POLIDEMOS

VALERIO ALFONSO BRUNO
(ed.)

ON TRADITION, COMMON SENSE AND CONSPIRACIES

Strategies and Insights of the Contemporary Far Right

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On Tradition, Common Sense and Conspiracies

Strategies and Insights of the Contemporary Far Right

EDITED BY
VALERIO ALFONSO BRUNO

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Centro per lo studio della democrazia
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Introduction. On Tradition, Common Sense and Conspiracies: Strategies and Insights of the Contemporary Far Right

VALERIO ALFONSO BRUNO[1]

This year, the international seminars, "Populism and the Far Right" – organised by the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart and Polidemos (Centre for the Study of Democracy and Political Change) – reached their second edition. As per the first edition, inaugurated in early 2022, internationally renowned scholars enriched the university's debate on issues of pressing relevance and complexity, providing both students with unique tools to understand the dynamics of political change and trends within liberal democracies, and scholars with an opportunity for critical reflection and the exchange of views.

The contributions that make this small volume so precious are the very fruitful insights that arose during those seminars, representing an important toolbox for those who are interested in gaining insights into the tactics and strategies employed by contemporary populist radical-right parties and far-right parties. In fact, it is here of the utmost relevance to note

[1] Valerio Alfonso Bruno, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Polidemos (Centre for the Study of Democracy and Political Change, Center for European Futures (Italy), Far-Right Analysis Network (United Kingdom), Center for European Futures (CEF) valerioalfonsobruno@unicatt.it.

that, also in virtue of such well-conceived and employed devices, the extreme right no longer represents a circumscribed sphere or a galaxy per se, still dangerous yet "confined" and "under control", so to speak (Ignazi 1994, Mudde 2019). In fact, many of the conspiracy theories, beliefs, opinions, and ideologies associated with the extreme right (Griffini 2023; Orofino and Allchorn 2023) that were thought to have been relegated to the past, are today not only more alive than ever, but almost perfectly welded within the conservative mainstream (in some cases even referred to as moderate)[2] and are an integral part of contemporary political science thinking (Palano 2023).

Last year, in the co-edited book based on the first edition of international seminars and entitled *Populism and Far Right: Trends in Europe* (2022), we encountered the following topics: the far right's use in Germany and the UK of media vehicles to channel hate towards official institutions and immigrants through discourses that are socially accepted as "truth", and the Spanish far-right's spectacularisation of politics on social media; the link between the contemporary mainstreaming of the European far right and the environment, including the debate on ecofascism, right-wing ecology, far-right ecologism and green nationalism; the role of ideological flexibility in Italy's and France's populist parties and the electoral consequences of ambiguity, and the role of public Euroscepticism in Southern, Eastern and Western Europe.

This year, beyond the numerous electoral victories (as in Italy), the real result at the political level has been a gradual but unstoppable convergence among the right-leaning of the political spectrum. That convergence is in fact a two-way process

[2] For an overview of the key concepts and state of the art review of Far Right in Europe see Kondor and Littler (2023).

that has occurred both (a) with the extreme right going mainstream and (b) the 'moderate' right radicalising. The result is that it is now very difficult to distinguish where one ends or the other begins. Another equally important element is that this gradual but continuous process of interpenetration between centre-right and far right, often labelled as conservative, represents fertile ground for an overall ideological shift increasingly to the right (Bruno 2023).

Again, an example from Italy. Until a few years ago it would have been unthinkable that a member of the military and a general of the Italian army, Roberto Vannacci, could write a self-published book, *Il mondo al contrario* ("The world upside down", 2023), in which he claimed (using a ferocious victim rhetoric and drawing on nativism and sovereignty) that minorities, from immigrants to the LGBT community, would now put "true Italians" in a position of danger and in check. Or that this book would be a best-seller in Italy for the past months. In short, if the contents are not (or at least not entirely) new, it seems astonishing that an army general could achieve such visibility and notoriety, becoming a coveted guest for interviews and television talk shows, and appearing as a guest in debates with politicians and conservative scholars. On the 20 September 2023, a meeting was organised in Rome by the think-tank, *Nazione Futura*, with Vanacci as main guest. As brilliantly noted by Diletti and Mazzonis (2023):

> [...] The evening was organised by the main think-tank in the Fratelli d'Italia area, "Nazione Futura"; one of the interlocutors on stage was its president, Francesco Giubilei. An element of interest for *Nazione Futura* is that of establishing international relations with other nationalist think-tanks, such as those gathered around the American National Conservatism project. It is Giubilei, in fact, who provided several ideological framework coordinates for the evening [...]. We do not know,

> however, the reasons for the "political realism" behind this meeting: Vannacci is popular, aligned on a narrative very similar to that of the more combative and anti-system, Giorgia Meloni. Vannacci is also of interest to the League and other minor political entities, while the general himself does not rule out a leap into politics (he reiterated this during the evening). We do not know whether there is an ongoing competition between Vannacci's suitors, or what degree of intensity it has reached; however, we can imagine that, in the current political-media market of "celebrities", being with Vannacci would produce positive dividends (like taking a photo with an influencer, a method that characterises all political forces, without exception) [...][3].

The structure of the book

In the first chapter of the book, "Granola Nazis And Neoliberal Mystics", Catherine Tebaldi and Alfonso Del Percio discuss digital traditionalism, that is, the ways in which new technologies enable old, often reactionary, ideologies and new modes of life which often call to mind images of ancient traditions. In particular, Tebaldi and Del Percio focus on two seemingly opposed elements of what they call "digital traditionalism": (a) the rise of white nationalist online influencers, and their use of women's media, and (b) the UK fascist group, Patriotic Alternative, who couch white supremacy in a return to so-called traditional ways of living that mix the hippie's "back to the land" and the Nazi's "blood and soil". The chapter offers an analysis of "neoliberal mystics", i.e., entrepreneurs who use the language of ancient spiritual traditions and wellness for technocratic ends. According to Tebaldi and Del Percio, while rugged

[3] Translation in Italian by the editor of the book.

homesteaders and suited HR bureaucrats may seem at opposite ends of the spectrum, they both blend new technology and reactionary politics, traditionalism and futurism (see also Leidig 2023; Tebaldi 2021).

In the second chapter, Katherine Kondor argues that the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures implemented by various governments tended to foster specific far-right conspiracy theories. Particularly concerning was the perception of pandemic measures as support for the New World Order conspiracy theory, which suggested that the pandemic was part of a grand plan for total control. More specifically, Kondor starts from the premise that throughout history people have adopted conspiratorial beliefs to explain the origins of various pandemics, with the coronavirus being surrounded by alternative explanations for the origins of the virus and the efficacy of safety measures; these correlate with studies showing that conspiracy beliefs increase when people feel powerless as they offer individuals some sense of control in being able to reject official narratives.

In the third chapter, George Newth analyses Matteo Salvini and the Lega's use of "common sense" to depict policies via Twitter. In particular, by combining a Gramscian-inspired dyad of common sense versus good sense (*senso comune* v *buon senso*) with the general orientation of the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) to Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), Newth examines Salvini's use of a *buon senso* trope over the five year period (2018-2023), revealing how Salvini's use of *buon senso* formed part of a populist far right logic to construct a reactionary people and contribute to a mainstreaming of far right politics (see also Newth 2023).

In the fourth, final chapter of the book, I focus on the sudden and risky decision, taken in August 2023 by the Italian executive led by Giorgia Meloni, to tax the extra-profits of Italian

banks, which was largely welcomed by the political opposition. More specifically, using the notion of *vincolo esterno* ("external constraint"), so avoiding conflict with European Union Institutions and the organisations of which it is a member (NATO, G7), I argue that the Meloni government's actions in this first year have carefully respected this constraint, seeking continuity with the Draghi government at the foreign policy level (as the Ukrainian dossier can demonstrate) and showing how the tax's rationale is hard to understand. In fact, the chapter concludes that rather than a (populist) well-conceived marketing device, the taxation of Italian banks – or at least the first draft of the tax – was conducted as a pure improvisation.

It is key but not enough to focus political analysis only on the electoral performances of the far right, as is often done. Instead, it is essential to add the awareness that, beyond the more or less positive results at the ballot box, the political fact going on is the transformation of a political system "from within". In this respect, liberal democracies have been lately often referred to as forms of government with adequate "antibodies" to deal with possible democratic backsliding or regression. To keep the antibody metaphor, it may be worth asking: do today's liberal democracies are capable of recognising the increasingly normalised features of right-wing extremism as pathogenic and foreign bodies?

In conclusion, we acknowledge those scholars whose extremely important research and dissemination efforts made both the second edition of UCSC international seminars' "Populism and Far Right" and this book possible. Genuine thanks also go to all the students and scholars whose valuable participation made the debates both challenging and productive. Finally, a special acknowledgment goes to my colleagues at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Damiano Palano and Antonio Campati, who actively contributed to the organisation

and success of these seminars in the hope that this important initiative will continue soon with its third edition.

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Granola Nazis and Neoliberal Mystics

CATHERINE TEBALDI AND ALFONSO DEL PERCIO[1]

Abstract. In Granola Nazis and Neoliberal Mystics we discuss digital traditionalism or the ways in which new technologies enable old ideologies, often reactionary, and new modes of life which often call the images of ancient traditions. Each section discusses two seemingly opposed elements of digital traditionalism, first, the rise of white nationalist online influencers, and their use of women's media, second, the UK fascist group patriotic alternative, a group who couch white supremacy in a return to so called traditional ways of living in a mix of a hippie's back to the land and a Nazi's blood and soil. The third section looks at the neoliberal mystics, entrepreneurs who use the language of ancient spiritual traditions and wellness for technocratic ends. While they seem at first opposed, the rugged homesteaders and the suited HR bureaucrats, each of these groups blends new technology and reactionary politics, traditionalism and futurism in ways which tell us a lot about the present moment. These new technologies are ways of making money, but also making value for the (white) nation.
Keywords: Nationalism; Racism; Gender; Digital Research; Tradwives.

Introduction

A long haired, well dressed online presence describing herself as a "cottagecore techno-optimist" defends a rigid gender essentialism opening into anti-trans hate. An internet

[1] Catherine Tebaldi, University of Luxembourg, catherine.tebaldi@uni.lu. Alfonso Del Percio, Universtity College London, a.percio@ucl.ac.uk.

entrepreneurship guru who lives on an island and does goat yoga, an ancestral living influencer making millions off of Instagram and tiktok. Blonde women churning butter or making ancient fermented kvass on very modern youtube channels, or HR leaders and employment gurus celebrating aligning your chakras as a job matching device. Instagram celebrates the algorithm as telling your future, with feeds saying "if you see this it's a message for you" while at the same time reviving older traditions of esoteric mysticism from hyperborea to tarot hipster. Highly online businesses and late platform capitalism fund a return to nature and the old ways, the old gods.

How can someone be both cottagecore, that is a celebrator of the past as a highly offline rural idyll, and a techno-optimist? And why does this person care about gender, or how are these two seemingly contradictory elements resolved in an embrace of traditionalist gender roles and whiteness? In this chapter we discuss these figures as elements of a "digital traditionalism" or "the seemingly contradictory online celebration of pre-digital life, which also encodes deeply right-wing social values as atavistic tradition" (Tebaldi 2023). That is, the ways in which new technologies enable old ideologies, often reactionary, and new modes of life which often call the images of ancient traditions.

Each section discusses two seemingly opposed elements of digital traditionalism. The first section reviews the rise of white nationalist online influencers, and their use of women's media. The second explores the development of semiotics of digital traditionalism, and looks closely at the author's joint project on UK fascist group patriotic alternative, a group of granola Nazis (Tebaldi 2023) who couch white supremacy in a return to so called traditional ways of living in a mix of a hippie's back to the land and a Nazi's blood and soil. The third section looks at the neoliberal mystics, entrepreneurs who use the language of ancient spiritual traditions and wellness for technocratic

ends. While they seem at first opposed, the rugged homesteaders and the suited HR bureaucrats, each of these groups blends new technology and reactionary politics, traditionalism and futurism in ways which tell us a lot about the present moment. These new technologies are ways of making money, but also making value (Del Percio 2022) for the (white) nation. The conclusion explores how these two are connected ideologically, through an exploration of how gender, nation, tradition, and future articulate together. The first section on a return to the past is represented by a woman returning to her natural place, while the second shows how the return to this natural past is also a return to a technologically innovative conquering future.

1. *Tradwives and the language of gendered tradition*

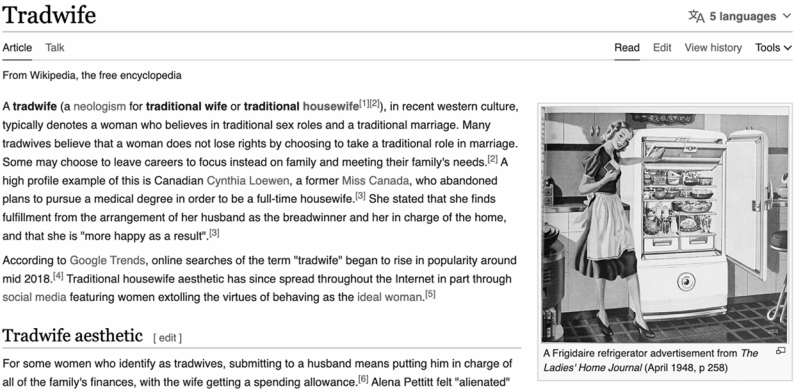
In this section we introduce digital traditionalism through ongoing research the white supremacist women influencers known as the tradwives (Tebaldi 2023, Tebaldi forthcoming, Leidig and Tebaldi forthcoming). Tradwives use the conventions of women's language – speak sweetly, softly, not too much – and women's media – mommy blogs, beauty videos, recipes – for white supremacist metapolitics. That is to change culture with the aim of changing power politics – they take the language women are taught to use privately to value men, to remasculinize the whole public sphere and revalorize white masculinity. With these performances they want to transform racism in to a romance, white nationalism into a domestic idyll. With this they follow long established conventions in American media which use the language of home and love to celebrate conservatism and evangelical Christianity (Bjork-James 2021), as terms from "family values" to Hallmark channel films where

woman falls in love with a white man in a flannel shirt, and through him, Jesus and America.

The tradwives simply do it better, linking the performance of seemingly apolitical language and media genres tied to an idealized womanhood to a deeply political message of a return to tradition as masculine domination and white America. Tradwives whose dress and makeup create links between the suburban 1950's and with it its gender politics, or, in prairie dresses, homesteads and the racial politics from the 1950's – their visual styles and speech performs the submission of women to men, while they advocate for the end of voting and legal personhood for women once they are married, as well as the end of nonwhite immigration and integration. They use the "apolitical" genres of Instagram, mommy blogs, beauty videos to advocate for the total removal of women from politics, linking together the semiotic styles of an idealized femininity with a far right moral universe

This interlinking of a particular type of language and a particular social and moral persona is termed a register (Agha 2007); a register is a set of semiotic elements which "make people up" (Gal 2019) a collection of words but also images, voice styles, makeup, body types which are seen as belonging together and belonging to a certain kind of person. Here the register of idealized womanhood, especially the 1950's American postwar white domesticity, is made of a set of semiotic elements or "pies, patriarchy, and pearls" as one online tradwife's video puts it. They are drawn from advertising images of upper middle class suburban life: new kitchens, well stocked new refrigerators, and a woman in an apron and pearls serving a man. This visual style has become so linked to the movement it is now featured in their Wikipedia article as represented below.

