

# Discourse and Practice of Violence in the Italian Extreme Right: Frames, Symbols, and Identity-Building in CasaPound Italia

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# Discourse and Practice of Violence in the Italian Extreme Right: Frames, Symbols, and Identity-Building in CasaPound Italia

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An investigation of the neo-Fascist organization CasaPound Italia, focusing on how political violence is framed in its public discourse, and on the role it plays as a constitutive element of the group's collective identity. Starting from the conceptualization of violence in Italian Fascism, we focus on CasaPound's practices, discourse, and ideology. The analysis combines findings from nineteen in-depth interviews with CasaPound members and participant observation at protest events and activities. This paper disentangles CasaPound's relationship with political violence, differentiating its discursive, aesthetic, and identity-building dimensions. Although in the external discourse of the group, violent activities are only accepted as a tool of self-determination and self-defence, we find that a cult of violence inspired by traditional Fascism emerges from the semiotic repertoire mobilized by CasaPound, and is reiterated by means of experiences of collective socialization based on violence.

Since the mid-1990s, several western European countries have been confronted with a resurgence of right-wing extremism, characterized by waves of protest and political campaigning targeting immigration and asylum policies, European integration and globalization, and social and economic policies in general. Previous research has underlined how this has been accompanied by a progressive resurgence of violent actions against opponents, foreigners, and other target groups.

At the same time, however, an increasing number of extreme right movements and groups officially reject violence as a political means. In other words, the subculture of overt violence which often characterized such groups has over time come to terms with the contextual constraints that restrict the range of arguments and strategies that are legitimate in the public arena. As pointed out by Koopmans (2004), besides political opportunity structures, a set

of discursive opportunities also contribute to establishing the trajectories and constraints for the political expression of movements. This has resulted in a situation where many protagonists of the earliest mobilizations of the extreme right have progressively abandoned references to violence in their official rhetoric, especially when they have been successful in institutionalizing themselves (as in the case of the French Front National).

Extreme right groups therefore define their discursive and strategic choices based on the estimation of the potential support that they can obtain. In the Italian setting, the trade-off between legitimization and visibility is most evident for neo-Fascist groups, as a consequence of the stigmatization (and state repression) of the terrorist activities of the 1960s and 1970s (Cento Bull 2007). In other words, social and institutional factors constrain the political opportunities and the range of discursive choices available

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to the Italian extreme right. Today, organizations from this area are forced to build their political legitimacy using very careful narratives with respect to political strategies, actions and goals, as numerous potential sanctions moderate the set of possible frames they can mobilize to accompany their political engagement (Caiani et al. 2012).

This trend is, however, challenged by two factors: the nature of the actors involved in political activism and the nature of their ideological background. On the one hand, recent research has pointed out that the organizational structure of neo-Fascist mobilization is increasingly diversified. In opposition to the process of progressive institutionalization of the extreme right in the 1990s, extreme right activism has turned to more flexible types of organizations and expanded the scope of its repertoire of protest actions (Europol 2010). In this sense, extremist subcultures represent a relatively understudied reality of the extreme right panorama (Fasanella and Grippo 2009).

On the other hand, the nature of the political ideology of extreme right groups matters for defining the way they relate to political violence. Numerous studies have underlined that the main traits of the ideology of Italian Fascism and the mythology of violence are basically inseparable (Lupo 2005), not only in terms of the fascist voluntarist spirit, which needed violence in order to justify the immediate transformation of beliefs in action, but also as a basis for the “militia” identity charged with regenerating the nation (Payne 1999; Albanese 2006; Gentile 1990, 2009).

Studies on social movements have underlined how the choices of forms of action are culturally constrained and strictly defined by the traditions that current activists inherit from their predecessors (Tilly 1986). Generation by generation, these repertoires crystallize within political cultures, often becoming embedded in activist subcultures (della Porta 2013). In the same fashion, discursive and nar-

rative characteristics may be transmitted over time, with the result that rhetoric choices are often structured by perceived discursive constraints. This is especially the case for the extreme right and for groups that hold positions (on issues such as violence, democracy, or modernity) that are stigmatized as illegitimate in the dominant culture.

How, then, is violence conceived within contemporary extreme right groups?<sup>1</sup> This paper focuses on the Italian group *CasaPound* (CP) and reconstructs the role of violence in its political ideology and practices of identity-building, differentiating between a discursive, aesthetic and identity-building dimension. Based on the triangulation of different research techniques, this approach allows differentiation of the external aspects related to the self-definition of the movement towards the outside world, and the internal aspects that help the movement construct and cement its shared identity.

