FASCISM AND NATIONAL POPULISM

New Uniforms for Old Strategies

Alba Sidera Gallart



Three activists of the Lega proudly display a poster of Matteo Salvini. Photography by Jordi Borràs

On 13 June 1984, the streets of Rome were packed with more than one million emotional people, all of whom were there to pay their respects with tears and applause as a coffin made its way through the city. The funeral was broadcast live on television. Never before in the history of the Italian Republic had there been anything remotely comparable to this outpouring of affection and respect, especially towards a politician. The object of this affection and respect was Enrico Berlinguer, the general secretary of the Italian Communist Party (PCI). In early July of this year, the name of Matteo Salvini was trending across social media after he compared himself to the venerated Communist leader. “The League is the heir to the leftist values of Berlinguer”, he declared. Although he has enjoyed moments of significant popularity, the Lombardy-born Salvini does not have Berlinguer’s charisma or intellectual stature, and nor is he respected and admired by his political adversaries, unlike the Sardinian. And, of course, the League is not the heir to the leftist tradition of what was, along with its French counterpart, the largest Communist party in Europe. Nonetheless, these declarations from Italy’s former minister of the interior are extremely revealing: not because they are accurate, but because they demonstrate one of the key aims of the new far right: namely, to seduce the popular vote that has traditionally always been linked to the left.

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One of the simplest ways to achieve this aim is to appropriate the symbols of the left. After dropping a media bombshell by comparing himself to Berlinguer –a move which prompted all of the centrist and leftist leaders to take the bait and respond with indignation–, Salvini announced that the League was going to open an office in Rome. And not just anywhere in Rome: on Via delle Botteghe Oscure, directly opposite the historical headquarters of Berlinguer's party (which, incidentally, was also the starting-point for the Sardinian's funeral cortège). In Italy, as in Spain and many other countries, the media use the name of the street on which a political party has its headquarters to refer to the party itself: consequently, the League's choice of address will have a deep and long-lasting impact. In fact, the League will be occupying premises that currently house the headquarters of a right-wing trade union, the General Labour Union (UGL). The building was also used by the CIA to spy on the PCI at the height of the communist party's popularity.

For some time now, Italy has had trade unions that are openly linked to right-wing parties, like the UGL: indeed, the latter's conference was attended not only by Salvini, but also by representatives of the right wing of Silvio Berlusconi's party, the post-fascist Brothers of Italy party led by Giorgia Meloni, and even Simone di Stefano, the leader of the neo-fascist group CasaPound. The phenomenon of far-right trade unions has been introduced to Spain by Vox: on the same day that Salvini proclaimed himself the heir to Berlinguer, the Spanish party announced that it would be launching a trade union in September. In a claim that both twists meaning and distorts struggle, Vox spokesman Jorge Buxadé stated that, although the union will be an organisation for workers, "It will not be a class-based union".

It is likely that Vox will draw inspiration for its union from the UGL, which has achieved significant success during its 70 years of existence. The union has always been linked with the right, although it tends to move closer to whichever is the strongest party at any given movement. Indeed, Buxadé's statement has echoes of the first objective that the UGL declared in writing: "to definitively overcome the political conception of social class and its ideological consequences". As such, this purported non-ideology is already an ideology, and a dangerous one at that. Historical fascism should have taught us that much.

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One of the key elements of historical fascism was so-called "fascist corporatism" (which should not be confused with its guild-based counterpart). "Corporations", which in this sense were like false "unions" controlled by the fascist party, were intended to control workers by dividing them according to industry or profession, thereby preventing the

formation of class consciousness. These corporations grouped workers with employers from the same industry, instead of other workers.

They are not stupid: a well-planned strategy

This strategy, the use of which is now becoming extremely evident amongst the far right in the West (and particularly in Europe), can trace its origins back to France and the ideologue Alain de Benoist. De Benoist is the guru of the *Nouvelle Droite* ("New Right"), which has its origins in neo-fascist militant activism, as well as the architect of the dramatic resurgence of the far right. Alongside a number of other intellectuals, in 1968 he founded the think tank GRECE, which laid the foundations for a "modernised" far right that distanced itself from the traditional far right, which was unable to attract younger adherents. To achieve this, he and his colleagues took ideas from key fascist and Nazi thinkers and combined them with the ideas of Marxist thinkers such as Gramsci. They were able to utilise the diagnostic tools provided by leftist thinkers, reinterpret their theories and use them to defend racist, ultra-nationalist and anti-equality positions. This appropriation of leftist rhetoric and aesthetics is the weapon that has allowed the far right to score victories in the battle for cultural hegemony, particularly among young people and those who feel excluded from the system.