Figure 1 – *The Wikipedia page for tradwife, showing the ways this style has become emblematic for the movement*



Tradwife

5 languages

Article Talk Read Edit View history Tools

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

A **tradwife** (a neologism for **traditional wife** or **traditional housewife**[1][2]), in recent western culture, typically denotes a woman who believes in traditional sex roles and a traditional marriage. Many tradwives believe that a woman does not lose rights by choosing to take a traditional role in marriage. Some may choose to leave careers to focus instead on family and meeting their family's needs.[2] A high profile example of this is Canadian Cynthia Loewen, a former Miss Canada, who abandoned plans to pursue a medical degree in order to be a full-time housewife.[3] She stated that she finds fulfillment from the arrangement of her husband as the breadwinner and her in charge of the home, and that she is "more happy as a result".[3]

According to Google Trends, online searches of the term "tradwife" began to rise in popularity around mid 2018.[4] Traditional housewife aesthetic has since spread throughout the Internet in part through social media featuring women extolling the virtues of behaving as the ideal woman.[5]

Tradwife aesthetic [edit]

For some women who identify as tradwives, submitting to a husband means putting him in charge of all of the family's finances, with the wife getting a spending allowance.[6] Alena Pettitt felt "alienated"

A Frigidaire refrigerator advertisement from *The Ladies' Home Journal* (April 1948, p 258)

They also include a particular vocal style and orientation to language which has been amply described in a series of love and marriage manuals with titles like *The Total Woman, The surrendered wife, or fascinating womanhood.* These manuals, most of which feature a romantic red rose on the cover, give minute instructions for the performance of correct femininity, from how to dress like a woman, how to act like a woman, and how to speak like a woman. All these manuals share the following characteristics, which make up the register: first the binary opposition between male and female – or what Gal and Irvine (2019) call an axis of differentiation, in which what is ideally, best, and most feminine is what is not masculine, and vice versa. Secondly the repetition, or fractal reiteration (Gal and Irvine 2019), of this opposition at every level through instructions for the performance of this gendered difference. That is, femininity is shown in speech; speak softly in volume and in tone, but also softly in content and quality by being agreeable and not getting angry; in body, be soft in the body slender but with curves; and in clothing, which should have soft lines, soft

fabrics, and soft colors. At each moment feminine softness should be distinguished from masculine hardness. Finally, the gendered axis of difference is also a moral one – a question of value and of values. Softness and hardness are not neutral qualities but necessary for being the right kind of person, and occupying the right place in the world. And this place, for women, is below men. Men are hard – which means dominant, powerful, strong. Women are soft, which means sweet and submissive. Toether they form a harmonious romance, what *Fascinating Womanhood* calls "celestial love" (1963, p. 1).

This vision of celestial love, and the gender politics it necessitates, is not merely a fairy tale but an entire cosmology. It also makes then the performance of these gender roles – soft dresses and feminine bodies, sweet speech and gentle listening – create an entire moral universe. The far right use these postwar gender roles to enregister a whole white supremacist social world, but also to perform it and making it look like fun. In Youtube videos and Instagram posts the far right openly celebrate fascinating womanhood, and use the speech conventions Helen Andelin designed to give you a "celestial love affair" for what Julius Evola – the far right traditionalist who wrote "Nazism seen from the right" and "revolt against the modern world called the celestial Aryan race.

Far right women describe this return to traditional roles as "making value again" – here as my co-author points out making value is enregisterment (Del Percio 2023). Here they are first enregistering the ideal woman, this morally marked feminine person type – basically, being a particular kind of pretty – which is seen as soft, sweet, girlish, slender, and then linking these physical qualities to a naturalized gender role as submissive partner. This way of making value then is about how this register is for, that is being a woman of value is being *for men* – what the tradwives call "always male oriented". In the original

femininity manuals this means a woman makes herself valuable by meeting a man's needs, and further that her worth is defined by his value and his metrics.

But secondly the tradwives adapt and complexify this in the new digital traditionalism. Here they are making their men great again; in these discourses providing value is about valorization – the ability, through this submissive register, to create man as your opposite – as the strong, dominant, decisive, intelligent leader. Your pink ruffly dresses create his strong masculine form, your return to the domestic is needed to give him heroic stature as the king in his home. In this use of women's language then, in their always being male oriented, the tradwives assemble their man's value.

The return to tradition becomes a sacrificial step back, honoring and elevating not just the individual man but the white nationalist movement as a whole. Tradwives manipulate, perform, reinforce what gal (1989) calls the semiotics of the public private binary – women's language is domestic, private speech – but they also play with this interscaling public and private – this private speech designed by handbooks elevate you man at home or in the bedroom is used publicly to elevate all men – so this interscaling of public and private is used in ways which preserve the gendered public/private binary. This gendered division scales up – the tradwives public use of private speech aims to use the norms of sex, beauty and romance to remasculinize and whiten the public sphere (Tebaldi, forthcoming). Value here means valuing men, making them heroes, and holding up a white male supremacist social order which you can repaint as a romance.

2. *Granola Nazis and Digital Traditionalism*

If the tradwives use the norms of sex and romance to sell fascism, the Granola Nazi uses the language of health and nature. In this section we use our ongoing research on the Uk fascist group Patriotic Alternative (Tebaldi and Del Percio, forthcoming) to look at new uses of this register. Patriotic Alternative is a group founded by two English people – Laura Towler and Mark Collett – who met through the American tradwife movement. Towler first used similar stylistic norms to shape Patriotic Alternative (PA) from a neo-nazi streetfighting gang into what she calls a "skipnat" group or an ethno-nationalist group which "skips over" the violence. She would wear polka dot dresses and red lipstick evoking a postwar femininity and hosted a series called "tea time" whose title evoked traditional Englishness and community; her soft voice and domesticity increasingly vile racist nationalism as "grandma politics".

However now, PA has shifted towards a new discourse which uses the language of health and nature as it has become increasingly active in natural health and anti-vaccine groups that became popular post-covid. PA uses the language of nature to espouse the great replacement conspiracy theory, in which that Jews are replacing white Europeans with immigrants – but often they represent this with stories of protecting the countryside, or indigenous animals. They celebrate white Britons as an indigenous species, and they will use images of the endangered red squirrel, which is being replaced by grey squirrels, to protest what they see as a looming demographic shift. They now sell all natural soaps, teas, and other products branded with these same endangered English animals designed to encode and circulate this message in new and profitable ways. To the tea of towler's grandma politics is now added a new image of nature and with it, far right ecologism (Lubarda 2023). In this

view, nature is used as a metaphor for race and racial conflict – white people are the natural inhabitants and the immigrants are an invasive species—and nature is also producing value, a special connection between the land and white people who are seen not only as arising out of it naturally, but as its true stewards best able to preserve its beauty and create value. They also sing terrible, really terrible folk music about England being their heart and soul their blood and soil.

Other members of the UK far right include the Raw Egg Nationalist (REN), who similarly deploys a register of gendered white nationalism but in a new way. REN believes that we can defeat what he calls soy globalism and restore a strong nation through movement to eat only raw eggs, although now he has added garlic and liver. In his writing which is one part natural health cookbook, one part body building guide, one part self-help, and one part conspiracy, and in his men's lifestyle magazine he no longer asks tradwives to do the work building heroic masculinity but men themselves making them heroes, building up their muscles their health and their vitality to make a strong white nation. If women's beauty was an essentially submissive nature, male beauty is dominance, but also knowledge – beauty is charisma, but also a science, a proof of far-right beliefs and a project of the mythological revalorization of the west. By defeating your own beer gut, you defeat decadent western feminizing influences and restore civilization.

I term those like PA and REN who are involved in this blending of physical health and far-right ideology granola nazis, which refers a group with both long historical links to blood and soil nationalism, linking deep ecology and deep far politics, and their apparent circulation into leftist spaces in an embrace of a so called "crunchy" style we previously associated with hippies and the left. They at once reveal the racism long part of conservation, the eugenics in the move for organic pure

food, and at the same time show the movement of explicit far right ideas into spaces only perhaps implicitly racist before. As they shift into these spaces of health, wellness and anti-vacc this group I call granola nazis is characterized by a deep ideological investment in the same gendered roles and identities naturalized through sexed bodies as tradition (ie traditional gender roles, traditional feminiity, tradwives) to a new nexus of "nature tradition" tradition of which the "crunchy mom" with her baby at home, alternative medicines and organic food, is the metonym. Granola Nazis celebrate organic food, nature, tradition but they are anything other than simply farmers' market fans, nature lovers, or viking enthusiasts. They take the gendered speech which codes racism as a return to domestic idyll, and add the idealization of nature, creating a new register of nature-tradition, for the purposes of selling white supremacy. These discourses always return to two key themes: nature and tradition are always white expressed in white folk traditions or northern landscapes, and nature tradition is always gendered, expressed in ideas of women returning to their role as mothers which is both natural and traditional. In this way, the register is deeply racializing – it links white tradition to white bodies and white nature – and sees them all as one organic, unity in what is sometimes termed integralism (Holmes 2010).

The difference here, is that it is digital – these strategies of traditionalism are made possible first but the online extension of older metapolitical strategies, and second by new structures of platform capitalism. First, the granola nazi and the tradwives' digital metapolitics extend longstanding strategies of naturalizing and normalizing white supremacist hate as domesticity and nature. These groups have long used femininity strategically to as a ^home front^ in the war for whiteness, as shown in figure 2 below:

Figure 2 – *An early 2000s image from Women For Aryan Unity, a publication for women married to white supremacists*

Here again we see the home at the center of the propaganda effort – showing silhoutes of women engaged in childbearing and domestic tasks, in their "traditional" place. Yet this is

represented a a war with the term "homefront" referring to the US domestic sphere during the second world war; the war is clearly racial with the life rune and the term "racially conscious home".

They extend this with the strategic use of nature to signify beauty and white fertility as in figure 3 below, linking the fertility of white women to the fertile farmland. This is all linked to tradition as shown in all the hashtags about "ancestral roots" and to pagan mysticism as shown in terms like "esoteric. Asatru, religion, pagan, gods"

Figure 3 – *A bucolic image of a white family overlaid with '14' and the slogan 'This is why we fight'*

This is deeply spiritual and deeply natural, it is also, however, deeply racist. The granola nazis are more racially explicit than even the tradwives. In the above image we see multiple

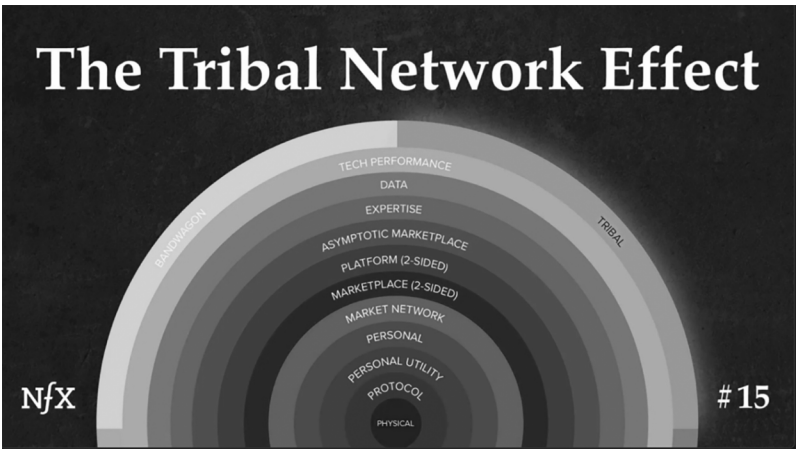
references to David Lane, the founder of Wotanism and the white genocide conspiracy theory, including the large number 14 and the two references to "this is why we fight". 14, also written in the whitest color as though representing the light, and iin the German font associated with Nazis in popular imagination, is also a symbol for the "14 words" of David Lane "we must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children". Here in this nature becomes a site for the battle for the existence of whiteness, as evidenced again by the repetition of "this is why we fight". This is not merely bucolic images of nature; it is a celebration of white fertility which links whiteness to the land, positions it as something spiritual, something legitimating violence, and something advertising this message. These strategies of moving from open violence to metapolitics and propaganda are core to the new far right from tradwives to granola nazis and beyond.

These far-right groups, PA, REN, and the granola nazis themselves do not only use digital platforms to circulate and normalize their racist ideology, but also brand it and literally sell it. In our forthcoming *White Pride and Profit* (Tebaldi and Del Percio, forthcoming) paper we document extensively how these groups use digital technology to monetarize fascism trough the building of a network of companies selling of cookies, cosmetics and tea, but also trough the circulation of online fascist online on demand content sold on diverse far right friendly digital platform, here we intend to extend this analysis to explore how far right connected start-up funders and technology gurus imagine and construct technology and the communities that technology helps to organize, including how these communities can be monetarized.

Like many other tech firms, start-up funders do not only sponsor startups but also provide them with expertise about how to conduct their business, develop and market their

products and build a pool of shareholders investing in the start up. NFX for example, who describe themselves as 'Those who think independently and creatively. Outsiders who never compromise their point of view, and never give up.' promises in what we may describe as a hypermasculinezd, producerist register which is both the extension and the counterpart of the language used by the far right women above 'to guard the backs of the next generation of fearless founders' and this with 'determination', give their clients 'an unfair advantage' and 'help them see things that others do not'. NFX does that not only with money, but also with advice, guidelines, manuals, reports and other forms of expertise such as The Tribal Network Effect in which they help start ups 'to get it right fast' and to help them 'raise your (their) next round at levels that are often embarrassingly high'.

Figure 4 – *The tribal network effect*



For NFX, to get it right, start-up such as the many that are emerging around PA need to build a community, both a

community of investors and a community of consumers, which both for NFX and PA are constituted by the same people. By paying for the content, including the fascist ideology and the products that start ups sell the community both invests in the growth of the start up and in the consumption of what it sells. The community is defined as a 'tribe', language which echoes the granola embrace of viking imagery but which according to NFX are more powerful and well developed in alumni networks of schools, military units, fraternities and sororities, accelerators, languages, regions, and religions, all institutions and forms of social organisation out of which many far-right groups develop.

Like for social darwinism, for NFX argues that people's most natural instinct is to survive, and its only the fittest that surivives. According to the Tribal Network Effect 'The ones that built the best tribes survived to procreate, so we are all descendants of the best tribe builders. Those who weren't good at building or joining tribes died off.' This social darwinist logic, is said by the tech guru's to have become part of how people have learned to see themselves and orient them in the social world. People do not just build identity around tribes, they do not only naturally join the strongest tribe to survive, but intentionally and actively invest in their tribe to insure its reproduction, and the reproduction of the strongest segments of the human species.