### 1. Political Violence, Collective Identities, and the Extreme Right

In her review of the academic literature on political violence, della Porta (2008) identifies four main reasons explaining the episodic attention of the social sciences to this field of research. These include the great variety of theoretical approaches that characterize these studies, “with ‘breakdown’ theories mostly used for the analysis of right-wing radicalism, social movement theories sometimes adapted to research on left-wing radical groups, and area study specialists focusing on ethnic and religious forms” (221).

In social movement research, political violence has traditionally been discussed as one possible type of action within a broader repertoire of mobilization, one which the group selects according to conditions set by the interaction between challengers and elites (Tilly 1978, 2003). Violence is then one of the possible outcomes of a protest cycle, during which social movements may change their tactics in order to perpetuate their mobilization and relate to other political

1 Terminology choices are of particular importance here as there are numerous different definitions for the populist or radical right (Mudde 1996; Minkenberg 2000). We choose the term “extreme right”

to reference the anti-democratic features of neo-fascist organizations, in opposition to the anti-liberal democratic values of radical right groups. Although the terminological and conceptual debate

is still ongoing, extreme right groups are generally associated with values such as nationalism and exclusivism, xenophobia, welfare chauvinism, revisionism, and conservatism.

actors within the same arena. (McAdam 1983; McAdam et al. 2001). The choice of any particular type of action depends on the configuration of a set of political opportunity structures that defines the group's margin of manoeuvrability (Wieviorka 1988; Kriesi 1989; Melucci 1989).

Quantitative studies on political violence of the extreme right generally tend to underline its "pathological" and "irrational" character. Conceiving right-wing radicalism as anomic behaviour, violence is considered a product of macro-structural causes, such as economic crisis and the collapse of social ties, combined with individual-level factors, such as psychological problems and relative deprivation (Bjorgo and Witte 1993; Olzak and Shanahan 1996; see also: Caiani et al. 2012).

Otherwise, for more than thirty years research on the extreme right has focused almost exclusively on political parties and more or less institutionalized actors (Ignazi 1992, 1994; Betz 1994; Kitschelt 1997; Mudde 2000), investigating the role they play in the reshaping of existing political space and conflict (see also Meguid 2005, 2008; Kriesi et al. 2008). Neo-Fascist and extreme right political violence in the 1960s and 1970s has been addressed within the tradition of so-called terrorist studies, which generally conceive it as a response to the radicalization of left-wing movements (Weinberg 1979; Weinberg and Eubank 1987; see also Cento Bull 2007), whereas more recent research has focused on the political and discursive opportunity structures of extreme right violence (Koopmans and Olzak 2004).

In this context, however, very little attention has been devoted to phenomena pertaining to the *groupuscular* right, and to understanding the processes of radicalization within this family of actors (Caiani et al. 2012). Although a number of studies have tried to bridge different analytical fields in order to account for the increasing importance of violence within loosely institutionalized organizations on the extreme right (Griffin 2003; Virchow 2004; Bale 2007), research on social movements and political violence has to date focused almost exclusively on a very specific set of actors, pertaining mainly to the left-libertarian sphere and geographically restricted to the Western hemisphere (della Porta 2013).

On the one hand, social movement research has been constrained by the difficulties of fieldwork access and by the general lack of scholarly experience in terms of understanding the extreme right and its use, representation, and exploitation of political violence (della Porta 2008; Caiani and Borri 2012). On the other, the predominant approach, based on political opportunity explanations, has tended to overemphasize the instrumental logic of movement practices (della Porta and Diani 2009; Koopmans and Olzak 2004): normative concerns, framing choices, and identity construction have been almost systematically downplayed, being considered as mainly determined by contextual structures (della Porta 2013).

Contextual circumstances and macro-level factors are not, however, sufficient to fully account for when and whether similar political actors opt for violent forms of mobilization. This is why a growing body of work underlines the importance of group-specific cultural processes (della Porta 1996), investigating the development of political violence in terms of the frames movements use to define their grievances, and in terms of the ways in which they identify and distinguish friend and foe (della Porta and Diani 2006; della Porta 2008). Micro-level research on social movements has found that the endorsement of violence is not only related to militants' socio-demographic characteristics, but also to the way in which they construct and understand social reality (Gamson and Modigliani 1987; Goodwin et al. 2001), which is in line with political sociology analyses of the perception of political action by extreme right voters (Betz 1994; Mayer 2002; Mudde 2007).

Within this literature, the concept of framing has been used in order to define the multiple ways in which collective actors can give meaning to social facts and motivate political strategies. Given that the same external reality is often constructed and framed in different ways by different actors, similar sets of opportunities and contextual circumstances can be associated with a vast array of reactions and choices, so that the "particular subcultures to which movements refer contribute to the creation of distinctive repertoires" (della Porta 2013, 18). In other words, since their instrumental logic is strongly connoted by cognitive and normative mechanisms, small subcultural groups on the

radical right can respond to contextual constraints in very different ways.

