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'Fascisti del Terzo Millennio? No, solo Fascisti': The Politics of CasaPound

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The Nation, the State and identity. But also two magazines, a radio station, pubs, bookshops, sports associations and a web TV. Counting thousands of members throughout Italy, this is what the Italian political movement CasaPound amounts to. Between those who claim that we are facing a 'black wave' and those who underplay the scope of the movement, there are some problematic aspects to be considered when analysing the so-called 'Fascists of the third millennium'. This paper, therefore, explores the key ideas underpinning CasaPound's ideology and how these are being translated into political practices. In this respect, it will be argued that, while the movement might be publicly perceived as an example of 'fascism à la carte' where only the 'positive' elements of the fascist doctrine are reproduced, CasaPound's use of new communication channels and symbols might only represent an attempt to redo the make-up of an uncomfortable ideology. In arguing so, the paper will first do a broad treatment of the three ideas central to CasaPound's discourses – the individual, the State, and identity – and how this 'holy trinity' translates into practices of inclusion and exclusion of specific categories of people. Then, the paper will move onto a discussion of how the movement instrumentalises existing socio-economic grievances in order to legitimise itself as the only viable representative of an alleged alternative and unexplored metapolitical space – the new-old 'Third Way'.

However, before moving to the main argument, the author of this paper wants to acknowledge that secondary sources (in the forms of journal articles or books) related to CasaPound are rather scant when compared to other Italian political movements. This might be mainly due to the fact that the organisation is a recent and numerically limited experience, therefore hard to access for fieldwork.

Resuscitating Old Ideas

When analysing the core ideas of CasaPound, a 'holy trinity' emerges: the individual, the State, and identity. In fact, when bound together, these ideas represent the cornerstone of the movement's ideology. Interestingly enough, they also summarise the ideas promulgated in *The Doctrine of Fascism* by Benito Mussolini and Giovanni Gentile, thus establishing a connection between CasaPound and its fascist legacy[1].

The first concept celebrated by CasaPound is that of the individual, who makes sense only as part of the group and whose self-determination is strictly related to the development of the community. Consequently, any personal aspiration is inevitably linked to the common project of CasaPound, where private life and life within the community are merged into a unique living space. By committing to the group, the individual not only lives in conformity with its values but it also devotes all of his life – *hic et nunc* – to the movement. Abandoning CasaPound means, therefore, betraying not only the community but also the nation, which is the only true reality of the individual[2]. Overall, the commitment to CasaPound transcends the idea of being merely a political commitment while it easily becomes an existential one as it concerns the expression of the individual in all the different aspects of life. This holistic involvement in the movement, though, is not perceived by members as a top-down imposition but rather as a natural expression of the individual essence. This is because the group is the ideal place to realise one's existence. Freedom, therefore, is not conceived as 'freedom from' (as in the Liberal tradition) but rather as 'freedom for' a shared goal. It represents the responsibility towards the community and the Self, as well as the awareness of one's own actions[3]. Therefore, in Mussolini's words, an individual in a fascist state is like a soldier in an army: in being

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part of a broader group, they are not diminished but rather multiplied by their comrades[4].

If the individual only makes sense as part of the national community, then there is no ontological separation between the State and the Subject. According to CasaPound, since the State is the exact expression of the individual's will, the highest degree of freedom is to be found in the presence of a strong and ethical State (very much in a Hegelian sense)[5]. The State, therefore, becomes the immanent conscience of the nation as it transcends the finitude of individual lives, thus becoming past, present and future. This State should be a 'monolithic entity, representing a unique community and devoid of any internal dialectic process'[6]. According to the movement, a stronger, organic and hierarchical State, which is above parties, is the only option for restoring moral order. Only in this way Italy can realise itself as a single moral, political and economic unit. By devising the State as the true realisation of the individual, CasaPound is able to transcend criticisms related to State oppression since the State is always a reflection of what the individual wants. Therefore, as maintained by Mussolini, if whoever says 'Liberalism' means the individual, whoever says 'Fascism' means the State[7].