This darwinist, and deeply racist logic then is then mapped onto the world of business, or better the type of business which, like those build and developed by PA draw on a strong community support. Strong startups, or startup which are striving, are startups which manage to build a community which is willing to 'build the value of the tribe' and 'defend' the tribe by: 'a. adding value to other tribe members, b. defending the tribe's reputation, c. receiving value from the tribe members, and d.

growing the tribe'. Investors, consumers or just members of the tribe, join the tribe because of the prestige that the tribe represents. Future members need to see the tribe as 'smart', 'strong', 'committed', all qualities which constitute the men that the far-right women celebrate for a renovated and glorious white nation. This is why NFX insists on the need to be very selective when it comes to letting people join the community that startups want to build around them. In order for the tribe to be strong, and prestigious NFX advices that new members of the tribe need to 'overcome a barrier to get into the tribe', they must demonstrate reason for their inclusion and "fitness" and this because members of the tribe 'endure shared hardship or adversity, such as training for the marines, studying for tests in college, founding a company, or going through a boot camp of some kind'. For NFX then each tribe is opposed to an 'out-group that the tribe is actively NOT. A different group, a rival, an enemy, a force to be fought.'

This model offered by NFX, and the hyper masculinized register by which is framed should not be understood in metaphoric terms, nor is the social darwinist theory underpinning it accidental. The models offered and circulated by NFX mirror far-right political strategizing (Tebaldi and Gaddini, 2023) which draws on a friend-enemy rhetoric to frame and normalise the need to contrast or prevent, if needed with force, the idea of racial replacement. The economic substratum which organisations such as PA build, and which is informed by advices and templates such as the ones offered by NFX is then one which is meant to build, fund and sustain far-right politics in a way for fascism to look appealing, desirable, strong for its multiple audiences. Darwinist tribes, and forms of expertise by which they are underpinned, do not only frame economics as a battle for the survival of the fittest but are mobilized as powerful techniques of community building which help to

mobilize people into a human battle for the survival of the white race, which has ultimately as an objective not just the reproduction of the white nation, but also the extermination of all those unites of the human race which endanger the survival of this white nation.

3. *New technology, neoliberal mystics and reactionary politics*

As we have demonstrated in the previous section, digital platforms are mobilized by far-right groups to circulate fascist thought and normalise gender ideals, but in addirtion the platforms themselves are constructed in a way to make this possible. This is for sure not a new phenomenon, far-right and fascist groups have historically invested technology as a condition of possibility and reproduction of the white race and the white nation, including the subjugation of women and all members of the national body which were seen as weakening it. In this last section we discuss how technology gurus are both trained to think new technology, mysticism and reactionary politics as part of the same thing, and how they invest in this neoreactionary mysticism when designing and implementing this knowledge in the new economy, I.e. into social domains which do not appear to be fascist but which are made to do neoliberal work around principles which have deep fascist roots and effects.

One of these guru sis David Bernard who self describes as 'quantitative psychologist, yoga practionner and entrepreneur specialized in the prediction of human behaviour'. In 2012, he released a predictive algorithm enabling his company Assess-First to anticipate the ability of people to 'succeed' and 'thrive' on the job. David is French, but lives on Ibiza, where, as he explains, David is a 'remote CEO' and can dedicate his time to

yoga and mysticism. This apparent opposite between AI and mysticism comes together in his Kundalini training which he did at RA MA Institute for Applied Yogic Science and Technology which has satellites all over the world. As noted on the institute's website, the RA MA 'is one of wonder, awe, curiosity, reverence, beauty, art, and optimal living on all levels'. The institute was founded in 2013 by white, female Guru Jagat 'on the belief that expression, creativity, wellness, and brass tacks pragmatics can all live in harmony'. The institute is said to build 'a New Era destination where everything is designed for interstellar beings like you'. It 'creates high vibrational experiences' and 'believes in chiseling out your (students) true essence, which aligns more and more destiny to your (students) life.'

These are neoliberal mystics because this discourse connects the inner spirituality of the self with a larger cosmology linking the self with the universe, beauty to harmony and the cosmos as well as creativity, wellness to pragmatic realism, in a far-right moral order. This discussion of "chiseling" recalls the granola Nazi Raw egg nationalists obsession with Greek statues and the hard male body, where beauty means alignment with fascist social order. But it is neoliberal, because it links creativity, wellness, the liberation of the body from its inner constraints to economic grow and prosperity. One of the most significant departments of the institute is its RA MA Business School which 'brings together Kundalini Yoga & Meditation, business how-to, prosperity technologies, and a roster of high-impact individuals in the business, finance, and leadership sectors for an unparalleled experience'. This is the business school that Bernard attended and which offers to its student a whole range of training units which help participants 'be very creative and conscious and alert and understand that these huge galactic energies that are coming on the planet are here to change, to upgrade, to evolve the whole collective.' The

business school offers entire semester modules in: 'The new paradigm (business school)', How to be real in an augmented reality', 'Economics of infinity', Pressure vs. Time success self-psychology {accelerator}', 'Prosperity & velocity in the digital age', Pivots, transits, & opportunities {accelerator}', 'Neurology of a trailblazer', 'Impact & inflow', 'The trinity cycle of success', 'Business, commerce, & creativity', Foundations of business', all of which assuming that understanding cosmic laws will not only allow participants to connect to cosmic energy and growth personally, but also build successful business.

Like the Granola Nazis and the NFX Gurus who help startups to 'see what other don't see', teachers and participants, many of them white, middle class women in white outfits in these trainings experience these trainings as liberating, transcendental moments which allows to connect their bodies to real truth. The blogger Cassidy George describes the teachers as 'speaking of enlightenment and transformation in terms digital natives understood, and peppered her speeches with repurposed internet speak; lessons and epiphanies were "downloads," and Kundalini was an "ancient technology" that could "optimize your system." (2021) This technological register is not the only aspect linking the teachers at institute with the technofascist introduced above. Like the Granola nazis, the institute's participants post and circulate their experiences on Instagram. Elizabeth, for example, who self-described as a 'spiritual investor' and who attended the business school in 2021 explain to her followers that the school changer everything for her.

> The yoga gurus as well as all of the other amazing teachers, coaches, and entrepreneurs that I met at the Ra Ma Institute, planted the seed within me that ultimately dismantled SO many limiting beliefs that I didn't even realize I had... not just about my business, but about my entire life. The wisdom and

> guidance that I gained at Ra Ma inspired me to flip everything I thought I knew upside down.

Also, similarly to the female PA activists who narrate their stories as stories of conversion, as moments of liberation from a corrupted, constraining truth imposed by mainstream society and circulate them on the digital platforms to sell far-right content to their audiences, Elizabeth goes on explaining that:

> I sold my beautiful horse ranch in California and moved all the way to the other side of the country, back to my family's land in Tennessee where I grew up. 🛩 Despite the emotions and challenges that I've gone through as a result of the changes and transitions that I've made over the past couple of years, I've never felt more certain that I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be. 💝 Everything has finally come full circle

While not explicitly tied to the far-right rhetoric described above, Elizabeth's account holds all ingredients of the narrative produced by the Granola Nazis: The returning to the idle, natural, country side (Tennessee) away from liberalism and moral corruption (California), the return to a celebrated, natural home and childhood, the land, the family, nature and the pain, struggles and emotions associated to womanhood, which however the mystic strength provided by male supranatural force, which for the Christians is god, and here is the universe allowed to overcome. This is emphasized by another section of the RA MA Institute for Applied Yogic Science and Technology which teaches participants to be a good mother, to give birth and raise children in alignment with cosmic forces.

For Bernard, the tech guru, alignment with nature, and as an extension with the cosmos matters too. He lives on Ibiza, close where he can cultivate his inner spirituality and be close to nature. He imagines a world of work which is remote, which allows others too to be connected both to the cosmos and their

inner self and is proud to be CEO of a company employing 150 people all of them working entirely from home, where they can be in harmony with themselves and their family. Bernard is interested in understanding himselves, but also to better understanding others or as he likes to say 'who people REALLY are', discover their inner truth. His company serves recruitment firms and HR departments around the world and helps through match-matching hiring technology to predict workers' behavior and identify those applicants who will strive in their professional role. For Bernard, the age of CV is gone. CVs are not predictive of workers' future behavior, of who they really are. Really understanding candidates, making the right hiring decisions, knowing how workers will really behave, making workers and recruiters happy, requires a set of technological tools measuring or as he prefers assessing. His algorithm helps assess what he calls 1. SHAPE, I.e. the behaviours that each person will tend to display naturally in either day-to-day life or in high-stress situations; 2. DRIVE., the needs and motivations of a candidates, what make the candidate strive. 3. BRAIN, which assesses cognitive abilities of candidates.

Now while not informed by knowledge from tech funders such as NFX, but by a mix between old fashioned psychometric and mystic, cosmic theories, the similarity between the model of the strong tribe that needs to be opposed to the weak elements which endanger the tribe and therefore need eradicated, and David's logic of 'predictive matchmaking' cannot be overseen. And this not just because the psychometric theories on which he draws are designed around what is imagined to be a white cognition. Like old phrenology and eugenics which informed fascist attempt to purify and strengthen the white race, David's matchmaking model produces a predictive model of the candidate's 'nature and culture', or how far-right activists would say blood and soil: their brain, natural believes and

attitudes, natural motivation and natural behaviour, of 'who they are', 'what drives them' and 'how they think'. Identifying the right candidate is for David not just a question of personal assessment, but of natural affinity, of what he calls 'cultural fit'. Like the eugenicists, David's algorithm allows to engineer a workplace of bodily, mentally and behaviorally strong people who belong together or are affine because of their 'natural' characteristics and values and fit. Candidates who do not naturally fit their work environment, do not fit the organizations culture are not just unhappy, but more importantly endanger the capacity of the organization to strive and prosper. For David, 'predictive analytics', the analysis of individuals inner, natural essence and the prediction of national behavior is the only means forward in a world which, as he says 'is increasingly complex and unpredictable', it is the only means by which a natural order of sameness and prosperity can be kept alive and reproduced. This is a predictive model which replaces the attempt to improve the genetic quality of human population with a method which improves society trough the assessment of their personality and natural quality, he replaces eugenics with phrenology, and society as a whole with the workplace. The principles remain the same, just on a lower scale.

All of these examples of what we are calling digital traditionalism show a neo-reactionary embrace of technology as a paradoxical space for a return to an idealized past which contains within it the promise of a magical future. they draw on longstanding conflictual relations between future and tradition within fascism itself, mediated by ideologies of gender which use women to express tradition and whose return to their traditional role is seen as allowing a masculine and innovative future to be created in which men can "chisel" and "shape, drive, brain". At each level, from the linguistic register, to the images and social media uses which realise it, to the

platforms and the ceos which create it, far right ideologies are incrusted and obscured as a return to tradition, nature, or magic. It is up to us as scholars to denaturalize, demystify this labor and call attention to its eugenic effects in order that we might counter them.

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Building a New World Order: COVID-19, the far right, and the pervasiveness of antisemitic conspiracy theories

KATHERINE KONDOR[1]

Abstract. Throughout history people have turned toward conspiratorial beliefs to explain the origins of various pandemics. The coronavirus (2020-2022) is no exception, with a host of attempted alternative explanations for the origins of the virus and the efficacy of safety measures. Indeed, this correlates with studies showing that conspiracy belief is heightened when people feel powerless and may afford individuals some sense of control as they can reject official narratives. Studies have found links between a belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories and a support for right-wing attitudes; this study aims to add to the literature on conspiracy beliefs among the far right. With the use of semi-structured qualitative interviews with members of European far-right organisations, this study examines conspiracy narratives and, hence, conspiratorial thinking around the COVID-19 pandemic. This study argues that the COVID-19 pandemic, and measures implemented by various governments, have lent to foster specific far-right conspiracy theories. Particularly concerning is the perception of pandemic measures as support for the New World Order conspiracy theory, which suggests that the pandemic was part of a grand plan for total control.
Keywords: Far right; conspiracy theories; antisemitism; New World Order; COVID-19.

[1] Katherine Kondor, Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX), University of Oslo. k.a.kondor@c-rex.uio.no.

Introduction

The far right is no stranger to conspiracist belief. Many of their narratives indeed lie in what Michael Barkun calls the "realm of stigmatized knowledge" (Barkun, 2013, p. 12), that is knowledge that has not been normalised, nurturing conspiracy ideas and encouraging a persistent "conspiracy tradition" (Billig, 1978, p. 185). Conspiracy theories share many similarities with extremist narratives that attempt to explain the world and the calamities afflicting their cause in unconventional ways, as they "represent explanations of malevolent events, attributing disasters real or imagined to a small group of secretive malign actors" (Lee, 2020, p. 347). Conspiracy theories are therefore frequently present in extremist narratives, and is likely why they are so appealing (Bartlett and Miller, 2010; Lee, 2020).

Radicalised movements endorse countless conspiracy theories, from those found in the Islamic world to the thousands of smaller or lesser-known conspiracy theories found in both historical and contemporary far-right narratives (Lee, 2020). For example, the belief that Austrian-Japanese politician Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi concocted a plan to encourage immigration in order to mix others with the 'white race.' Known as the Kalergi Plan, this conspiracy theory was popularised by a book by the same name in 2005, as 'evidence' citing segments of Kalergi's 1925 writings out of context. Another similar conspiracy theory purports that immigrants, or specifically those of Islamic background, will replace Europeans. Eventually popularised by Renaud Camus' *Le Grand Remplacement* in 2011, the use of this conspiracy theory is an example of how conspiracy belief can lead to extreme violence. In this particular case, terrorist Brenton Tarrant, responsible for the murder or 51 people in two mosques in New Zealand in 2019, titled his manifesto

The Great Replacement[2]. In it he cited, among other things, the white race being under attack and threatened by imminent extinction (Farinelli, 2021). Currently, many studies analysing conspiracy theories and the far right examine the link between conspiracy theories and violent far-right extremism (See, for example: van Prooijen, Krouwel, and Pollet, 2015; Rottweiler and Gill, 2020; Byington, 2019; Vegetti and Littvay, 2021), with fewer examining the content of these conspiracy theories.

This chapter explores COVID-19 conspiracy theories among the far right through interviews with far-right movement party members in two countries. The study found a general belief in typical COVID-19 conspiracy theories to do with the origins of the virus and vaccines. Furthermore, there was clear use of the global pandemic as justification for belief in the New World Order conspiracy theory. While widely used today, the term 'New World Order' became popular after former US President George Bush coined the term in his 1991 State of the Union Address. It is unclear what George Bush meant by the term, but it is now used to refer to the idea that a nefarious group of wealthy individuals seeks to deploy their vision of the world, by any means necessary.

1. *A (very) Brief Introduction to Conspiracy Theories*

Conspiracy belief, at its base, is the belief that human destiny is controlled by "powerful, hidden, evil forces" (Barkun, 2013, p. 2). More specifically, it is "the belief that a number of actors join together in secret agreement, in order to achieve a hidden goal which is perceived to be unlawful or malevolent" (Zonis

[2] This title was likely based on Camus' book. However, as the original book is in French and has not been translated to English, it is unlikely Tarrant got his ideas directly from Camus.

and Joseph, 1994, p. 448). As Barkun explains, the conspiracist's worldview is "governed by design rather than by randomness" (2013, p. 3). This is made clear by three main principles found in all conspiracy theories: nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected (Barkun, 2013).