As is suggested by the resource mobilization approach (Caiani et al. 2012), the incentives emerging from sets of opportunity structures are often filtered by collective self-perceptions, narratives, and constructions of external reality. Similarly, inherent norms, group rules, and traditions often guide and justify behaviours and forms of political action that would appear illogical or anomic if viewed merely as a product of the available opportunities. For extremist movements of the right, previous research (Bjorgo and Witte 1993; Bjorgo 1995) has shown that militants, supporters, and sympathizers are incentivized to violent action by the organization, which offers rationales for mobilization and synthesizes grievances in political and ideological discourses based on race, religion, and gender superiority. Similarly, justifications may be based on symbolized concepts such as homeland, blood and honour (O’Boyle 2002; Taggart 2000), or the process of cultural and economic globalization (Kriesi et al. 2008). In this sense, anthropological research has shown that violence fulfils both instrumental and expressive functions within groups (Riches 1986), since it not only affects the way in which the group interacts with its own social environment, but also contributes to the construction of group identity.

Authors increasingly recognize the importance of collective narratives, rituals, and symbolic repertoires in the development of protest events and violence, and within processes of exclusive identity building (della Porta 2013; Goodwin 2004). In this understanding, the symbolic, cultural, and emotional aspects of political violence are often more significant than its material and strategic consequences. Recent research has in fact rediscovered the role of emotions in the construction and structuring of collective identities (Aminzade and McAdam 2001; Goodwin et al. 2001; Eyerman 2002). To put it differently, the relevance of violent events within and outside a given group is principally a function of the framing process that has been activated, since it is the narrative of violence – more than violence per se – that enables the group to reconnect with its past and construct its legitimation.

Developing the literature outlined above, this paper addresses the role of violence in group formation and collective identity within a contemporary neo-Fascist group in Italy: CasaPound Italia. Based on the concept of “constructed violence” recently proposed by della Porta (2013, 19), we examine the cognitive and affective aspects of violence by which CasaPound constructs its identity vis-à-vis the surrounding environment. On the one hand, therefore, we overcome the traditional approach that sees political violence merely as a result of political and discursive opportunity structures. On the other, we avoid identifying violence with ideologies that justify it (Snow and Byrd 2007; Bosi 2006). This entails investigating the specific narratives, frames, and symbols that are used to legitimize violence, to construct collective emotions, and to cement group identity.

We follow an analytical strategy aimed at identifying a threefold function of violence within CasaPound’s identity, discourse, and practices. In the first place, violence should be understood in terms of a *discursive dimension*. In the light of the political and discursive opportunities available to the group at the present stage of its existence (Koopmans and Olzak 2004), it rejects political violence as a means to achieve policy success in its external rhetoric. Yet, given the specific ideological background of the movement, and its need to reconnect with its fascist past, violence cannot be fully erased from the movement’s political platform. The result is the development of a specific narrative in which violence is framed as a defensive tool used to respond to forms of repression, be they institutional or from opposing political groups. This way, the group is able to respond to external constraints while at the same time accommodating the needs of its members for creation of a common identity.

Secondly, violence emerges within an *aesthetic dimension*, by which CasaPound romanticizes and reproduces the myth and symbolic violence of Fascist Italy. Under this perspective, the fascination with violence emerges from the semiotic and linguistic choices of the movement and from its aesthetic strategies in terms of music, literature, and art. Lastly, violence plays a fundamental role in CasaPound within an *identity-building dimension*, where the militant’s

body is mythologized in a martial understanding of the self. The identity-building of CasaPound, in our opinion, can also be understood in terms of a shared experience of violence: the sense of comradeship may spring from the collective practice of suffering and heroism, of pain and glory, but also from non-violent activities (drinking beers, hiking, diving etc.). In the following we therefore look separately at the discursive, aesthetic, and identity-building aspects of violence within CasaPound, investigating the construction and use of violence within the group and vis-à-vis its surrounding environment.

## 2. Methods and Sources

As far as groups like CasaPound are concerned, first-hand sources tend to be scarce and fieldwork access difficult (Caldiron 2009; Bartlett et al. 2012), which is why most literature in this field relies on secondary data (Bosi and Della Porta 2012). Our analysis of the role of violence in CasaPound is empirically grounded. We based our research on a triangulation of methodological perspectives, combining different data collection and analysis methods (Campbell and Fiskie 1959; della Porta and Keating 2008), including in-depth interviewing and ethnographic participant observation. Additional sources (written, photographic, and audio-visual), helped us to contextualize this information.