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Naturally, each grouping in this new far-right movement has adapted the theory to suit its particular country. Marine Le Pen can combine it with the principle of secularism, for example, while Salvini exploits Catholicism in order to appeal to potential voters. Le Pen has even gone so far as to redefine the word "feminism" from an identity-based perspective, to the extent that anti-feminism (or "anti-gender ideology", as she calls it) is now one of the ideological pillars of the new far right.

There is a widespread tendency in certain progressive intellectual circles to associate the far-right or quasi-fascist ideas with ignorance or a lack of culture and education. "It is a disease cured by reading", one often hears, although this overlooks the fact that de Benoist has one of the largest private libraries in France. It is never wise to underestimate one's adversary. Behind the postulates of the new far right there are thinkers who have studied not only the work of the key figures who share their beliefs, but also the work of their political opponents, in order to gain an understanding of their weaknesses.

The role of social democracy is in crisis

What did the other parties do while the far right grew and grew? The rise of the far right cannot be separated from the great crisis in social democracy at the global level, and voters' disillusionment with the parties that were supposed to represent progressive thinking. Powerful politicians such as Tony Blair in the UK, Bill Clinton in the USA, Matteo Renzi in Italy and Gerhard Schröder in Germany chose the so-called "third way", accepting part of the neoliberal argument and alienating a significant proportion of their electorate. Many voters have found themselves politically homeless as the boundary between the decisions and actions of social democratic parties and the right becomes increasingly blurred.

If we analyse the election manifestos of far-right groups, we may encounter some surprises. Indeed, it is by no means unusual for such groups to propose policies that the governing parties have already implemented. The difference is that while the right shouts these policies from the rooftops, the other parties –particularly the social democratic parties– hide them away. Spain provides us with a clear example. One of the flagship proposals in Vox's manifesto, among the "100 Measures to Change Spain", had already been implemented by none other than the most progressive central government in the country's democratic history (at least prior to the formation of the current government, which includes the left-wing party Podemos). The proposal in question is that the police intensify their efforts to identify undocumented immigrants, with a view to deporting them to their countries of origin.

During the second prime ministerial term of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, the position of deputy prime minister was held by Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, who also served as minister of the interior from 2006 to 2011. With Rubalcaba at the head of the Ministry of the Interior, the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) implemented the immigration policies that the People's Party (PP) had barely begun to enact or plan under José Maria Aznar. During this period, Rubalcaba issued a memo, known as the memo of 1/2010, ordering the intensification of measures to identify undocumented immigrants with a view to deporting them. This order constituted a veritable political persecution of immigrant groups, as a number of human rights organisations reported at the time.

In Italy, the PCI joined forces with the leftist wing of the Christian democratic movement, and after a number of regroupings and schisms, the centre-left in Italy is now represented by the Democratic Party (PD). Salvini became the general secretary of the League at the same time Matteo Renzi was appointed to the same position in the PD. Both politicians implemented substantial reforms within their parties: however, while the former –advised by his good friend Le Pen– managed to take a moribund, corruption-ridden party campaigning for northern independence and transform it into the country's leading party and a nationwide ultra-nationalist force, the latter only managed to split his party.

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Renzi aimed to "de-ideologise" the Democratic Party and shift it away from leftist positions (his equivalent in Spain would be Albert Rivera and the Ciudadanos party). Under his leadership support for the PD fell to the lowest levels in the party's history. He also set a new record for desertions from the party: no mean feat in the turbulent context of Italian politics. Renzi applied labour reforms that can be compared in many ways to those of Rajoy; he affirmed that immigrants should be helped "to go home"; and denied any evidence of an increase in racism or a growing sympathy for neo-fascist ideas.

It was the PD's minister of the interior (Marco Minniti, Salvini's predecessor) who signed the so-called "Pact of Shame" with Libya: an agreement that was condemned by every humanitarian organisation and celebrated enthusiastically by the League. Under this agreement, Italy would use European funds to pay Libya to patrol its coastline (Libya in turn delegated these patrols to human traffickers turned mercenaries) and intercept refugees offshore. These refugees were taken to prison, where they were tortured, raped and even, on occasion, killed. The centre-left paved the way for Salvini, who has made the criminalisation of immigration his central policy.