There are many various theorisations as to how a conspiracy theory should be defined, what they constitute, and why people believe them. Of course, conspiracy theories are found on a wide spectrum from harmless to harmful, and indeed some turn out to be true (and, hence, simply become conspiracies). While the depth of literature on the definition of conspiracy theories will not be thoroughly discussed here, there is a wealth of literature on the topic (see, for example: Walker, 2018; Goertzel, 2010; Douglas and Sutton, 2022). An excellent explanation of the five "critical ingredients" of conspiracy theories is provided by Jan-Willem van Prooijen (2018, p. 5). According to van Prooijen, conspiracy theories must first possess patterns. In other words, they explain "events by establishing nonrandom connections between actions, objects, and people" and believe nothing is coincidence (van Prooijen, 2018, p. 5). Second, they must assume agency, that is that an event was purposely caused by a detailed plan. Third, they must include coalitions, or a conspiracy, of multiple actors. Fourth, they must have some form of hostility and believe the plan is "evil, selfish, or otherwise not in the public interest" (van Prooijen, 2018, p. 5). Finally, it assumes continued secrecy, meaning it has not yet been exposed; this makes a conspiracy theory very difficult to disprove. "Conspiracy theories are thus by definition unproven" (van Prooijen, 2018, p. 5). Conspiracy theories tend to oversimplify complex phenomena to make them more easily comprehensible, tend to try and explain "why bad things

happen to good people," and give people some sense of control of the future (Bale, 2007, p. 50).

1.1 Why do people believe in conspiracy theories?

Beyond conspiracy theories themselves, some researchers have suggested a conspiracist ideation, meaning an underlying worldview or disposition, similar to political ideology, towards viewing events and circumstances as the product of conspiracies" (Uscinski, 2019, p. 50). This world view is characterised by intentionalism: believing nothing is by coincidence but rather solely happen due to a conscious plan (Bak and Emberland, 2022). These people also tend to have distrust in structures and authorities, as they are seen as a tool of a conspiracy. The conspiracist mindset is "associated with disliking powerful societal groups and perceiving them as responsible for political and economic events with negative implications (Imhoff and Bruder, 2014, p. 26).

It has been suggested that "conspiracy theories are a natural reaction to social situations that elicit feelings of fear and uncertainty" (van Prooijen, 2018, p. 22). The stronger the negative emotions, the more likely people are to attempt to assign blame for the distressing event. Therefore, conspiracy theories often emerge "in the wake of distressing societal events" (van Prooijen, 2018, p. 22). Similarly, others have suggested that conspiracy belief is heightened when people need feel safe and in control, as well as have a need to make sense of their environment and to feel good about themselves and their group (Sternisko, Cichocka, and Van Bavel, 2020). A rise in conspiracy belief during times of crisis is of course nothing new: this has been regularly seen throughout the centuries. In the past people blamed 'witches' for failed crops and regularly blamed

Jewish people for epidemics (See for example: Matossian, 1982).

There are many other reasons that may also account for why people believe in conspiracy theories or why belief is heightened at certain times. For example, it has been suggested that the more strongly people identify with a certain group, the more likely they are to believe in a conspiracy theory if they feel that members of their group are victimised (van Prooijen, 2018); this is particularly pertinent when considering radicalised groups like the far right. Furthermore, collective narcissism may lead to heightened conspiracy belief, that is a belief the in-group's greatness paired with a belief that people do not appreciate that group enough. When considering the far right, this can be easily applied to white supremacism and certain conspiracy theories such as the Great Replacement. However, most pertinent to a significant pandemic like the one caused by COVID-19 is proportionality bias: big consequences must have big causes. It is difficult to accept that our lives were impacted for several years due to a virus being spread from animals to humans; rather, for some it is easier to accept that this was all due to a grand plan by some malevolent group. Indeed, studies have shown that conspiracy belief is heightened when people feel powerless, or when they experience the typical emotions of crisis: fear, uncertainty, and a sense of losing control (Goertzel, 1994; Šrol, Mikušková, and Čavojová, 2021; van Prooijen and Douglas, 2017). Conspiracy theories may serve to give people some sense of control, or may simply serve as an explanation when desperate to make sense of a situation (Goertzel, 1994; van Prooijen and Douglas, 2017). Considering these factors, it is no surprise that during times of major international crises, conspiracy theories provide simple explanations for doubts and uncertainties that may emerge (Douglas, Sutton, Jolley, and Wood, 2015).

When seeking explanations during times of crisis, as mentioned earlier, people often turn to blaming minority groups. In this vein, the idea of the 'evil Jew' corrupting innocents as an explanation of crisis is certainly not a new trope. Indeed, evidence suggests that people are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories during times of crisis (van Prooijen and Douglas, 2017). For example, during the Black Death, Jewish people were blamed for the spread of the disease by allegedly poisoning wells, causing their expulsion from Western Europe (Ehsan, 2020). The idea of Jewish people spreading disease continued into the 20th century in Nazi Germany, with Adolf Hitler referring to Jewish people as a 'harmful bacillus' and Nazi propaganda comparing Jewish people to fleas, lice, and rats (Ehsan, 2020). The next section will look further into the intersection between antisemitism and conspiracy theories in the 20th century.

2. *Antisemitism and Antisemitic Conspiracy Theories*

It needs not be said that the COVID-19 pandemic was a global crisis. As any crisis, this brought with is countless conspiracy theories, from those about the origins of the virus to vaccines. As will be seen, several prevalent antisemitic conspiracy theories were revised during this global crisis. This section seeks to provide background on the last century or so of antisemitic conspiracy theories, to better contextualise those propagated by the far right today.

Antisemitism is undoubtedly nothing new to the far right: looking back, the last two centuries are riddled with antisemitic conspiracy theories. Probably the most fundamental artifact of these conspiracy theories came with the production of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which quickly became the main source

of conspiracist ideation in Europe (Bak and Emberland, 2022). The document was first published in Russia in 1903 and soon translated to Swedish in 1919, followed by English and German. "The text purports to be the minutes of a late 19th-century meeting attended by world Jewish leaders, the 'Elders of Zion', and claims to unveil a Jewish conspiracy aiming at the destruction of Christian civilization and seizure of worldwide power" (Bak and Emberland, 2022, p. 21). The text presented a hierarchy of conspirators, with Jewish people at the top; the text was "anti-Masonic, anti-occult, anti-Liberal, and anti-Socialist" (Bak and Emberland, 2022, p. 21). The text was deeply antimodern and offered an "explanation of the perils of modernity as seen from the viewpoint of the ultraconservative and extreme right" (Simonsen, 2020, p. 361). Although revealed to be a forgery in 1921, the text continued to spread throughout Europe. Still today the importance of *The Protocols* is seen, most especially in the foundations of several far-right attitudes and conspiratorial beliefs.

Around the end of the 19th century came the importance of the conspiracy theory that would have possibly the greatest impact on the following decades, which was borne from the myth of Atlantis. The myth of Atlantis began millennia ago, first recorded by Plato in the dialogues *Timaeus* and *Critias*, depicting Atlantis as a sacred island located outside the Pillars of Hercules (Forsell, 2022). Plato's writings described "the island as a place of heroism and energy, marvellous beauty and inexhaustible profusion, governed by a 'great and wonderful monarchy', and as a civilization housing 'one of the original earth-born men' before it ultimately sunk into the sea in 'one terrible day and night of storm'" (Forsell, 2022, p. 116). Eventually the idea of Atlantis, and this perfect race, became associated with the Nordics, with Olof Rudbeck's 1675 *Atlantica sive Manheim* or *Atland eller Manheim* ('Atlantis or Manheim') seeking to prove

that Atlantis was Sweden (Kunkeler, 2019). This ultimately became what is known as the *Hyperborean narrative*: a version of the myth of Atlantis "based on the divine unity of the Nordic race and its racial soul" (Forsell, 2022, p. 115). The basic idea of this esoteric narrative is that this incredible area in the extreme north, "sometimes called Atlantis, Hyperborea, or Ultima Thule" was the original home of "the heroic, inventive, and culture-creating Nordic race" (Forsell, 2022, p. 144). It was from here, according to the narrative, that the Nordic race migrated southward, "conquered the world, and founded every high civilization throughout history, all of which degenerated, especially through race mixing" (Forsell, 2022, p. 114).

In the late 19th century Russian noblewoman Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, co-founder of the Theosophical Society in New York, elaborated ideas about the origin and nature of the Nordic Aryan race. With the doctrine of Theosophy, which sought to "adapt scientific thoughts to postulate the notion of spiritual evolution through innumerable worlds and eras springing from an underlying and intangible divine force," Blavatsky created a new, alternative, theory of human evolution by combining theories of Atlantis, Darwin's theories of evolution, and other ideas (Forsell, 2022, p. 116). Blavatsky believed there were seven root races, two which haven't yet materialized: (1) The Astral race (evolved by 'divine progenitors'), (2) Hyperborean root race from a now-vanished continent around northern Asia, (3) Lemurian (Indian Ocean), (4) a fourth race which "developed 'from a nucleus of Northern Lemurian Third Race Men' on a continent in the mid-Atlantic Ocean, which ultimately became 'the true home of the great Race known as Atlanteans'" (Forsell, 2022, p. 117). The (5) fifth Aryan root race, which arose and progressed in Europe, succeeded the fourth root race. At its basis, Blavatsky's root race theory of evolution postulated that the Aryan race was of divine

origin but degenerated into humans; this race will, "eventually, in correspondence with the cyclical process of the cosmos, ascent back to divinity" (Forsell, 2022, p. 117).

Theosophy soon spread to the Nordics and German-speaking areas, becoming part of the Volkisch Movement[3] in Germany. Eventually theosophy combined with Volkisch nationalism and Nordicism[4], allowing Ariosophists to vindicate a coming grand era of German or Aryan world domination. Part of the Volkisch movement, Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels claimed that the Atlanteans (4th race) had evolved into two antagonistic sub-species: divine Aryans and demonic dark-skinned races called 'animal men' [*Tiermenschen*]. "Aryans were the chosen people of God, but they had degenerated because of idolatry and persistent interbreeding with animal men, which threatened the very existence of the Aryan race" (Forsell, 2022, p. 119). Drawing from Blavatsky and others, Liebenfels claimed that Aryans were culture bearers and creators of every supreme civilisation in history: the 'anthropological root' of the Aryans was either in the new world or in Atlantis. In his magazine *Ostara*, Liebenfels claimed in 1927 that "the 'world war' ended with a provisional victory for the dark races and their leading people, the Jews."

These ideas were adopted by the German Thule Society, founded by Rudolf von Sebottendorf. Followers dedicated themselves to the study of runes as Aryan symbols and rejected Christianity altogether by professing that "Our God is Walvater" and that "Wotan, Wili, We is the unity of the trinity"

[3] The movement had a spiritual emphasis on the Volk (the people), characterised by radical nationalism, anti-liberalism, cultural pessimism, and racism.

[4] A race theory popularised in the late 19th century believing that the Nordic race is a superior but endangered race, descended from the far north and bound to its land through mythic connection.

(Forsell, 2022, p. 120). Believing that the Aryan-Teutonic people were the great 'civilisers' of the world who eventually became the Germans, they also believed that these superhumans have been weakened by interbreeding with inferior 'races' – and these 'inferior races' were now in control. Therefore, they believed that their enemies, namely Jewish people, were attempting to destroy their culture from within, by infiltrating and corrupting their bodies. While clearly this conspiracy theory is not the only foundation of the German Fascist ideal of eliminating all Jewish people, it certainly was one factor.

Antisemitic conspiracy theories are still found in contemporary society. For example, the Kalergi Plan is still cited by far-right supporters today, especially since the publication of a book by the same name in 2005. This conspiracy theory claims that Austrian-Japanese politician Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi laid out plans to mix 'races' in his 1925 book *Praktischer Idealismus* ('Practical Idealism'). By quoting Coudenhove-Kalergi's writings out of context, the far right attempts to legitimize the 'white genocide' conspiracy theory, claiming that white people will soon become a minority. A contemporary version of the centuries-old idea that Jewish people control the world economy is found in the 'Zionist Occupation Government' (Z.O.G.) conspiracy theory, which originated in the USA in the 1970s and 1980s, and eventually spread to Europe. Finally, another example is found in forms of Holocaust denial, where some believe that the Holocaust was created by Jewish people in order to gain wealth for themselves or for Israel (Simonsen, 2020). These "deniers claim that the history of the Holocaust has been 'created' by a powerful conspiracy that controls academic institutions as well as the media" (Simonsen, 2020, p. 365).

A research briefing published early in the global COVID-19 pandemic found evidence that antisemitic conspiracy theories

were being spread on social media (Community Security Trust 2020), related to the suggestion that Jewish people were complicit in spreading the virus and going as far as to suggest people cough on Jewish people to infect them – 'an act labelled in far-right online subcultures as a "Holocough"' (Ehsan, 2020, p. 6). Such research is crucial as it has been shown that antisemitic conspiracy theories have been normalised during the pandemic (Rose, 2021; Teter, 2020). Clearly, these ideas can be extremely damaging: hence, more research on the topic is crucial. The COVID-19 pandemic provides an excellent contemporary opportunity to examine such conspiracy theories. As there is a well-established link between conspiratorial belief and political extremism (van Prooijen, Krouwel, and Pollet, 2015), this chapter analyses interviews with far-right movement party members about their conspiratorial beliefs during the pandemic. As this research will show, the pandemic provides an opportunity to analyse the evolution of conspiracy theories, and how they are shaped to fit contemporary society in order to maintain relevance.

3. *Methodology*

Data was collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews with members and leaders of far-right movement parties. Interviews were conducted via telephone between August and October of 2022. In total, six interviews were conducted with far-right organisation members in three different European countries: Italy (4), Hungary (1), and Sweden (1)[5]. Interviewees were contacted to discuss their views on the COVID-19 pandemic and how it affected their organisation, which is why

[5] Interview data from the Swedish participant will not be presented herein, as that participant did not present a conspiracist worldview.

these countries were chosen for the study. As qualitative interviews also discussed the effects of pandemic measures on far-right organisations, countries were selected with this in mind: each of these countries had different levels of stringency, with Italy having strict lockdowns throughout the pandemic, Sweden being relatively open throughout, and Hungary having regulations that followed the pandemic waves. Interviews were conducted in each participant's native language by the author and research assistants via telephone, transcribed directly to English, and coded in NVivo.

Participants were mainly recruited through an online survey, save for the Hungarian participant who was contacted directly. The quantitative survey asked questions about the participants' views on how the pandemic was handled in their respective countries, as well as their views on the origin of the pandemic. Surveys received 12 responses in Italy and three in Sweden; survey results were not used for analysis for this paper. During the qualitative interviews, in addition to the main interview schedule participants were asked to elaborate on their survey answers.

For anonymity, participants that are organisation leaders will not be disclosed: all interviewees will be referred to as organisation members. All interviewees were given a participant number and no personal information was stored.

4. *Ideas of the COVID-19 Pandemic's Origins*

Participants discussed several types of conspiracy theories, beginning with where the virus originated. Some, like the one Swedish participant in the study, did believe the official narratives that the SARS-CoV-2 virus was likely spread to humans through an animal. Before moving to antisemitic conspiracy

theories in the next section, this section will cover various conspiracy ideations that participants mentioned about virus origins, vaccines, and about official pandemic communication.

