gaps that this article strives to address. First, it demonstrates the value of the ethnographic approach in the study of far right, which offers unique insights into the motivations for involvement and the relations between ideas, beliefs, and practices. Second, it shows the importance of situating present-day activism in a historical context, not only by looking for long-term patterns but also by paying attention to the ways studied actors engage with historical comparisons. Third, in engaging critically with some commonsensical approaches to far-right activists, the paper suggests that ethnographic studies of far-right activism can give us fresh perspectives on broader social phenomena beyond the far right per se.

Key words: far right, activism, youth, social movements, community, fascism, Italy

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