Fake news: we are worn down into believing it

Social media has played a decisive role in the success of the far right. Online, its strategy is based on making noise and creating a poisonous atmosphere, without scruples, around the issues it wishes to place on the agenda. Once it has laid the bait, those wishing to challenge the far right often do the rest of the work themselves, by dedicating too much time to responding and to debunking the fake news that has been peddled. Ultimately, this helps the far right and adds weight to its claims, which are very often entirely false. So why does fake news triumph so rapidly? Experts agree that we process information only partially: we tend to believe whatever validates our existing beliefs, or in other words, whatever tells us we're in the right. Laziness is a key part of this process, as it leads us to accept easy and plausible explanations.

In 2004, the Italian computer programmer Alberto Brandolini developed a theory –which has since become known as "Brandolini's Law"– to explain the success of fake news. Essentially, it is based on the "bullshit asymmetry principle", in which the amount of energy required to disprove a lie is always higher than the amount required to create it. Brandolini developed this theory by observing the godfather of today's populist movements: Silvio Berlusconi. The former Italian prime minister's strategy has always been the same: bulldoze his way forward, control the media and repeat one lie after another, without giving his interlocutors (or journalists) time to refute them. Using this approach, he has created a

powerful persona that has served as an example to the rest of today's populist leaders.

Not only was Berlusconi the pioneer of this particular school (a pre-Trump Trumpist, if you will); he also constructed the ideal cognitive framework to allow this approach to take root in society. He is the originator of the televisual culture of "he who shouts loudest must be right", of rewarding the unscrupulous, promoting style over substance and proclaiming that everything has a price. On Berlusconi's television channels, truth became of secondary importance and the riled-up, mesmerised audience allowed themselves to be drawn into an artificial world that was ultimately designed to make the values that Berlusconi represented desirable: values such as personal enrichment at any cost, individualism, machismo, and deceit. A society made in this image is much easier to manipulate.

Protest votes by those who feel forgotten, as well as ideological votes

At the beginning of the groundswell of electoral support for the far right throughout the West, a popular theory held that this rise was due to a "protest vote" against the status quo: a kind of right-wing anti-establishment wave. It is important to bear in mind that nobody is better than the populist far right at exploiting the contrast between the ruling elite and the ordinary voters who feel unrepresented and excluded from the system. However, this factor alone is not enough to explain the success of the far-right. Undoubtedly, many of those who voted for Trump, Salvini, Meloni, Le Pen or Bolsonaro did not do so simply in order to "protest against the system" (indeed, perhaps they believe that the system should not be changed, as it benefits them), but rather because they shared the world view that these leaders presented.

A war among the poor

The far right wants to stir up conflict between the most disadvantaged groups; a so-called "war among the poor". When Salvini holds rallies outside factory gates he assures the workers that the people responsible for their precarious circumstances are the ones who are even lower than them on the class pyramid: namely, undocumented immigrants. According to Salvini, these immigrants have come to steal their jobs, even though native Italians are often unwilling to do these jobs and are more likely to reject the conditions of semi-slavery that accompany said jobs.

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Consequently, all of the policies that harm the interests of the working classes serve to

benefit the far right, as they create the perfect conditions for it to thrive: job insecurity, poverty, and desperation. It then becomes easy to demonise public administrations, to brand all politicians elitists who only act in their own interests, and to claim to speak on behalf of those who purportedly have no voice in public institutions. This particularly applies when the parties that are traditionally supposed to respond to these issues, namely the parties of the left, have ended up caving in to the interests of those who hold the reins of power. This approach, which often translates into anti-European sentiment, provides the ideological basis for the political agenda promoted by Le Pen and copied by Salvini.

This does not mean that if the far right were in government they would favour the working classes: in fact, the total opposite applies, as has been shown in the places where they have gained power. For example, in the Italian regions and municipalities where the far right is in government (whether in the form of the League or the Brotherhood of Italy, and always with the assistance of Berlusconi's party), the policies they implement are those of the traditional right wing, with additional measures against minorities, the sexual freedom of women (in these areas it is always more difficult to exercise the right to have an abortion) and LGBTI rights (these parties have overturned policies to combat homophobia).