Lastly, the image of a strong State (and therefore of a strong individual) is to be reflected in the Italian identity, which should be based on honesty, loyalty, respect and anti-conformism. Indeed, CasaPound maintains (influenced by the work of Julius Evola and the spiritualism of the 'Ordine Nuovo', founded by Pino Rauti in 1956) that the real defining characteristic of 'Italianhood' has to be found in one's spirit rather than in physical traits[8]. Since the values and faculties that distinguish Italians do not depend on biology but rather on an inner spiritual race of which the somatic race is only a consequential manifestation, Italian identity is immanent. While often hidden behind the label of 'ethno-pluralism', this form of identity-making is nothing but a contemporary alternative to mainstream racism – two different cultures cannot approach each other as they would risk contamination and thus undermine the purity of identity[9]. This discourse is particularly crucial if linked to notions of citizenship as, by presenting identity as given and unchangeable, it establishes that acquired citizenship will never turn foreigners into Italians. Following accusations of racism, CasaPound defends its willingness to preserve difference against multiculturalism by claiming that the State, like a father, naturally prioritises its children over anyone else[10].

Translating Discourses into Practices of Inclusion-Exclusion

The peculiarity of CasaPound's 'holy trinity' lies in how its discourses are translated into practices of inclusion as well as exclusion. The 'Area 19', an occupied station recently closed by the Italian police, was a well-known 'cultural gym' for CasaPound members and it exemplifies how the community is built. In fact, a considerable number of events, concerts, and sports activities were organised there, not only as a form of amusement but also as a collective experience of socialisation, aggregation and political action. Inspired by the 'Opera Nazionale del Dopolavoro' (the 'National Recreational Club', founded in 1925 by Mussolini) and the 'Opera Nazionale Balilla' (an informal school of courage and patriotism targeted to the youth, founded in 1926), CasaPound surrounds its members with a cultural and moral cosmos in which they can invest the entirety of their life[11]. As a consequence, the fascist lifestyle becomes a pre-rational experience able to grasp the essence of people and satisfy their need for identity. In this community of the like-minded, violence is the cornerstone of its sense of belonging as well as its opposition to the 'Other'. Indeed, when approaching the outside world, CasaPound justifies its own violence as a genuine act of self-defence against the violence perpetrated by anti-fascist groups[12]. Violence, in other words, is conceptualised as a form of resistance against an oppressive and intolerant 'Other'. Hence, the use of violence for self-defence is experienced by members as a natural expression of their self-determination. On the other hand, when approaching the internal audience, violence emerges as a fundamental aspect of solidarity and camaraderie. Like in the Roman phalanx, violence does not represent chaos but rather an ordinate resistance towards a shared destiny[13]. The practice of the 'cinghiamattanza' ('massacre belt') during which CasaPound's men whip each other with their belts until bleeding clearly exemplifies how the experience of pain is pivotal in generating a sense of camaraderie[14]. Similarly to the practice of moshing or pogoing of the punk movement in the 1970s which sought to challenge the mainstream forms of dance in the rock genre, the 'cinghiamattanza' discloses fundamental aspects of life – vitality, might and strength, famously celebrated by the Futurist avant-garde of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and the 'Arditi' under the leadership of Gabriele D'Annunzio – as opposing to a dominant cultural model that reduces the body to an object-commodity[15].

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However, while solidarity is mandatory within the community, anyone who is not Italian in the spiritual and moral sense expressed before cannot be part of that community and thus should not enjoy any right deriving from it. This discourse is at the base of CasaPound's claim that Italian citizenship should be based on blood (as expressed in the 'ius sanguinis') rather than on birthplace (as stated in the 'ius soli')[16]. In this respect, the movement argues that, since identity is immanent, foreigners acquiring Italian citizenship would be forced to suppress their past history and inner 'spirit'. Consequently, this process would not only fuel their resentment but it would also confine them into ghettos and inevitably spark violence[17]. CasaPound, therefore, claims to defend the Italian community against foreign invaders who, helped by liberal democratic institutions, seek to replace Italy's ageing population. The Church, international organisations, criminal groups and left-wing politicians are to blame for immigration as they eventually obtain more churchgoers, more money, more thugs and more voters[18]. As in a dystopia, true racism becomes the one promoted by Universalists and Liberal Democrats who, by encouraging multiculturalism, the apology of freedom and the establishment of a 'community of the free', are driving the white European population towards extinction. Therefore, whoever deems immigration acceptable is an enemy of all the peoples throughout the world and, above all, is a traitor of the Italian nation, an 'enemy from within' that needs to be eliminated. In line with this argument, CasaPound values the right of any individual to a life in his homeland. In practice, this translates into proposed massive deportations of immigrants back to their countries but also into several 'humanitarian' projects through the ONLUS 'Solidarité Identités', including the fight for self-determination of the Karen against the Burmese government, as well as the Serbian enclaves in Kosovo that are believed to be hostages of Muslim Albanians in the area[19].

