

# It Never Went Away - Fascism and far-right violence in Italy

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**In Italy, where fascism was born, far-right violence is a growing feature of political life once again.**

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A terrorist attack in Macerata close to Italy's Adriatic coast on February 3 sharply illustrated the persistence of fascist violence in the country. The drive-by shooting spree, which targeted African immigrants, injured eight people. But even as the gunman Luca Traini handed himself into police, Italian politicians were quick to insist that the real problem stemmed from migration itself.

Throughout Italy's election campaign its main parties have imitated anti-migrant and racist rhetoric from the far right, an alarming trend in a country where fascist groups are increasingly finding a foothold again. The Left's weakened social roots and a pliant media have combined not only to boost hard-right forces like the Lega and Fratelli d'Italia, but also militant fascist groups such as CasaPound and Forza Nuova.

Italy has a long history of anti-fascist struggle, but developing the tools to stem the latest rise in far-right politics will take more than a veneration of the country's resistance heritage. As fascism becomes popular again in the country of its birth, Italy's left desperately needs to rebuild its social roots in the communities the far right is targeting.

## **A History of Fascist Violence**

It was a normal Saturday in Macerata, Italy, last month when Luca Traini began shooting [1]. Targeting foreigners, he injured at least eight West Africans — seven men and one woman. When the police finally stopped him, Traini draped an Italian flag over his shoulders and gave a fascist salute. Last year Traini ran in local elections for the anti-immigrant Lega in the nearby town of Corridonia. After the shooting it also emerged that he was close to the neofascist parties Forza Nuova and CasaPound.

Less than two years ago in Fermo, also in the Macerata region, Emmanuel Chidi Nnamdi — a Nigerian man aged thirty-six — was killed by fascist ultra Emanuele Mancini [2] in an attack that began when Mancini hurled a racist insult at Namdi's partner. Having pleaded guilty of manslaughter with racist aggravation, Mancini was released from prison after one year for good

conduct, whereas Namdi's partner, a refugee escaped from Boko Haram in Nigeria, has had to leave Fermo.

These two cases were part of a longer pattern. In Florence in 2011, CasaPound supporter Gianluca Casseri killed two Senegalese men [3], Samb Modou and Diop Mor, and injured a three others, Mbenghe Cheike, Moustapha Dieng, and Sougou Mor, and then killed himself before he could be captured by the police. While the mainstream media and political parties have treated these events as isolated incidents caused by lone wolves, they are in reality chapters in the story of resurgent fascist and xenophobic ideas in Italy.

Although the fascist regime was defeated at the end of World War II, Italian fascism never really went away. The Italian constitution might have explicitly prohibited the reconstitution of the fascist party, but no sooner than it was introduced the Italian Social Movement (MSI) was founded. This party made explicit reference to the Italian Social Republic, the fascist regime that Mussolini established under Nazi protection in northern Italy after the Allies and the Italian partisans had freed the central and southern part of the country. From 1946 onward, MSI regularly participated in Italian elections, increasing its vote share to the point of becoming the fourth largest party behind the Christian Democrats, the Communists, and the Socialist Party.

In spring 1960, MSI offered external support for the government led by the right-wing Christian Democrat Fernando Tambroni. However, the Tambroni government was dissolved after only four months thanks to a wave of demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands of people in many Italian towns and cities. Organized by left-wing opposition parties, these protests were often violently repressed by police. The demonstrations were also notable for the large number of young people who participated, combining an anti-fascist spirit with a broader desire for social change in a country that was characterized by conservatism. In fact, the 1960s marked the beginning of a wave of social struggles that continued across the following decade. The student revolt in 1968 was soon followed by an important cycle of workers' struggles: the Hot Autumn.

While this strong popular opposition destroyed the MSI's chances of entering government, fascists could still be useful for sections of the Italian ruling class. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s sectors of the the country's political and military elites made use of a myriad of subversive fascist groups to pursue "strategy of tension" aimed at containing the wave of social struggles which were emerging in the country. The goal was to create a climate of fear among the population, which would then justify authoritarian measures to reestablish order — including through the suppression of the Left.