Participants had somewhat differing views on the origins of the SARS-CoV-2, but all seemed to agree that the virus in some way was real: "we're talking about a real virus, pandemic" (HUN-01). Following popular narratives, some expressed that the virus was created in a laboratory in Wuhan. As participant ITA-03 expressed, this was allegedly 'proven': "now it is something proven, even the Chinese government admitted it." Also following popular conspiracy beliefs of the origin of the coronavirus, one participant mentioned it being used as a biological weapon ("We're talking about a laboratory virus, a biological weapon that, that they can use any time against society. You can't protect yourself against this." (HUN-01) and others mentioned it being an artificially created virus (ITA-03, ITA-04). Italian participant ITA-03 mentioned the disproven conspiracy theory that the virus was actually created by the United States and spread by American soldiers.

Venturing further yet, one participant expressed their belief that the SARS-CoV-2 virus was created by the World Health Organisation to sell vaccines:

> Let's say that it was created by the WHO, the World Health Organisation. These are classic false pandemics that they have created tens of in the past to sell some vaccines, but this time they did a more detailed job that all the world believed... (ITA-02)

This idea that organisations and pharmaceutical companies benefit from vaccines, and hence from the pandemic, was found among more than one of the Italian participants. Participant ITA-04 expressed: "And who gained from it? First of all, the pharmaceutical companies, the multinational corporations

that accumulated mountains of billions thanks to the pandemic..." ITA-02's fellow movement member stated a similar idea: "the WHO and the pharmaceutical companies made billions in profits that they of course distribute to the different doctors and virologists enslaved to them, to the politicians and company that support their narrative." This suggests that perhaps discussions of the COVID-19 pandemic have happened among the members of this movement party, although it is also possible that this idea was common among the Italian far right (or far right in general). Furthermore, participant ITA-02 believed that politicians were paid by a higher power to force people to vaccinate:

> In several regions the opposition was in power, meaning the Lega, Salvini, and co., and they all did the same thing, because they are all paid by the same potentates, they get the money because of this pandemic to impose vaccines, to force people to vaccinate... vaccines that are useless, maybe they are even damaging, but... (ITA-02)

Finally, several Italian participants mentioned the idea that the numbers of affected individuals in the COVID-19 pandemic were purposely inflated. Participant ITA-01 expressed that they "do not think it is a very dangerous thing like... they made us believe... a national danger... and then in my opinion the numbers are inflated." This participant expressed that this inflation of numbers was for "was political exploitation, it was a way for politicians to obtain... to do certain things that have brought revenue." Participant ITA-04 similarly believed that the numbers were inflated, but rather than for the purpose of financial gain this inflation was in order to control the masses:

> Because the pandemic, if it really happened, was amplified enormously. The number of deaths that was reported, communicated officially is absolutely inflated. Probably, actually

> surely, there were some deaths caused by this virus, but the large majority of the deaths calculated as caused by the virus are deaths that would have happened anyway because they targeted people who were gravely compromised because of their age or health. So the virus might have accelerated the death, but that it was a direct cause, I would exclude that. However, they are counted as deaths caused by the virus... This also serves the general objective of keeping the attention of the masses away and create problems of survival... of life, so that they do not get strange ideas, think about changing the state of things, the political status quo. (ITA-04)

5. *Building a New World Order*

Along the lines of what Bale calls a belief in "conspiratorial politics" (2007, p. 53), several participants felt that the COVID-19 pandemic was exploited by politicians to serve political interest, also in terms of financial gain for major corporations. Participant HUN-01 felt that politicians "obviously" had the goal "to take away peoples' financial independence," likely as a form of control. Participant ITA-01 was somewhat more explicit:

> So, in my opinion... yes, there was political exploitation, it was a way for politicians to obtain... to do certain things that have brought revenue... brought revenue. Not to the state, not to citizens, but to certain firms that, like it or not, work in close proximity to the state. (ITA-01)

The idea of some larger financial gain, or the manipulation of the world economy, through the pandemic was mentioned by several participants. For example, participant ITA-04 explained that a group of people controlled the world's financial state: "They then decide... they decide the financial crisis that MUST take place, they are the ones that decide the stock market should go..." These ideas were generally tied to the familiar

trope of the world's rich Jewry. Participant HUN-01 explicitly stated the connection between the world's economic power and familiar antisemitic ideas:

> *Interviewer: And you mentioned a world dictatorship. I'd be interested to know, who rules this dictatorship?*
> ... we don't know who's running it... There must be more, more people in it. Those who control the financial power, control the economic power. Those, those, they talk about a lot of things, right, the Bilderberg Group, the Rothschilds, and then different lodges, Freemason lodges, people who, I don't know, plan step-by-step for the next 100 years how things should happen. Or the leadership of the World Economic Forum, that Klaus Schwab, they talk about him. So a lot, this, this, this is a group, you should imagine this as a council. They figure out what will happen, and they end up seeing it through since the world power is theirs, the money is theirs, the firearms factories, pharmaceutical factories... those, those tech companies that now, right, got a huge profit from the Covid dictatorship. So these could be the people who, right, control this process. (HUN-01)

Participant HUN-01 here is clearly referring to the New World Order conspiracy theory. This powerful group of people was referred to in a variety of ways by participants, for example 'Covid dictatorship' (HUN-01), 'potentates' (ITA-02), and 'a supranational mind' (ITA-04). Some participants were quite explicit about whom they were speaking: "They are the Jews, the reds, those people... Soros[6]... all these people who make billions thanks to... this rubbish and if someone goes against

[6] Referring to the Hungarian-American Jewish philanthropist, George Soros. Familiar tropes of the early 21st century are the attacks by those on the far right, including Hungary's governing Fidesz party, against Soros, including ideas that he sought to bring countless refugees into Europe.

them, they randomly die" (ITA-02). Participant ITA-03 also described who is organising the grand "plan":

> Well... initially the plan takes the name of its founder, the Count Kalergi... ehm... then organizers let's say they are... I am not saying it on the phone, but they are... people with an aquiline nose, that are circumcised and that are hunchbacks... then, the description I did it, connect the dots you arrive to who they are. The surnames usually are Rothschild, Warburg, Oppenheimer, then there's Soros... All connected by... a common intent. (ITA-03)

The New World Order conspiracy theory was explicitly referenced by one participant: "Because the... the... the, in quotations, 'white race' is an obstacle to the realisation of this New World Order that is based on the Talmud and so the objective is our elimination for... for the realisation of their plan, for sure" (ITA-03). 2020 saw the publication of a book that has, post-COVID, been misused by the far right to give legitimacy to their conspiratorial views: "I think in the book... *The Great Reset* by Klaus Schwab, a lot is specified. Some of the fundamental aspects, because there are a lot, we could be there an entire day talking about it..." (ITA-03). While this is clearly a legitimate publication, it is perhaps, to those in the far right, a contemporary publication which gives legitimacy to *The Protocols* and their idea of a New World Order.

6. *Conclusion*

As these interviews demonstrate, antisemitic conspiracy theories are still pervasive among far-right supporters. Antisemitic conspiracy theories are by no means only a far-right phenomenon, as Islamist and more mainstream conspiracists also believe in a Jewish involvement in, and exploitation of, the

COVID-19 pandemic (Ehsan, 2020). These various ideologies are united by "a shared belief that the West's market-based societies are constructed to serve the financial interests of an 'international Jewry'" who are led by a powerful Jewish elite (Ehsan, 2020, p. 17). This chapter presents a unique look into the conspiracy beliefs of individual far-right supports and members of far-right movement parties, providing empirical evidence of the 'repackaging' of centuries-old antisemitic tropes for contemporary crises.

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From Common Sense to Faith: Matteo Salvini's normalisation of far right ideology via social media (2018-2023)

GEORGE NEWTH[1]

Abstract. Between 2018 and 2023, Matteo Salvini, leader of Italian populist far right party the Lega per Salvini Premier, depicted his policies as 'common sense' (*buon* senso) via Twitter. This chapter combines a Gramscian-inspired dyad of common sense v good sense (*senso comune* v *buon senso*) with the general orientation of the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) to Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) to examine Salvini's use of a trope of *buon senso* over this five year period. This reveals how Salvini's use of *buon senso* formed part of a populist far right logic to construct a reactionary people and contribute to a mainstreaming of far right politics.
Keywords: Common Sense; Populism; Far Right; Mainstreaming; Discourse; Lega per Salvini Premier

Introduction

Towards the end of 2017, Matteo Salvini, leader of the populist far right party, the Lega per Salvini Premier (the Lega) stated his intention to bring a 'common sense revolution' (*rivoluzione del buon senso*) to Italian politics and society. *Buon senso* subsequently became a consistent trope in Salvini's communication

[1] George Newth, University of Bath, ghn20@bath.ac.uk, @georgenewth.

via Twitter between 2018 and 2023 as his party shifted between government and opposition. Inspired by work which examines how populist discourse can be used to create a 'reactionary people' to legitimise far right ideology (Mondon 2022; Brown *et al* 2021; Mondon and Winter 2020; Katsambekis 2022), this chapter addresses the following question:

> How did Matteo Salvini shape common sense via a *buon senso* trope on Twitter between 2018 and 2023 to bring far right ideology closer to the mainstream?

In doing so, the findings of the chapter build on the idea that 'ideas which are at one time unacceptable can become not only acceptable, but actually normal and even common sense.' (Brown *et al* 2021, p. 11). Interpreting Salvini's common sense trope through a Gramscian-inspired dyad of *senso-comune* v *buon senso*, I argue that rather than ideas simply *becoming* 'common sense' via mainstreaming, the discursive construction of common sense can contribute *to* mainstreaming. Studying Salvini's *buon senso* trope, therefore, enables a greater understanding of the role of reactionary forms of populist logic in legitimising far right ideas. This contribution addresses this question in three sections: the first section sets out the conceptual and definitional parameters relevant to analysing Salvini's discourse. Following this, the general orientation of the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) to Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) is applied to examine the discursive strategies used by Salvini to shape far right politics as 'common sense', linking it to the people, and therefore, bringing it closer to the mainstream. The third and final section summarises the findings and suggests avenues for future research.

1. *The Lega per Salvini Premier, Social Media, and the Senso Comune/Buon Senso dyad*

Prior to analysing how Matteo Salvini has attempted to shape common sense, the following section sets out the conceptual parameters of this chapter. It starts by establishing a definition of the Lega as populist far right as well as a definition of the mainstream/mainstreaming, then moves on to examining the extent to which the Lega's digital activism has already been examined. The section closes by outlining the dyad of *buon senso* (good sense) and *senso comune* (common sense) and how this relates to populist and far right logic.

Formed in 1991, as a merger of north Italian regionalist movements, the Lega Nord campaigned for some form of autonomy for the North under Umberto Bossi's resignation in 2012, with Matteo Salvini taking over as Federal Secretary in 2013. Under Salvini, the party gradually but steadily abandoned its historic cause of regional autonomy for one of nationalism between 2013 and 2017 (Albertazzi et al 2019). This process culminated in the creation of a new party entitled *Lega per Salvini Premier* towards the end of 2017, which further sharpened the party's pre-existing populist far right identity. The term far right here draws on Mondon and Winter's (2020, p. 19) definition which outlines how such groups espouse racist ideology thinly-veiled behind covert and coded references to culture and identity. Building on this, I define far right as the following:

> A position characterised by a generalised commitment to inequality, with racism at its core. This may be accompanied by a broader 'politics of fear' (Wodak 2020) which encompasses various forms of exclusion targeting different marginalised groups. (Brown, 2023, pp. 28-9)

The pre-fix of 'populist' on the other hand refers to a discourse which constructs 'the people' as 'a large powerless group' in juxtaposition to an 'elite' conceived as a 'small and illegitimately powerful group'. (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017 p. 310). Populist far right actors, therefore, construct the people as an 'exclusive collective subject, united through references to a common ethnic origin, language, heritage and religion' (Katsembekis 2018). Acting in the name of this reactionary people can, in turn, be used to 'legitimise certain reactionary positions' such as an exaggerated focus on immigration and an amplification of 'cultural' grievances most propitious to the (far) right over economic concerns' (Mondon 2022). Such legitimisation, however, requires an active engagement with the mainstream. Interpreted here as 'representative of the norm or centre', the mainstream is 'contingent', discursively constructed, and 'not essentially good, rational or moderate' (Brown *et al* 2021; Brown 2023).

The Lega has played an active role in the mainstreaming far right politics in Italy. This is a process in which 'discourses and/or attitudes' (in this case on migration and national identity) 'move from a position of unacceptability to one of legitimacy' (Brown 2023). One way in which the party shifted the Overton window in Italy, is via its social media discourse. While the Lega's ideology had previously been disseminated, at least in part, via its newspaper, *La Padania*, towards the end of 2014, Salvini closed the offices of this loss-making publication. Salvini's communications instead have relied on 'synergy between traditional in-person and face-to-face activism [...] and modern online activism, carried out through social media and instant messaging systems.' (Zulianello 2021) Indeed, an increased personalisation of the Lega under Salvini and 'his rise as a "digital leader"' took place 'through an active digital mediatisation of his own political persona on social media including Twitter'.

(Zappetini and Maccaferri 2021) Often used by the far right to spread and mainstream its ideology (Froio and Ganesh 2019; McSwiney 2021; Ekman 2020; Gallaher 2018), social media also plays a key role in populist communication, enabling a direct connection between the people and politicians, (Engesser *et al* 2017; Gerbaudo 2018). Existing analysis of Salvini's social media has both underlined the changing ideology of the Lega under his leadership and how he has harnessed the power of social media to 'shape (and, indeed, dominate) national debates on issues concerning identity, immigration, and law and order' (Albertazzi et al 2018; Cervi 2020). Meanwhile, other studies have highlighted Salvini's use of Twitter to perform 'Character Assassination' of political opponents (Berti 2021; Berti and Loner 2021) delegitimise the EU and rearticulate fascist narratives (Zappetini and Maccaferri 2021; Newth and Maccaferri 2022). Furthermore Padovani (2018) illustrates how Salvini reinforced 'hegemonic forms of immigration discourse' via Twitter, to promote an anti-immigration march in 2014. These contributions, however, have lacked any in-depth focus on Salvini's use of a *buon senso* trope. This has instead been viewed as 'generic', 'amorphous' and a way for Salvini to enact a 'dual construction of himself as a tough, yet approachable, people's man, and as 'the true representative of civil society' (Maccaferri 2021). While this observation is accurate, it does not account for how *buon senso* has a key 'interpretive frame' which has helped the Lega 'define the issues around which to mobilise' (McSwiney 2021).