While immigrants and foreigners act as the 'Other', women constitute another category with a specific function within the community. Indeed, in order to face the 'great replacement', CasaPound argues that the State needs to invest money into the biological reproduction of the nation, clear reminiscence of Mussolini's belief that the strength of a nation lies in the size of its population[20]. 'Immigrants out, Italian babies in' reads one of CasaPound's press releases on the 'National Birth Income' policy proposal[21]. According to this system, for every new-born child and until the age of 16, Italian women (born out of at least one Italian parent) should be given € 500 a month to be spent on products for their children. Unsurprisingly, the estimated € 1.5 billion expenditure for this proposed measure would be taken from the budget given to the immigration emergency[22]. The logic behind this is that immigrants already have a high birth rate and therefore need no help. On the other hand, Italian women have to safeguard their right to be the mothers of the future of the nation at a time when feminism is destroying their identity by transforming them into mere sexual objects. Although Italy is actually one of the European countries with the lowest and latest fertility rate, CasaPound turns what is fundamentally a socio-economic issue into an alleged reduction in women's self-determination[23]. Moreover, CasaPound believes that such a policy would also solve unemployment issues as there would be more jobs available on the market if women were prevented from working. Gender roles within society and the family are therefore differentiated following a careful assessment of individual realisation, based on the belief that men and women have distinct natural functions. In fact, as reported in an interview, women at CasaPound can do 'women's things' such as food shopping or cleaning without feeling diminished in their natural role[24]. In doing so, CasaPound not only turns motherhood into an economic activity but it also takes agency away from women by assigning them a pre-determined role within the community.

The New-old Politics of CasaPound

While the political weight of CasaPound is still minimal – it got only 0.95% of votes at the last elections – the movement appeals to an increasing number of Italians, especially amongst the youth[25]. The reason behind this is likely to be CasaPound's ability to build on the urgency of existing socio-economic grievances to legitimise its political claims. Through a combination of right- and left-wing symbols and practices, their emphasis is on a direct approach to politics, usually targeting those people left behind by the State. In this respect, the recent economic crisis offered CasaPound a key opportunity to reconnect with its fascist legacy. In fact, similarly to Mussolini's critique of plutocracies, the economic crisis (and Liberalism more broadly) acts as the 'enemy' against which CasaPound's identity is made and its political programme articulated[26]. Indeed, the social doctrine of Mussolini was primarily directed to the veterans of WWI who felt excluded from the State at a time of profound economic crisis. Following the 'Biennio Rosso' (1919-1920) and the failure of the Italian ruling class to both respond to mass mobilisation and handle the aspirations of the emerging organisations of the industrial working-class, calls for national cohesion and radical nationalism became rapidly popular in the 1920s[27]. Similarly, CasaPound borrows from socialist and

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syndicalist movements the idea of the State as the provider of order and stability to present itself as the only reliable answer to Italy's economic and cultural crisis. The starting point for CasaPound is the house – as the word 'Casa' (house) says. This is not only because the movement started in 2003 with the occupation of an administrative building in the suburb of Esquilino in Rome (reminiscent of Mussolini's launch of his first manifesto from an occupied building in San Sepolcro, Milan) but also because the house is considered as an individual right and a precondition for the spiritual well-being of the individual[28]. Through the name 'CasaPound', the group recalls Ezra Pound's considerations on the holiness of the house as the only safe place for a family and the individual to be[29]. This is why the proposed policy of 'Mutuo Sociale' ('Social Mortgage', largely inspired by Article XV of the 'Manifesto di Verona', 1943) and the prospect of property are experienced by CasaPound's members as a liberation of the Self[30]. However, following the logic of 'Italy to Italians', the 'Mutuo Sociale' applies to Italians only. In fact, the notion of individual rights is not based on the liberal idea of universality but rather on that of camaraderie: differences in identity are mirrored by differences in rights. Hence, while the relevance of syndicalist practices in CasaPound – as did the revolutionary syndicalism of Alceste de Ambris for Mussolini – is evident, the movement rejects the notion of class distinction and it embraces the corporatist model as the perfect arrangement through which individuality has to emphasise the organic character of the Italian people[31]. CasaPound, therefore, builds on Mussolini's Labour Chart (1927) [32] and the current 'need for change' to push for policies that even the Left has given up hope on, such as the renationalisation of the banking and health system, communications, transports and energy[33].