Despite the smokescreen which still hangs over the events of these years, it has been established that fascist groups were involved in at least one coup attempt (the so-called Golpe Borghese, named after the former fascist Navy official behind the initiative) and a number of massacres across the 1960s and 1970s. The bomb that killed seventeen people and injured eighty-eight in Milan's Piazza Fontana in 1969 marked the beginning of a decade that culminated in the August 1980 with the bombing at Bologna railway station, which left eighty-two people dead. Although we still don't know the names of the instigators, trials have established that fascists carried out both atrocities, as well as a number of other killings and shootings throughout that decade.

The 1980s were a decade of political disillusionment and retreat, marking the end of the social struggles which characterized the two previous decades. From the outside, it appeared that this could also be the end of Italian fascism. The 1990s saw the end of the MSI, which turned into the more "institutionally respectable" Alleanza Nazionale (AN). During a 2003 visit to Israel, Gianfranco Fini — the final secretary of the MSI and the leader of the transition towards the AN — went as far to declare that the Italian fascist regime of Mussolini was part of the "absolute evil," [4] on account of its 1930s "race laws" against Jews. Italy, it seemed, might finally be about to leave its fascist past

behind.

## **A Renewed Threat**

Believing the country was moving beyond political “extremes,” both center-left and center-right parties engaged in an attempt to rewrite history, aimed at creating a fictitious shared memory of the years of the fascist regime and the Italian Resistance. The Italian Social Republic was progressively normalized, with politicians from the left and the right arguing that it was time to try to understand the motives of the defeated fascists, who were increasingly characterized as young people who fought for the wrong cause.

At the same time experience of the Italian resistance against fascism was gradually emptied of its original political significance. This led to a situation where in 2017 the governing party, the centrist Democrats, turned the annual demonstration in commemoration of the Resistance, held every April 25, into a celebration of the European Union. To add further embarrassment, PD militants were photographed holding signs celebrating a series of “European patriots,” among whom they included Coco Chanel [5], in fact known to be a Nazi collaborator [6].

But the reality was, against this backdrop of ideological confusion, Italian fascism had not disappeared. Many politicians in “institutional” right-wing parties maintained links with the far-right milieu and a number of neofascist organizations continued operating. In a telling reflection of these often untold links, in 2008 a number of supporters of Rome’s new mayor Gianni Alemanno, a former chairman of the MSI youth organization and a prominent AN member, gave fascist salutes and chanted in homage to Mussolini after Alemanno’s election victory [7].

Fascists did not stop killing, either. In 2003, two fascist brothers and their father stabbed to death Davide “Dax” Cesare [8], a militant of a social center in Milan, who they held responsible for an attack on the family’s older brother a week before. In 2006 two young fascists stabbed to death Renato Biagetti [9], a militant of Rome’s Acrobax social center. In 2008 Nicola Tommasoli, aged twenty-eight, died in Verona after a savage beating by a group of five far-right ultras.

But it is with the recent economic crisis that Italian fascists’ strategies have become more overt. In the context of rising unemployment and poverty, triggered by the EU-backed austerity policies implemented by all Italian governments since the beginning of the crisis, neofascist organizations such as Forza Nuova and the new CasaPound tried to build support by shifting blame onto immigrants. In perfect continuity with the historical experience of fascism, neofascist organizations have politicized the crisis along racial and not class lines, exploiting also the weakness of the Italian left, which has been unable to provide a radical alternative during the recession.

The demand “put Italians first” has not only been a rhetorical device. As the housing situation became explosive during the crisis, with evictions skyrocketing as tenants were unable to pay their rent, fascist groups promoted squatting for Italians only [10], or attempted (often successfully) to impede migrant families’ rightful access to public housing. Playing on the burgeoning feelings of fear and insecurity, fed by a media campaign over migrant criminality, fascists instigated neighborhood patrols [11], often under the cover of murky citizens’ associations. Taking advantage of an increasing poverty rate, they have collected food in front of or even inside supermarkets, but for indigenous Italians only.

In this pivot to service provision for the poor, fascist groups well understood that they were stealing the Left’s clothes. As one group said in a recent interview [12], “We do what the Communist Party stopped doing. In the poorer areas, in the outskirts of the cities, the Communist Party is not there

anymore but CasaPound is there now helping.” Helping maybe — but only some, solidifying their base among white Italians suffering from the economic crisis while fomenting animus against their immigrant neighbors.