Often seen as tantamount to wisdom, authority and reason, common sense, at least on a superficial level, offers 'frameworks of meaning with which to make sense of the world' (Hall and O'Shea 2013; Rosenfeld 2011). Despite this veneer of intuitiveness, common sense is notoriously difficult to define in objective terms, as people are 'plural, multiple, and even

contradictory subjects who might be capable of holding incompatible or contradictory thoughts.' (Clarke and Newman 2017). It is for this reason that politicians 'of all stripes' often seek to appeal to common sense to claim that they are saying out loud what everyone is really thinking (Crehan 2018). Matteo Salvini's use of a *buon senso* trope should be interpreted as an attempt to construct far right discourses as tantamount to the 'general will' of the people and, therefore, taken for granted and accepted as unproblematic truth' (Stahl 2022). This, in turn, can contribute to a 'discursive shift in which ideas and discourses move 'from a position of unacceptability to one of legitimacy' (Krzyżanowski 2021). Broadly speaking, common sense discourse is a component of populist politics insofar as it is another way of articulating the 'general will of the people' through 'aggregating different demands' (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Maccaferri 2021), while also refuting expert knowledge and opinion (Merkley 2020; Moffitt 2016; Brubaker 2021). Claiming to embody common sense has long been a strategy employed by the far-right to provide its ideas a veneer of rationality and popular will (McKenna 2021; Loftsdottir 2021; Richardson and Wodak 2009; Mondon and Winter 2020). This populist strategy, links to broader 'Gramscian of the Right strategies employed which help contribute to a legitimisation of far right ideology (Bar-On 2008). As noted by Mondon (2015)

> far right ideas are seen in the media and within the ranks of mainstream parties as 'common sense', or at least acceptable. The growing acceptance of this 'common sense' is the result of very carefully crafted strategies put in place by extreme right thinkers since the 1980s.

French New Right (*Nouvelle Droite*) philosophers such as Alain De Benoist argued it was necessary to 'borrow from the tactics

of the left, and more specifically the Gramscian concept of hegemony' (Mondon 2015; Bar-On 2008). Attempts to shape common sense are a key element of hegemony i.e., 'the political process that aspires to conquer the ideological terrain' (Filippini, 2017, p. 18). According to Gramsci, common sense (*senso comune*) is a conception which, even in the brain of one individual, is fragmentary, incoherent and [inconsistent] (Crehan 2018; Gramsci 1971, p. 419). The 'vagueness' of *senso comune* means that it can 'encompass contradiction and facts that shift over time, coupled with its recognition of the importance of emotional persuasion'. (Crehan 2018). Gramsci noted that *senso comune* held a 'crudely neophobe and conservative nature' (Crehan 2018; Gramsci, 1971, p. 42) and 'generally indicates the conformism of individuals in relation to the communities to which they belong, and as such its conservative connotations are often accentutated' (Fillipini 2017, p. 126). Gramsci also recognised that while *senso comune* contains not only 'the most conservative and reactionary ideas' it also holds the 'intuitions of a future philosophy' (Fillipini 2017, p. 110). It was to these intuitions that Gramsci, appealed for the formation of a 'new common sense' (*Buon senso* or good sense) to 'lead to a popular strategy for radical change' (Gramsci 1971, p. 328). *Buon senso*, is therefore, 'the healthy nucleus that exists in '*senso comune*' which deserves to be made 'more unitary and coherent' (Gramsci 1971, p. 328).

A far right shaping of 'good sense' is a perversion of what Gramsci would have considered as a 'healthy nucleus' or basis for 'radical change' (Gramsci 1971, p. 328). While claiming to act on behalf of 'good sense', far right actors such as Salvini are in fact appealing to the incoherent and fragmentary nature of *senso comune* to prevent 'the formation of collective wills as an alternative to the dominant one' (Fillipini 2017, p. 110). Further to this incoherence, however, is an appeal to the

aforementioned 'crudely neophobe and conservative nature' of *senso comune* (Crehan 2018; Gramsci, 1971, p. 42). This makes it particularly useful to populist far right politicians such as Salvini in their presentation of ideas as which should be 'taken for granted and accepted as unproblematic truth' (Stahl 2022). This, in turn, can contribute to a 'discursive shift in which ideas and discourses move 'from a position of unacceptability to one of legitimacy' (Krzyżanowski 2021).

2. *The construction of far right common sense, 2018-2023*

The data examined below covers the period from Salvini's announcement of a 'common sense revolution' in late 2017 until the first months of the Giorgia Meloni administration. This period was, in many ways emblematic of the 'fluctuating fortunes' which have characterised the Lega since its formation. Receiving 17.4% of the vote in 2018, Salvini became Interior Minister and Deputy Prime Minister in a coalition government with the Five Star Movement (5SM) led by Giuseppe Conte. Salvini's 'Security Decree' which 'stopped asylum seekers from accessing reception centres and introduced a fast-track expulsion system for so-called '"dangerous" asylum seekers' (Dennison and Geddes 2022); meanwhile, further legislation broadened the definition of 'legitimate self-defence' (Mendoza, DuBois, Wetton, 2019). After emerging from the European Parliamentary elections with 34.3% of the vote and polling nationally at 36% in summer 2019, Salvini tried to trigger elections by withdrawing his support for the government (Giovannini and Vampa 2022). This strategy failed, with the 5SM reaching an agreement with the Democratic Party (PD) to form the second Conte administration and consigning the Lega to the opposition benches. On the fall of this administration, Salvini lent his

parliamentary support to Mario Draghi's government, while his far right coalition partner/rival Giorgia Meloni, leader of Brothers of Italy (FdI), was able to position herself as having been 'alone in opposition'.

Many of Salvini's and the Lega's tweets between 2018 and 2023 represent 'soundbite headlines hyperlinked to radio and TV interviews, press releases or speeches that are also distributed on Lega's and Salvini's Facebook pages', (Zappetini and Maccaferri 2021). Tweets over this five-year period from the handles of @matteosalvinimi and @legasalvini were extracted using Twitter's 'Advanced Search' function in combination with the data-extraction software EXPORTCOMMENTS™. The yield of tweets was aggregated, leading to a total of 25,026 tweets over this five-year period. I then refined this search restricting results to tweets containing the phrase or hashtag of #'buonsenso'/#'buon senso,' narrowing the field to a total of 624 tweets (@Matteosalvinimi = 296 @Legasalvini = 328). This constitutes an average of 2.47% of the aggregated tweet output over a five year period, during which a buon senso trope was only absent in one month (May 2018). Considering the 'broad range of populist communication tactics available and the usually fragmented nature of populist communication' (Engesser et al 2017; Berti and Loner 2021), the recurrence and consistency of the buon senso means it is interpreted here as a significant strategy. Aiming to make the Lega's stances more acceptable to prospective voters, references to buon senso saw peaks and/or steady levels either during national and administrative election campaigns (2018; 2021; 2022) or attempts to either promote policies when in government (2018-2019; 2021-2022) or oppose policies when in opposition (2020-2021). Analysis of Salvini's *buon senso* trope was then guided by a three-step analytical process. First a 'coding' of the tweets by identifying recurring discursive themes; second an examination of

the argumentation strategies through which positive and negative attributions are justified and legitimised with the establishment of out-groups, in-groups, and metaphorical devices' (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001; Boukala and Dimitrakopoulou 2017); finally, examining the modes of realisation, enactment, and discursive performance (Reisigl and Wodak 2001; Bates 2023). This analysis reveals that between 2018 and 2023, Salvini shaped a far-right version of common sense via different discourse topics of Italy and Italians First; Close the Borders and Clear the Camps and Rights, Freedoms, and Security.

2.1 'Italy and Italians First,

Salvini's attempt to shape common sense as 'Italy and Italians First' consisted of a dyad of protecting, on the one hand, 'Italian cultures and traditions' and, on the other, 'Italian sovereignty'. Regarding 'cultures and traditions' Salvini constructed in-groups and out-groups around common sense:

> It is common sense to guarantee hospitality and respect to those who want to integrate. It is not common sense to allow somebody to trample on our history, culture and traditions, take down crucifixes in schools and take the celebration of the nativity away from our children.' (@LegaSalvini 2018)

An essentialisation of Italian identity around the 'crucifix' and the 'nativity' was combined with the use of 'trample' to give the impression of a 'native' in-group being over-run by a 'non-native' out-group. Italians First, however, represented not only a Islamophobic othering strategy which sought to exclude Muslims from the Italian people, but also a moral panic relating to gender and an opposition to LGBTQ rights. This involved linking the use of gender-normative family tropes of 'mother and father' to common sense:

> On Italian identity cards, the words 'mother' and 'father' are back and 'parent 1' and 'parent 2' have been removed. A little bit of common sense restored. (@matteosalvinimi 2019b)

Salvini depicted those fighting for LGBTQ rights as a 'dictatorship of the politically correct' which posed a threat to 'common sense' (@LegaSalvini 2020a). As a fierce opponent of the proposed 'Zan' law in 2021 which aimed to make homophobia a hate-crime, Salvini claimed that this went 'against common sense' (D'Angelo 2021; @matteosalvinimi 2021a). Regarding 'Italian sovereignty', for the 2019 European Parliamentary (EP) elections, Salvini promoted a 'common sense Europe' and 'more Italy in Europe.' This involved stating that Italians had a choice between 'on one side, bureaucrats, bankers, do-gooder, NGO boats, on the other the People and Common Sense, on one side the past, on the other, the future! #Italy First' (@matteosalvinimi 2019c). Similar tweets used a metonymical device of 'four Bs' (*Burocrati, Banchieri, Buonisti, Barconi*), to represent elites who posed a threat to 'common sense' (@LegaSalvini 2019a). Later, in 2021, this discourse against 'bankers' and the Europe of 'big finance' was transformed into support for a government led by a former head of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi. Exploiting the inconsistent nature of *senso comune*, Salvini now praised the 'common sense' of a man he had once depicted as at the heart of the European elites (@matteosalvinimi 2022b). Salvini argued that

> Like the Germans defend their interests, we want to be involved in a Government that does not sell our national interests to Europe. Not for sovereignism, but for common sense. (@Legasalvini 2021)

'Italy and Italians First', however, overlapped with a further discursive theme of closed borders and cleared camps which

Salvini used to target migrants and Italy's traveller populations in the name of 'common sense'.

2.2. 'Closed Borders and Cleared Camps'

Central to the promotion of Salvini's 'security decree' was its discursive construction as a 'common sense' measure to protect Italy against what Salvini labelled as 'sly and fake refugees.' This predication strategy contributed to a creation of a clearly defined out-group who did not play by the Lega's common sense rules of migration. (@matteosalvinimi 2018d). Furthermore, Salvini claimed

> Two Italians out of three are with us (so says a *Corriere della Sera* poll, but speaking to the people for me the number is even higher) Are they all dangerous 'racists populists, fascists, extremists...?' No, it's just COMMON SENSE (@matteosalvinimi 2019d)

Using public opinion polls via a mainstream newspaper to add legitimacy to his claims, Salvini argued he spoke on behalf of more than two thirds of 'common sense Italians'. Meanwhile *refuting* membership of right-wing terms such as 'racists' and 'fascists', Salvini argued that 'asking for order' [was] not fascism, but COMMON SENSE.' (@matteosalvinimi 2018e). This is in line with other right-wing actors who make frequent use of an 'invader' or 'enemy' metaphor to construct refugees and migrants (Taylor 2021, p. 474). What Ekman (2022) has noted as a mainstreaming of Great Replacement conspiracy theories, is illustrated via Salvini's following plea to voters:

> Friends, [...] help me save our country from the devastating project of invasion [...] Where is the 'racism'? where is the 'intolerance?' Where is the 'fascism'? To me it seems only COMMON SENSE. (@matteosalvinimi 2020a)

While fomenting the idea of immigration as a plot to demographically 'replace' white Italians with people of non-European origin' (Ekman 2022), the use of rhetorical questions and inverted comments actively seeks to discredit accusations of racism, intolerance, and fascism. Meanwhile, in terms of 'clear the camps' this was linked to both migrants in detention camps and Italy's Roma population:

> In Italy, there is a Roma population of nearly 150 thousand. The problem regards those 30 thousand who insist on living in camps, at the border of legality or in full illegality. Stopping all of this seems to me only a question of COMMON SENSE (@matteosalvinimi 2018f)

Providing a caveat that it is 'only the 30 thousand who live in camps who cause the problem' is used to depict the discourse of 'clearing the camps', as common sense. During the national lockdowns in Italy imposed during the Covid 19 pandemic, the clear the camps discourse was extended to migrants who were accused of bringing Covid 19 to Italy:

> Without these centres for migrants, we wouldn't have had two big (coronavirus) outbreaks. [...] They must go home. These are the words of common sense and what the majority of Italians think (@matteosalvinimi 2020b)

This was the latest in 'a long-established pattern of linking minorities, racial groups, and specific communities to disease' (Bieber 2022). The Covid 19 pandemic was not, however, only exploited by Salvini to promote such racist narratives under the guise of common sense but also fed into a discourse of rights and freedoms and law and order.

2.3. 'Rights, Freedoms and Security'

Populist far right actors often invoke a discourse of rights and freedoms to construct the people (Alekseev's 2018). This is illustrated via Salvini's association of 'common sense' with Italians' 'rights' to security, via a society of law and order:

> The right to legitimate self-defence, zero tolerance for thieves and zero reduction of sentences for grave crimes such as rapes or murders. Day after day, we are working to restore a little normality and common sense for Italians, and we don't intend to stop. #self-defenceisalwayslegitimate (@matteosalvinimi 2018g).

This sought to normalise a zero-tolerance approach to crime and blind faith in police authority. It was reiterated in several tweets which depicted the use of tasers by the police as a 'common sense' security measure (@matteosalvinimi 2022c; 2022d). Salvini further depicted his 'legitimate self-defence' measure as a common sense by employing a perspective of a legal expert:

> I believe that if you find a thief in your house and you shoot, you have the right to do it, especially if your life is in danger.' So says Franca Leosini, who is one of the leading experts in judicial cases in Italy. It's just COMMON SENSE. #self-defenceisalwayslegitimate. (@matteosalvinimi 2018h)

Shaping common sense around expert opinion was, therefore, aimed at providing a veneer of legitimacy to his proposed reform of the penal code. Salvini would later also cite the opinion of doctors, intellectuals, and other experts who agree with him regarding a lifting of lockdown restrictions. While endorsing expert opinion; these views were framed by Salvini as 'common sense' and, therefore, tantamount to the 'general will' (@LegaSalvini 2021b). The incoherent nature of *senso comune* became apparent when Salvini's libertarian law-and-order

measures to empower the individual conflicted with his opposition to measures to protect the health and safety of the collective during the pandemic:

> As a former minister, I hope [...] the forces of law and order will be used as soon as possible not to pursue and fine hairdressers or bartenders, but to arrest drug dealers and criminals. I'm counting on Italians' common sense (@matteosalvinimi 2020c).

This opposition to law-and-order measures designed to stop the spread of Covid-19 hinged on the contradictory and incoherent nature of *senso comune,* something also illustrated in the changing position of the Lega towards lockdown measures. Indeed, when the Conte II administration first announced lockdowns in Italy, Salvini retweeted a message from the governor of Lombardy, Attilio Fontana, which stated that 'common sense has prevailed' and that 'the government has acted on our requests' (@LegaSalvini 2020c). Initial calls for stronger lockdown measures, however, gave way to a position closer to that typical of the populist far right i.e., a 'conspiratorial view of pandemic response' which reified freedom, individualism and social Darwinism (Gerbaudo 2020, p. 63). Salvini later argued 'further lockdowns are against COMMON SENSE. If they want to keep us cooped up, they really haven't understood. Italians have already shown a huge amount of generosity' (@LegaSalvini 2020d). Salvini, therefore, shaped common sense to oppose lockdown measures, while using the term 'us' to align his views with those of 'the people'.