Moreover, CasaPound predicates that the only way to overcome the mainstream party system is through the so-called 'Third Way', defined as an alternative to the traditional Left and Right. In arguing so, the movement maintains that there is only one solution to the problems of Italy: fascism. Therefore, in order to prove its difference with mainstream parties, CasaPound presents itself as a 'metapolitical' force, echoing Gentile who stressed that fascism was 'before all else a total conception of life'[34]. In this respect, CasaPound draws from Alain de Benoist and his 'metapolitical' experience within the Nouvelle Droite as a 'Right-wing Gramscism' maintaining that compliance to the rule of the dominant group could be obtained by spreading dominant ideologies and cultural norms[35]. Within CasaPound, the 'Third Way' is often expressed through the concept of the 'Estremo Centro Alto' (the 'Extreme High Centre') which help overcome the dichotomy between two paradigms – Left and Right – and build new cultural references[36]. The concept encompasses three core ideas. First, the 'Extreme' or the radicalism of not forgiving both the Right for having confused order with 'low sanitation tasks' and the Left for having raised the masses against mainstream power only to better settle into it[37]. Second, the 'Centre' or the idea of being centred in life – culturally, socially, politically and existentially – since only those who are centred in themselves can assert their centrality in the world. Third, the 'High' as a vertical movement that overcomes the cultural and political mediocrity of the Italian political scenario and rediscovers the fine dimension of politics[38]. Therefore, redirecting towards the 'Estremo Alto Centro' – which is believed to be valid anywhere and anytime – means transcending and overcoming any other kind of existing political construction. However, claims to a 'Third Way' might be used by CasaPound as an attempt to project a positive image of itself while clouding the most 'inconvenient' aspects of its doctrine (e.g. the belief that people are not born equal). In fact, at a time when the gap between the political class and the electorate is increasingly expanding, CasaPound might find it helpful to depict the fascist model as an alternative 'Third Way' aiming to achieve economic autarchy and national purity. Indeed, while recreating the Fascist party or making apology of Fascism is outlawed in Italy, the 'sanitised' version of fascism represented by CasaPound has earned a place in the democratic space[39]. In this respect, the media have played a major role in normalising CasaPound's ideology by making its ideas expressible, acceptable and ultimately relatable.

In the public sphere, the movement claims to focus on the most progressive aspects of the social doctrine of Mussolini (e.g. housing, unions and minimum wage) while rejecting the racial laws as a mistake. This decision has sparked debate around CasaPound as a 'fascism à la carte', since the group seems to strategically select, among a plethora of policies, discourses and symbolic repertoires of the fascist tradition, only the ones that suit their public image[40]. For instance, members of CasaPound make constant reference to the 'Manifesto di Verona' as a fundamental document for the ideology of the movement. Nevertheless, out of the eighteen points included in the Manifesto, CasaPound seems to pick only the ones referring to the protection of workers' rights, whereas it makes no reference to the racist undertone of the document[41]. Therefore, by selecting and prioritising some aspects of the traditional fascist discourse, the movement is able to reconstruct the idea of fascism as a genuine reactionary anti-liberal force. Perhaps, the goal is to establish a sentimental and political connection with the corporatist and social

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experience of Mussolini's regime since, from the perspective of the current crisis, they represent the most convincing and appealing aspects of the Italian fascist history.

Conclusion

In a society where antifascism is no longer recognised as a value in itself, especially amongst the youth, movements such as CasaPound hide increasingly less. On the contrary, they constantly look for new visibility through anti-conformist actions that end up in the social media. This paper has, therefore, done a broad treatment of CasaPound's 'holy trinity' and assessed the role of the movement's ideas. In doing so, a considerable similarity between the movement's ideology and the traditional fascist doctrine was highlighted. Then, the paper has explored how at a time of political and economic crisis, when racism seems tolerated and nationalist sentiments to the exclusion of foreigners are endemic, CasaPound is seeking legitimacy by presenting itself as the only credible and 'metapolitical' interlocutor on social issues. In short, the movement has managed to retake and address those social spaces forgotten by mainstream politics, especially by the Left. Although it remains a minority in the political arena, it is not a silent one. However, CasaPound is not merely a nostalgic movement: in its 'fascism à la carte', the group attempts to revitalise the same ideological core of Mussolini's fascism by simply adapting it to a new – and potentially less stigmatised – format. Indeed, when asked in an interview whether he liked the definition of 'Fascists of the third millennium', CasaPound's leader Gianluca Iannone clearly answered, 'no, we are only Fascists'[42].

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