In Lombardy, stronghold of the Italian right and far right, the League and Berlusconi's party have dismantled much of the public healthcare system; a move that became particularly notable during the coronavirus crisis, when the region accounted for nearly half of all Italy's deaths from COVID-19. Roberto Formigone, a member of Berlusconi's party who governed the region for 18 years with the support of the League, was found guilty of masterminding a broad network of corruption that penetrated into every corner of Lombardy's healthcare system. Despite the anti-establishment rhetoric appropriated from the left, all of the far-right movements in the West, within their specific national context, end up benefiting the economic elites of their particular country. The reality is that the new far right is not very new at all.

The culture war and the role of the media in legitimising the new far right

Even the practice of defending "political incorrectness" and railing against the "do-gooders" who defend human rights has its origins in historical fascism. When Mussolini was in power, particularly during the early years, the pro-fascist press used the phrase "the pious ones" to refer to those who dared to question the practice of treating Italian Jews like non-Italians solely on the basis of their origins and progressively robbing them of the rights afforded to other citizens, and to wonder where such a practice might lead.

By holding aloft the banner of political incorrectness, the far right is evidently playing a trick. This supposed irreverence, often wrapped in a counter-cultural aesthetic, would only make sense if the target was those in power, rather than those who are weakest. It is no coincidence that the political incorrectness of the far right is never directed against power, but against the most disadvantaged sectors of society. The aim is to break the social consensus regarding certain values which the myopic left and liberal centrists had come to

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In this context of democratic fragility, the media must be made aware of its own responsibility, and the fact that it has played a decisive role in promoting the culture war fomented by the far right. Too often, the media has bought into and amplified the messages of these groups. The media strategy of the far right is based on provocation, and at a time when journalism is becoming ever more precarious, this approach has served to pour petrol onto the flames. One hand has washed the other. Headlines featuring the incendiary declarations of far-right leaders have provided excellent clickbait, and even media outlets on the other side of the political spectrum have ended up playing the far right's game by amplifying their messages and engaging them in debate.

One of Europe's most influential fascist organisations is Italy's CasaPound, which hosted Salvini's first major public appearance in Rome in 2015. Salvini and CasaPound shared a stage, and the latter presented him as the future leader of Europe's identity-oriented far right. A pioneer of the far right's appropriation of left-wing symbols and references, CasaPound justly lays claim to having thrust its pet themes onto the media agenda, ultimately making them part of the political debate. These themes are chiefly concerned with immigration and the normalisation of the fascist ideology in the name of freedom of expression. This is how the far right controls the culture war: by making sure its chosen topics are always trending, regardless of whether or not they have been debunked.

CasaPound has a media presence and has even ensured that the debates that take place at its headquarters (which displays portraits not only of Mussolini, but also of Che Guevara and Gramsci) feature renowned journalists, such as the director and television presenter Enrico Mentana. This has served to legitimise the fascists' discourse and stands in contrast to the position taken by another renowned journalist, Giacomo Matteotti, almost a century ago: that fascism is not just another ideology or opinion, it is in fact a crime, and should therefore be isolated.

Matteotti knew that Mussolini would have him assassinated; and this indeed proved to be the case. His was an inconvenient voice that denounced the corruption and trickery of a regime that was still consolidating its hold on power. Therefore, he was thinking of us, the future generations, when shortly before his death he explained the strategy of fascism, which is the same strategy now being used by the new far right. It takes advantage of democratic institutions –and the good faith of those who, in the name of freedom of

expression, consider it fair to give the far-right space and a voice– with the ultimate aim of dismantling those institutions and democracy itself. Almost one hundred years have passed: perhaps it is now time to learn the lesson.



Alba Sidera Gallart

Alba Sidera Gallart is a journalist and writer. She lives in Rome since 2008, where she specialized in Italian political analysis and far-right movements. Since 2012, she is the correspondent of the newspaper *El Punt Avui* and collaborates with different media, such as the magazine *Contexto* or *Mèdia.cat*. She recently published the book *Feixisme persistent. Radiografia de la Itàlia de Matteo Salvini* (Saldonar, 2020), a journalistic work that is the result of years of research where she explains the context that has allowed the rise of the far right in Italy by placing it within the European framework.