3. *Conclusion*

The snap elections called for September 2022 marked a new phase in Salvini's use of *buon senso* trope as he combined it with a new slogan of credo (believe/faith) in which politics was

defined as an 'act of secular faith' (@matteosalvinimi 2022b). In the days leading up to this poll, Pietro Castelli-Gattinara and Caterina Froio (2022) noted in a blog post that in Italy 'some of the key ideas of the far right are now normalised and deemed "common sense."' This normalisation has been a long-term process and cannot be solely attributed to the discourse or actions of one political party. Nevertheless, Salvini's construction of a reactionary people via a trope of *buon senso* should be viewed as at least one of the key contributing factors in the legitimisation and mainstreaming of far right ideology which helped propel Italy's far right coalition to victory. Despite losing ground to Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy in the 2022 elections, the overall victory of the right-wing coalition in these elections is testament to how Salvini shaped far right ideas as common sense in the five years leading up to this vote. Salvini's claim to embody common sense was predicated on a populist logic of constructing a 'reactionary people.' This has involved not simply appealing to *buon senso* but has actively shaping it around reactionary discourses to 'persuade addressees of the validity of specific claims of truth and normative rightness' (Reisigl and Wodak 2009 p. 93). This spurious *buon senso* trope has depended on the other side of its dyad i.e., the contradictory, incoherent and conservative nature of *senso comune*, thus enabling Salvini to construct a reactionary people via three key discursive themes of Italy and Italians First, Closed Borders and Cleared Camps, and Security, Rights, and Freedoms.

Beyond the case of Italy, this article has furthered understanding of how populist and far right politics relate to common sense narratives. Salvini's engagement with a series of academics, doctors, and intellectuals – albeit highly selective – is indicative of how via common sense narratives, populist politicians can depict certain expert and intellectual opinion as

close to what the people think. Far right constructions of common sense should, therefore, be viewed as a way of exploiting the ambiguity of 'the people' for reactionary ends (Mondon 2022). Meanwhile, it is equally important to examine how mainstream actors have themselves engage with common sense narratives to move the mainstream closer to the far right. The implications of this strategy go beyond just Italian politics. Salvini's praise for the UK Prime Minister, Risihi Sunak's anti-immigration policies as 'words of common sense' (@matteosalvinimi 2023) has further blurred the lines between the mainstream and extreme of right-wing politics. Viewing common sense as constructed enhances our understanding of the contingent nature of the mainstream itself, something which the academic community is duty-bound to acknowledge to effectively challenge far right ideology.

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Taxing the banks' extra-profits. The first risky move by Meloni government's: a well-conceived marketing device or pure improvisation?

VALERIO ALFONSO BRUNO[1]

Abstract. This chapter discusses the recent sudden move (in August 2023) by the Italian executive led by Giorgia Meloni to tax the extra-profits of Italian banks, largely welcomed by the governing majority and the political opposition. Within the framework of "external constraint" (*vincolo esterno*) – so avoiding any conflict with European Union institutions, international organisations and alliances of which Italy is a member (including NATO, G7), or the international financial markets – the executive's actions in the first year carefully respected this constraint, in continuity with the Draghi government, including at a foreign policy level as the Ukrainian dossier demonstrates. All this makes the tax exceptional, and its rationale – which merely sparked international investor uncertainty and stock market volatility – hard to understand. The chapter concludes that rather than a populist, well-conceived marketing device, the taxation of the Italian banks, or at least the first draft of the tax that was then subsequently downsized, was pure improvisation,

[1] Valerio Alfonso Bruno, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Polidemos (Centre for the Study of Democracy and Political Change, Center for European Futures (Italy), Far-Right Analysis Network (United Kingdom), Center for European Futures (CEF) valerioalfonsobruno@unicatt.it.

a likely initiative of some key but dissatisfied members of the governing majority[2].
Keywords: Italy; Meloni Government; Far Right; external constraint; banks; tax on extra profits

Introduction

After a year of winning Italy's general election in September 2022, the Meloni government appeared to be capably handling several complex policy dossiers, including those related to foreign policy. Analysts and political commentators in Italy and abroad had issued warnings about the possible victory, after several technocratic "pauses" (see Giannone and Cozzolino 2023) of a government so far to the right of the political spectrum. In particular, the role of the *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy or FdI) party's post-fascism, its neo-fascist history, political culture and ideological roots have often received attention, partially in the broader debate around democratic backsliding and illiberal democracies (Anselmi 2023; Campati 2022; Palano 2022). Indeed, the possibility that Italy with its new government could veer, or will veer in the future, towards a regime similar to Orban's Hungary or today's Poland, is a complex issue that will not be addressed here. However, some considerations can be made. Firstly, while it is easy to discuss and comment in retrospect, even a year ago it would have been unthinkable that the FdI and its right-wing allies would be able to campaign, and subsequently win, as a government acting under a banner of open defiance to what can be summarily defined as "external constraint" (in Italian, *vincolo esterno*). On the

[2] This chapter is partially based on a paper presented at the annual conference of the SISP, Società Italiana di Scienza Politica, held in Genoa in September 2023. For this, I am grateful for the constructive feedback received.

contrary, what might enable a change in the current political balance in Italy and the European Union (EU), assuming that this is the aim of the Italian government and which probably reflects the current strategy of the executive, would be a planned gradual modification of the balance of power, starting from within the institutions[3]. It would, therefore, be crucial to avoid open and/or direct conflict while respecting the external constraint. Here, when speaking of external constraint, I intend – in very broad terms – three principal factors that depart from its classic application to public finance:

1. the Institutions of the EU, such as the Commission, the European Parliament (EP)[4] and the European Central Bank (ECB);

[3] In this chapter I consciously leave out any discussion of the country's "internal constraints", i.e. the expected checks and balances enacted by the country's institutions: the opposition in Parliament, the Constitutional Court, the judiciary, and – most notably – the Presidency of the Republic (on this key aspect, see Passarelli 2022).

[4] In June 2024, European Union citizens will be called upon to re-elect the EP. The 2019 EP elections already played a pivotal role in the development of current European party politics. Currently, the two European political groups with the most representatives are the European People's Party (EPP) and the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) with 175 and 144 representatives, respectively. These parties have historically been the axis around which the EP moves; however, it is possible that in 2024 the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and the Identity and Democracy Party (I&D) will play a key role in the new European power dynamics, attempting to shift the balance of European politics from within by influencing the composition of the future European Commission. In particular, the ECR – currently chaired by Italy's PM Meloni and including parties like the FdI, VOX, PiS and Sweden Democrats – may well play a decisive role in any new internal EU dynamics, forming a possible political axis with the EPP.

2. Italy's historical allies, including partners such as the United States[5], France and Germany, and its membership of organisations such as NATO and the G7;
3. the global financial markets.

Regarding the first point, a government like that of Italy – irrespective of its political colour or electoral support – could hardly afford, *rebus sic stantibus*, to set off on a collision course

[5] The presidential election in the United States, to be held in November 2024, will also play a crucial role in the external constraints affecting far-right parties in Europe. There is little doubt that a return of Donald Trump may signal to those parties the possibility of obtaining far more room to manoeuvre, with NATO undergoing a process of change from within (similar to what may happen to the EU institutions should populist radical-right and far-right parties score a major victory in the 2024 EU election). Currently, a growing number of Republicans are battling for the party's nomination and the chance to face the Democratic candidate in the 2024 presidential election. Trump is currently favoured in the Republican primary race, but with some dangerous contenders. Indeed, despite his unpopularity with large sectors of the electorate, Trump has maintained a strong grip on his base and has strengthened his position in the polls, despite ongoing investigations into him. Florida Governor, Ron DeSantis, has positioned himself even further to the right than Trump on many key issues; he is second-placed in the polls and has signed legislation imposing new restrictions on abortion and a loosening of gun laws in Florida. The remaining candidates in the Republican field – Pence, Christie and Burgum – appear, if possible, more "moderate" than the direction taken by Trump and DeSantis. Indeed, it is interesting to note that in the U.S., as well as in other contexts (think for example of France with Le Pen and Zemmour), a complementary process of normalisation and radicalisation is underway. This has seen increased interest among right-wing parties in adopting and propagating extreme political positions, and far-right leaders and movements gradually being accepted within institutions (a far-right mainstreaming phenomenon now widely studied and documented; see, among others, Leidig 2020, Mondon and Winter 2020, 2020b), as witnessed in the widespread strategic emphasis given to migration policies in recent years (Downes and Loveless 2018).

with the EU institutions, especially the European Commission and ECB. Both the fourth executive, led by Silvio Berlusconi in 2011 alongside the one-of-a-kind "yellow-green" *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (Five Star Movement or M5S), and Salvini's League in 2018, attempted (with different outcomes) to openly "challenge" the EU institutions. With regard to the second point – Italy's historical alliances – Italy is a founding member of the EU and a member of NATO and the current G7. As such, its stance is fundamentally hinged on an inescapable transatlantic relationship, as was evident in the recent Ukraine Dossier. As Bruno and Fazio (2023) have recently surmised in their analysis of the positioning of the Italian government and political parties vis-à-vis Russia's war in Ukraine:

> [...] To conclude, as far as the "Ukraine Dossier" is concerned, the transition between the technocratic national unity government led by Mario Draghi and the right-wing political government led by Giorgia Meloni seems, for now, to have followed a path of continuity. In fact, while within the right-wing coalition, Salvini's Lega and Berlusconi's Forza Italia seemed to have been wavering regarding the position taken on the Ukraine Dossier, following the demise of Forza Italia's historic leader in 2023 and the handover of leadership to Antonio Tajani, the discontent around Italy's Atlanticism and pro-European line seems to have subsided, at least for the time being.

As for the global financial markets and related institutions, their role – broadly understood as that of rating agencies – in the public finance policies of national governments cannot be underestimated. The more financialised an economy a country has, the greater the influence of financial markets on its

policies. Andreas Nölke has shown (Nölke 2020; Nölke *et al.* 2019)[6] how the international economy's current financialisation status *de facto* limits countries' room to manoeuvre[7]. In the aforementioned crisis situations of 2011 and 2018, with tensions arising between European institutions, financial markets played a fairly important role, in virtue of (a) Italy's membership of a monetary union alongside other Eurozone countries, and (b) because of its very high public debt, currently about 140 percent of its GDP[8] (Ansa, 21 July 2023)[9].

In summary, my hypothesis is that the Meloni government's actions have, for almost a year (at least until August 2023), been perfectly in line with what we have called "external constraint", which makes taxing the extra-profits of Italian banks a

[6] Financialisation is defined, amongst others, by Andreas Nölke (2017) as "an especially aggressive form of economic globalisation", and by Epstein (2005) as "the increasing importance of financial motives, financial institutions and financial elites in the functioning of the economy".

[7] This is truer for countries belonging to a monetary union, like the EU member states that are also part of the so-called single-currency Eurozone, as they cannot independently adopt economic policies.

[8] https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/economia/2023/07/21/debito-pil-nelle urozona-cala-al-912-italia-seconda-al-1435_117b36c8-0179-473e-adc0-faef49e 238aa.html.

[9] One criticism, fair in principle, might be that high public debt per se does not mean that a country is bound by international financial markets. The United States of America's Government debt accounted for 122,8% of the country's Nominal GDP in June 2023, yet it is hard to consider the USA as constrained. In fact, high U.S. public debt is starting to increasingly occupy financial analysts' agendas, and the debate there in the spring about the difficulties of raising the public debt ceiling any further have led some rating agencies to downgrade the U.S. debt. Obviously, as a historically leading country in the liberal international order (Parsi 2021), and with a currency such as the dollar still playing a preponderant role in the world economy, financial markets may currently play a minor role in limiting the actions of the U.S. government.

misstep that is hard to understand. If the external constraint may in this case be made to coincide with international institutions, organisations and historical post-WW2 alliances, but also global financial markets, as they agree to lend money, for longer or shorter predetermined periods, to the Italian state in exchange of a financial return. For this very reason, this chapter questions whether a move like the Meloni government's sudden decision to tax Italian bank profits can be considered a first misstep in the considerations set out earlier with respect to external constraint.

1. *The August 2023 tax on Italy's banks' extra profits*

Here follows an account of the tax on extra-profits. With the Omnibus Decree of 10 August 2023, the Meloni government expressed its willingness to introduced a tax on Italian banks' extra-profits. The decision was allegedly made in response to the high interest rate hikes decided by the ECB, which led to an increase in variable-rate mortgage rates. The tax was, thus, allegedly intended as a form of "social justice," with the proceeds then going to help first-time home owners and reduce taxes. The rate charged is forty percent and is based on a number of factors, including the interest margin for previous years (ANSA 9 August 2023)[10]. While the majority (e.g., Matteo Salvini, who endorsed the measure in the name of "'fairness") and opposition in the Italian Parliament have been in surprising agreement with the measure, seeing it as a way to protect families and support those struggling to pay their mortgages, the

[10] https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/economia/2023/08/08/banche-come-funziona-la-tassa-sugli-extraprofitti_fc620ed7-33b6-4e2c-9e96-a7ffef7212e8.html

financial markets unsurprisingly did not welcome the news[11]. As mentioned earlier, while almost all majority and opposition parties welcomed the tax, with the exception of Forza Italia now led by Antonio Tajani, and *Italia Viva* and *Azione* (Repubblica, 15 August 2023)[12], it immediately raised concern among analysts, both regarding the modality and the instrument itself. The tax was announced, unexpectedly and extremely suddenly, in the middle of the summer; there was no debate on the issue at either a parliamentary or public opinion level[13]. Regarding the measure itself (as Tajani, among others, highlighted), the tax, as originally conceived, would have hit both large and small Italian banks at the same rate, having a further dangerous impact on the Italian public debt (currently at 140% of Italy's GDP), which Italian banks regularly buy.

The original version of the tax assumed a one-off payment of forty percent, applied when the interest margin, i.e., the difference between interest income and interest expense, recorded in 2022 exceeded the value of the 2021 fiscal year by at least 3 percent, and by at least 6 percent in 2023 compared to 2022 ("linearity" is in this sense effectively a total lack of equalisation). The model chosen by the Giorgia Meloni-led

[11] Stocks in the banking sector posted significant declines, with the FTSE MIB (*Milano Indice di Borsa*), the benchmark stock market index for the *Borsa Italiana* (the Italian national stock exchange) opening in negative territory and suffering losses of around 10 billion euros. And yet, in reality, the model of the tax closely traces the one pioneered by the Draghi government on energy companies to recover resources for businesses and households against high energy prices.

[12] https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2023/08/15/news/tajani_forza_italia_meloni_colloquio-411131375/.

[13] At least that was done with the financial markets closed.

executive would apparently cut without making any distinctions[14]. Secondly, in its original version, the tax lacked any distinction in terms of size[15], seemingly neglecting the role of financial institutions deemed as "too big to fail" (Chesney 2018 and Dembinski 2009)[16].

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[14] Imagine if a small bank had decided, independently and with a view to protecting its customers through redistribution, to allocate part of its undistributed profits to "capping" mortgage payments; in other words, placing a levy to the benefit of savers and to its own disadvantage (considering the merely pecuniary interests of the bank). Imagine if that same credit institution adopted a cooperative approach in its activities, marked by the creation of locally-based value, rejecting any kind of speculation. Well, according to the rule so far indicated by the government and then "amended" by the Ministry of the Economy, it would be taxed in the exact same way as a bank that had done nothing to protect savings and was perhaps cheerfully dedicated to speculating on all kinds of markets, putting at risk economic systems, international financial stability and, therefore, the security of the same small savers. A system that does not take into account the size and activities of lending institutions.