In shifting the focus away from class politics and driving warfare within the working class, fascists have served the interest of the Italian ruling class. It is therefore unsurprising that they have been gradually normalized within the public debate. CasaPound’s self-defined “fascists of the third millennium” has received increasingly benign media coverage [13], with interviews of its leaders and a widespread description of its militants as young and passionate activists, in contrast to the apathetic majority of the younger generations.

This reached fresh heights last November, when a fashion magazine published an article describing some of the more visible women within the organization in admiring tones [14]. Last fall, famous journalists participated in the preelection debates held in the CasaPound headquarters in Rome [15]. Moreover, as documented by the Wu Ming collective [16] and the researchers of the Nicoletta Bourbaki group, recent years have seen increasing number of connections at the local level between exponents of the centrist Democratic Party and CasaPound. Local Democratic figures have participated in initiatives hosted by CasaPound, and vice versa, even to the extent that some fascist militants complained publicly on Twitter about such strange connections.

## **Mainstreaming Fascism**

Not only have fascist organizations been progressively normalized, but their xenophobic ideology has become more mainstream. The right-wing Lega’s leader Matteo Salvini has built the relaunch of his party, highly discredited after a scandal about the misuse of party funds, on shifting away from its older separatist stances against the “profligacy” of southern Italy and focusing on a harsh anti-immigration rhetoric. The Lega still polls badly in central and southern Italy, as voters seem to remember the two decades in which the party railed against the supposed laziness of southerners.

However, another right-wing party which built its campaign on anti-immigration positions, Fratelli d’Italia [17], is polling well in the South. This is unsurprising, as Fratelli is a post-fascist party with its roots in the MSI, which was traditionally strong in southern regions. Both parties are in coalition with Forza Italia, the party led by the elderly media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, and they are set to come in first place in the coming elections, though it is not clear if this will guarantee the number of seats necessary to create a government. While Berlusconi is now seen by EU elites as a possible counterweight to Salvini’s more extreme positions, the heightened competition between Forza Italia and the Lega has in fact led Berlusconi to adopt bombastic anti-immigration stances. Immediately after the Macerata terrorist attack, Berlusconi made a Trump-style claim that Italy needed to kick out the six hundred thousand immigrants living illegally in the country.

Things are no better among the other big Italian parties. The populist catch-all Five Star Movement (M5S) has turned its initially ambiguous position on immigration into one more closely aligned with the right. Last year Luigi Di Maio, the M5S candidate for premier, labeled the NGOs working to save migrants crossing the Mediterranean a “sea-taxi.” [18] The main point of the M5S program [19] on immigration is a target of zero migrants disembarking on the Italian coast. This resonates well with the immigration policies implemented by the current government, led by the Democratic Party, whose Interior Minister Marco Minniti reached an EU-backed agreement with Libya to prevent migrants leaving African shores.

While the agreement led to reduced numbers of migrants reaching Italy, its main result has been to hold thousands of people prisoner in obscene detention camps in Libya, described by UNICEF as

“hellholes.” [20] A few days after the Macerata attack, Minniti claimed credit for the agreement with Libya, stating that he implemented it because he foresaw attacks of this kind, and even calling it “an Italian asset of which we should be proud.” Minniti is no isolated case among the Democrats. The party’s chairman and candidate for premier Matteo Renzi wrote in his most recent book that there is no moral need to receive the migrants and that we should instead help migrants “in their home country,” [21] the same rhetoric which the Lega has championed since the 1990s. In May 2017 Debora Serracchiani, the party’s former vice-chairman, stated that sexual violence was more unacceptable if committed by an asylum seeker, in response to which she was offered honorary membership of the fascist Forza Nuova [22]. Shortly afterwards, Patrizia Prestipino, a member of the Democrats’ national leadership, stressed the need to support “Italian mothers” to sustain the continuation of the “Italian race.”

### **Which Anti-Fascism?**

The Democratic Party tried to refresh its anti-fascist credentials by promoting the Fiano Law, a law which is supposed to strengthen the punishment for fascist propaganda. The emptiness of this legalistic approach to fascism became fully apparent in the aftermath of the Macerata attack. The local social center Sisma called an anti-fascist demonstration for Saturday, February 10, exactly a week after the shooting.