[15] We may ask if it does make sense to demand that they pay the same proportion as small and very small entities, present perhaps with only a few branches, in a small territory, and which, for this exact reason, have not in the past exploited distortions and legislative loopholes to guarantee themselves shameful profit margins and expand. Even in the ultra-liberal United States, the rules for larger banks are unique and more stringent, starting with the supervision exercised by regulators. Then there is the real risk that a manoeuvre centred precisely on one specific aspect, that of how loans are made (or at least on a parameter closely related to them), may in fact invite the same taxed banks to prefer other types of business. In other words, if it becomes more onerous to issue loans, better to focus on something else. Perhaps precisely, again, speculative activities.

[16] Thus, it is key to emphasise here the interest in the role of ethical and cultural norms, but also the calls for ethical behaviour and a culture of prudent risk-taking. To this regard, contemporary authors such as Paul H. Dembinski and Marc Chesney have produced several analyses on this

2. *The international financial markets as "external constraint"*

As mentioned earlier, the increased role of financialisation in national government public finances has had a huge impact. This is particularly relevant for the EU; in fact, in any discussion of the role of national governments and financial markets in the EU, the EU institutions play a crucial role. Nölke (2017, pp. 38-39) has observed the EU's general stance and specific policies and the role of financial markets:

> [...] The European Union has played an important role in all three dimensions of the deepening financialisation, even though the original decisions were taken at the global level (the end of the Bretton-Woods system) and at the national level (financial market liberalisation, extension of the financial sector). Whereas the European Union played a negligible role compared to the national role until the 1980s, it has become the main driving force facilitating financialisation in Europe since the 1990s. More specifically, "the European Union" usually refers to the European Commission and the representatives of the EU member state executives (e.g., ministries of finance), with a very strong input by the financial lobbying sector that is more powerful at the EU level than at the national level of most member states.

Nölke later concludes (2017, p. 42): "[...] The European Union has been identified as a prime driver of the deepening of

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particular point. Dembinski, among others, has framed the problem not only in terms of "ethics *and* finance", or "ethics *of* finance", but as ethics *in* finance. More specifically, in his works Dembinski introduced and framed ethics as the place where dilemmas are expressed, systematically analysing the ethical dilemmas of financial players. Reference was also made to this issue in Bruno and Cozzolino's 'Financing: Fiscal Tools To Enhance Regional Sustainable Development', in the The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Urban and Regional Futures, edited by Robert C. Brears (2021).

financialisation. Moreover, a comparison of the most important options for reversing the financialisation process with recent EU decisions, has demonstrated that the Union intends to deepen financialisation, rather than reverse it".

The other side of the relationship, i.e., populist governments, in particular populist radical-right and far-right governments, is also complex. In fact, despite what one may think, there is relatively little clear and precise evidence available on the specific role of populist governments in financial stability.

It is important to clarify a point here. At the level of both populist and sovereignist ideologies and discourses, international financial markets make a perfect target for political players suffering under constraints; with markets acting to *de facto* or *de jure* narrow national governments' room for manoeuvre, there are few options available for their public finance policies (among others Preda 2007)[17]. According to populists' claims, financial elites represent an enemy of the people's will, while in the sovereigntist's discourse, international financial markets take sovereignty away from the nation, similarly to globalisation or international institutions (Mueller, S., and Heidelberger 2020; A. Verzichelli 2021). As Alessio Scopelliti and Valerio Alfonso Bruno argue:

> [...] what distinguishes sovereignism from nationalism and populism is the rather vague idea of restoring a lost sovereignty. "Sovereignty" here is to be understood not in a precise and consistent manner (i.e., as a field of political science), but

[17] Here a first draft distinction that is still not very elaborate. I mean, for instance, (a) what a government of a member country of the Eurozone is allowed, or not, allowed in matters of economic policy as a result of treaties and agreements, thus a formal "constraint", differently from (b) a constraint of a material kind may be represented precisely by the financial markets, which exert pressure of a different kind not on the basis of an agreement.

> rather as a more or less concrete and idealised place and time, in which the people and the nation were allegedly deemed to hold political power, having given up full control of a given territory, its borders, policy-making, etc. In this sense it is understandable how sovereignism develops in constant opposition to phenomena such as globalisation and Europeanism, including their respective elites, which would have allegedly taken the original sovereignty away from the people and the nation. (Scopelliti and Bruno 2023, p. 194)

Specifically in regard to the financial markets and populist parties in power[18], studies have shown the direction of the impact of populist electoral victories to be ambiguous: in the short-term, populism may appear to increase volatility while in the long-term, the effects of populism are country – and context-dependent (Hartwell 2022). In relation to the positioning of populism on the left-right spectrum of the political continuum, despite its anti-capitalist rhetoric, the alleged political insecurity that could be generated by populist movements on the far left only partially translates into financial insecurity in the context of institutionalised democracies. In turn, researchers have allegedly found that the electoral success of right-wing populists reduces risk assessments, which could be driven by their frequent association with rent-seeking and big business (Stöckl and Rode 2021). Focusing on Italy, and more specifically in relation to different Italian governments, there has tended to be a greater focus on EU reactions, which have actually been

[18] The discussion of what is populism would be immense. I would at least defer to some interesting works on the role of populist parties in power, in particular Albertazzi and McDonnell (2015), Caiani and Graziano (2022), Pappas (2019). On extreme-right and far-right see Ignazi 1994 and Mudde 2019.

complementary to those of the financial markets (Verbeek and Zaslove 2015).

Therefore, vis-à-vis populist (radical-right) governments, the financial markets – at least from the evidence available – seem to act in a fairly neutral manner, with the Meloni government also following this direction[19]. Precisely for this reason, and in light of how the Meloni government behaved responsibly for about a year, the rationale behind the sudden decision to tax the extra-profits of Italian banks, without any prior notice or consultation with the parties involved, and without having informed the ECB and other European authorities (at least as far as we know) seems even less understandable. As evidence of this, the tax was immediately and sharply scaled back by the Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF), led by Giancarlo Giorgetti (League)[20]. More specifically, the amount owed by individual institutions will not be allowed to exceed

[19] In fact, some evidence seems to point to a substantial continuity in the differential between Italian public debt and German public debt (the spread between the Italian Btp and the German Bund), or even improving, as with the exciting recovery of the Italian major FTSE MIB index in the first half of 2023.

[20] As recently argued by Bruno and Downes (2023), the current Italian Minister for Economic Development represents the most pro-European and business-friendly part of the League. This is exemplified by the support of important European funds, around €220 billion, that Italy is currently using under the name of the PNRR (*Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza* or The National Recovery and Resilience Plan) and has suggested the possibility of a "Semi-Presidenzialismo di fatto" (de facto Semi-Presidentialism) under Draghi. This political shift is even more ironic, considering how the populist radical right League has historically adopted a "hard" Eurosceptic stance (i.e., outright rejection of the EU Project) yet now resembles far more closely a "soft" Eurosceptic party (i.e., seeking to reform the EU Project from within/via the mechanisms of the EU Parliament).

0.1 percent of their capital assets, that is, of all the assets that the banks holds. A choice, according to the government, made to safeguard the stability of banking institutions. The move, which followed twenty-four hours after the first announcement, brought the maximum revenue from the tax down to less than 4 billion euros, but it is likely to be much less than the 8-10 billion originally envisaged[21]. The sum gained would be ideally used by the Italian government to finance the first-home mortgage fund, intended first and foremost for citizens under 36 years of age planning to buy a home, and to finance a non-better specified tax cut[22] (Sky Tg24, 9 August 2023).

3. *Conclusions*

In conclusion, it is worth recounting a very apt anecdote. In early September 2023, during the recent annual forum organised by The European House-Ambrosetti (a forum with exclusive participation and strictly for invited recipients), the work of the Meloni government, according to a survey of participants, was fully promoted and very positively judged. But with one notable exception. The tax on banks in early August[23]

[21] For the country's two largest banks, the account would get smaller, with Intesa Sanpaolo expected to save over 1.5 billion euros compared to initial estimates, and Unicredit about 400 million.

[22] https://tg24.sky.it/economia/2023/08/09/tassa-extraprofitti-banche-rischi-conseguenze#:~:text=Il%20Ministero%20dell'Economia%20ridimensionabeni%20che%20le%20banche%20possiedono.

[23] https://www.repubblica.it/economia/2023/09/03/news/la_platea_di_cernobbio_promuove_il_governo_meloni_ma_boccia_la_tassa_sulle_banche_extraprofitti-413137416/. The European House-Ambrosetti Forum is an international meeting to discuss primarily economic issues; it has been held annually since 1975, in the first week of September, at the Villa d'Este in Cernobbio, on Lake

(Repubblica, 3 September 2023) was, on the contrary, sharply rejected by the forum participants, comprising presidents, CEOs and top managers of major international and national business groups, as well as influential global politicians. In other words, and with generous generalisation, a good number of those we might call global economic and financial elites would not be convinced by the "populist" move of the Meloni government.

Despite being acclaimed by almost all of Italy's political parties, including those in opposition, it is very likely that the tax on the extra-profits of banks will be still further diluted, perhaps guaranteeing that Italian banks will be able to claim credits over the next five to ten years, covering almost all of what they will have to disburse, making it a well disguised device. One could ask whether this was not the government's original objective, or whether it was an improvisation that was followed by an equally sudden backtracking. As far as we are now concerned, the latter option seems the more likely, probably due to the influence of several members of the government and the support of the right-wing coalition[24].

Como. Organised by the Milan-based business consulting firm of the same name, it is aimed at and dedicated to heads of state, ministers, Nobel laureates and economists. The forum generally consists of an intensive cycle of meetings, debates, presentations of ad hoc research, elaboration of forecasts on the world, European and Italian economic and geo-political scenarios, and an analysis of the main scientific and technological developments and their effects on the future of institutions, businesses and, in general, civil society.

[24] In fact, it would be interesting to know the role played by the League, and specifically Salvini, in this matter. While Forza Italia's role is clear, given Berlusconi's recent departure and the evident perplexity of Tajani and other party politicians, that of the League seems more complex and, even, split. In a recent paper, mentioned above, Bruno and Downes (2023) mentioned how different "souls" or factions can be ascribed to the party. There is firstly the

What leads us to think this is, once again, the ways in which Giorgia Meloni's government has acted thus far, avoiding any confrontation with Italy's historical allies[25] and regional and international institutions, as one would expect when seeking a convergence between extreme right-wing and radical populist elements on the one hand and the governing party's conservative ideology on the other. Even at the economic and financial level, the executive and its ministers are well aware of the precarious, to put it mildly, situation of Italy's public finances. Rather, it is the strategic action of gradual change, from within

"historical" League, the ideological core that holds deeply entrenched links to Northern Italy, for many years the key bastion of support for both Umberto Bossi and Roberto Maroni. This component, although currently latent, should not be underestimated. A second feature that can be considered part of the contemporary League, is the party's support for what has been the government led by Mario Draghi and his agenda, exemplified by Giancarlo Giorgetti. A third core feature of the League relates to that hard, extreme right-wing element of the party. In essence, this ideological element has created structured links with the extreme right, not only neo-fascists, but also those with neo-Nazi links and allegations. Finally, a fourth core feature resembles an ideological complexity, with the more truly pragmatic and populist core represented by the leader Salvini himself. Salvini has, on several occasions, either *de jure* or *de facto,* disavowed the above-mentioned components while also seeking a delicate balance that allows these ideologically disparate groups to coexist with each another.

[25] And yet this is true up to a point. One only has to think of the heated confrontation between the newly appointed Meloni executive in the fall of 2022 and France regarding the migrant issue between Italy and France and, more recently, the letter sent by the Italian government to the German Chancellery, which was guilty, according to Italy, of subsidising nongovernmental organisations in the Mediterranean to transport illegal immigrants to Italian shores.

the system, that has been the hallmark of the government's work[26].

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[26] Note by the author, 26 September 2023. The government's reversal actually occurred in late September 2023, after a summer of heated debate. In synthesis: Italian financial institutions will either pay the tax or set aside a reserve in their assets. In fact, the government's new amendment stipulates that Italian credit institutions, as an alternative to the levy, can opt to divert the contribution to capital strengthening, pleasing Italian banks and the ECB. (ANSA September 23, 2023). Source: https://www.ansa.it/sito/noti zie/economia/2023/09/23/banche-bozza-invece-di-tassa-si-puo-rafforzare-il-capitale_dd700f8d-8b57-43a6-b6fd-d0af6876a022.html.

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This collective book consists of contributions by renowned international scholars of the far right who participated to the second edition of the seminar series "Populism and Far Right", organized in 2023 by Polidemos, the Centre for the Study of Democracy and Political Change of the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. The fil rouge of the book is the disturbing awareness that, beyond the electoral victories or the more or less good electoral performances by populist radical-right parties, which have been characterizing the political landscape since decades, the real element of novelty is today's convergence between extreme and mainstream politics. While it is undoubtedly important to distinguish the realm of the public narratives from the one of policies and actual policy-making, it is also true that "institutional" politics and the politics of the rallies and the shouted slogans have become increasingly connected, allowing certain discourses to become not only tolerated, but hegemonic. The process of "overlap" between those political platforms is increasingly allowing elements of far-right extremism, from conspiracies theories to white supremacy and nativism, to be fully accepted and integrated into mainstream politics, with the family of conservative parties seemingly being absorbed by the populist radical-right counterpart. To focus political analysis on the electoral performances of far-right parties is key, but not enough. Beyond the results at the ballot box, what is at stake is the transformation of a political system "from within". Lately liberal democracies have been often referred as forms of government with adequate "antibodies" to deal with democratic backsliding or regression. To keep the antibody metaphor, it may be worth asking: do today's liberal democracies are capable of even recognising the increasingly normalised features of right-wing extremism as pathogenic and foreign bodies?

Valerio Alfonso Bruno is research fellow at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, where he collaborates with Polidemos (Centre for the Study of Democracy and Political Change), also a fellow at Far-Right Analysis Network (FRAN) and member of the Center for European Futures (CEF). He works on European and Italian politics, focusing on populist and radical right-wing parties. Bruno has recently contributed to the *The Routledge Handbook of Far-Right Extremism in Europe*, *The Routledge Handbook of Non-Violent Extremism* and the OSCE Academy's volume *Polarization, Shift ing Borders and Liquid Governance. Studies on Transformation and Development in the OSCE Region* (Springer), and co-authored the forthcoming book *The rise of the Radical-Right in Italy: A New Balance of Power in the Right-Wing Camp* (Ibidem/Columbia University Press) with J.F. Downes and A. Scopelliti. His analyses and interviews have appeared, among others, in The Financial Times, The Economist, Al Jazeera, The Sunday Times, and The Telegraph.

On Tradition, Common Sense and Conspiracies

Valerio Alfonso Bruno
(ed.)

EDUCatt - Ente per il Diritto allo Studio Universitario
dell'Università Cattolica
Largo Gemelli 1, 20123 Milano - tel. 02.7234.22.35 - fax 02.80.53.215
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