Responding to fascist violence with huge popular demonstrations has always been customary in Italy. In 1969, after the bombing in Milan’s Piazza Fontana, the three union confederations called a general strike on the day of the victims’ funerals, and thousands of people filled the streets of the city.

This time, however, Romano Carancini, the Democratic Party mayor of Macerata, astonishingly called for the cancellation of any demonstrations that day, in order to avoid disturbing the shocked population. Carancini’s call well expressed his party’s embarrassment faced with the Macerata terrorist attack, incapable of taking a strong position against fascism and xenophobia with the fear of losing precious votes in the election.

The leaderships of four of the main forces on the institutional left — the CGIL union confederation, the anti-mafia association Libera, the ARCI network, and the ANPI partisans’ association — decided to withdraw their participation from the demonstration, with a public statement in which they canceled a demonstration that they had themselves helped to call [23]. These four organizations settled for organizing a demonstration in Rome on February 24, three weeks after the Macerata attack. The Interior Minister Minniti was quick to praise these associations’ decision, saying that if the demonstration’s organizers had not called it off, he would have moved to ban it.

It stood in stark contrast to the emphatic response from fascist groups. Forza Nuova expressed its full support to the gunman, even offering to cover his legal expenses. Meanwhile CasaPound chairman Simone Di Stefano visited Macerata [24]. Although he condemned Traini’s actions, he again drew attention to the migrant threat. A few days later, CasaPound officially presented its program for the coming elections in a room of the Italian Parliament.

It was only thanks to the determination of the Sisma social center and the other movements and grassroots unions which supported the Macerata demonstration since the beginning that it ultimately took place on Saturday, February 10. Despite the climate of tension created by the authorities, who even closed the schools for the day, more than twenty thousand people from all parts of Italy rallied to stage a peaceful but resolute demonstration against fascism and xenophobia. Many branches of the CGIL, Libera, ARCI, and ANPI disobeyed their leaders’ calls and participated

in the march. Solidarity demonstrations were also held in many other Italian and European towns. It was undoubtedly a good day for Italian anti-fascists.

## **Beyond the Election**

With election day approaching, Forza Nuova and CasaPound have intensified their activities, holding election rallies across the country. While local councils have been shy in forbidding such rallies (showing once again the inconsistency of the current anti-fascist legislation), they were confronted by a wave of anti-fascist counterdemonstrations. Whereas the fascists have been able to mobilize only a few dozen militants, the counterdemonstrations in towns such as Bologna and Venice have involved thousands. Yet, instead of stressing this numerical disproportion, the media has preferred to focus on the clashes between the police and the anti-fascist rallies, fueling a narrative about the danger posed by “opposite extremisms.” This has played into the idea that the country needs “stability,” exactly the perspective a grand coalition government would want.

The Left should learn two things from these events. First, while fascist and xenophobic ideas are on the rise, we should not succumb to a logic of pessimism. The fact that thousands of people took the streets against fascism in several Italian towns — even without the support of large traditional left organizations — means that there is a substantial base from which we can start building a large front to oppose fascism. Second, the hesitation that these traditional left organizations (sadly including the ANPI partisans’ association) have shown in joining a march of such importance as the Macerata demonstration means that the Italian left must to go beyond the traditional anti-fascist rhetoric.

For years, most of the Italian left has effectively ignored the problem of the growing pervasiveness of fascist ideas, contenting itself with annual rhetorical celebrations of the ideals of the World War II Italian resistance. All the while, fascist organizations were establishing their presence in peripheral areas, and xenophobic ideas were becoming hegemonic. The Left must return to the workplaces and to the communities where working-class Italians live, unmask the false logic behind the fascist-promoted warfare between the poor, and build a front between national and foreign working classes against the common enemy: capitalism.

It is no coincidence that some of the most advanced struggles in Italy — such as those in the logistics sector — have seen migrant workers at the forefront. And it is no coincidence that the social movements and grassroots unions which have been such an active part of those struggles have also driven the Macerata demonstrations and the others which have followed. This must be our starting point.

**Carlo Florenzi**

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**P.S.**

\* Jacobin. 03.04.2018:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/03/italy-fascism-lega-berlusconi-immigration>

\* Carlo Florenzi is a journalist and social movement participant.

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## Footnotes

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