Fieldwork access to the organization was based on a relationship with one member of the group, who arranged the possibility to formally contact the national secretary of CasaPound. Given the hierarchical structure of the organization, it was the explicit consent of the national leaders that enabled us to access local headquarters and to enter into contact with militants. Interaction with members of CasaPound was therefore generally mediated by the consent of other members of the group. In each local office, we were allowed to interview at least one local cadre (previously contacted by the national headquarters), who also participated to the in-depth life-history interviews with the rest of the local leadership. Mostly, however, we were also able to hold informal conversations with other militants. Our position as researchers was always made explicit prior to interaction with CasaPound members (who knew about our study and were promised anonymity), and we

were never asked whether we felt politically close to the movement, nor we were asked to define ourselves ideologically.

The bulk of the present research is hence derived from nineteen in-depth interviews held in CasaPound offices in Florence, Turin, Verona, Rome, and Naples between February and November 2012 (all but one face-to-face and recorded). The interviews reconstruct the life-histories of the militants and analyse their political discourse and understanding of activism, providing a hermeneutical interpretation of the framing of violence in CasaPound. In other words, not only do the interviews elicit an in-depth understanding of the meaning of violence in the group's ideology, but they also highlight its significance in CasaPound's practices and culture. Biographical information allows us to trace the militants' perceptions of the outside world, the patterns of their political socialization, and the processes by which collective identities are produced and sustained.

It is important to underline, however, that the interviews were designed mainly to investigate the socioeconomic and transnational dimensions of the movement's ideology (as part of a broader project on militancy in the extreme right) and its practices of militancy, whereas the specific interest in its relationship with violence emerged after the fieldwork had already started. Problems of "resistance" (Becker and Geer 1969) and the necessity to go beyond the group's external discourse on violence led us to augment the interviews with ethnographic participant observation.

Taking part in conferences, celebrations, concerts, and demonstrations between February and November 2012, and observing the group's daily activities, enabled us to see aspects of its relationship with violence that would not be reported in an interview. On the one hand, participant observation allowed us to analyse how collective emotions are built in the movement, and how they are expressed in the codes of its subcultures (Brown and Dobrin 2004); on the other, by relaxing the cordons of internal control and discipline, it enabled us to interact with militants away from the leaders' supervision, and to interact with

members who were much less concerned to comply with the organization's public line.

In this sense, our ethnographic approach departs from the classical positivist methodology based on the falsification of a previously formulated hypothesis; on the contrary, it is based upon a procedure encompassing both inductive reasoning based on fieldwork experience, and theory-led deductive interpretations (Bosi and della Porta 2012). In this methodology participation, observation, and hermeneutical and semiotic interpretation are the constitutive elements of a single iterative process (O'Reilly 2005).

In order to investigate how CasaPound's collective identity is constructed, the interpretation of its internal and external discourse on violence was also based on the vast amount of written, visual, and audio material that we were able to collect through the fieldwork and observation at public events organized by the group. This material was then integrated with the main texts used by CasaPound as "ideological pillars", as well as with song lyrics (which often express identity, especially in subcultural extreme right milieus) (Backes and Mudde 2000; Eyerman 2002; Kahn-Harris 2007).

In order to provide additional context, we examined how CasaPound is portrayed in the media by analysing the description of its protest events in the quality newspaper *La Repubblica* (2004–2012, N=308), and conducting a content analysis of the press releases in CasaPound's web archive (2009–2012, N=1,233). Press releases supply a good approximation of CasaPound's external discourse, as they are largely composed of information and propaganda material for media consumption. We coded each item to identify press releases dealing with violent events. Within the violent category, we further differentiated between violent actions explicitly vindicated by CasaPound and those where group defined itself as a victim of violence.

In conclusion, it is our opinion that methodological pluralism is the best strategy for understanding political violence in the extreme right milieu. Rather than focusing on single aspects of the use of violence, this design enabled us to simultaneously tackle the different dimensions of the relationship with violence, hence gaining a transversal view on the ideological discourse, aesthetics, and identity-building practices of the group. At the first level we identified the external discourse of CasaPound, as emerging from its propaganda material, public campaigns, and official discourse; at the intermediate level, there is the discourse addressed to both external and internal audiences, which emerges from the in-depth interviews and from interpretation of the aesthetic repertoire of the group; finally, there is the dimension of internal consumption, the system of values and symbols exclusively addressed to movement militants, which we could only access by means of participant observation.

### 3. CasaPound Italia and "Fascism of the Third Millennium"

CasaPound defines itself as a "fascist movement" whose identity is rooted in the Italian fascist tradition rather than in the traditional "left" and "right" categories (Scianca 2011). At the rhetorical level the group thus asserts difference from traditional parties and their formal ways of political engagement, privileging the organization, repertoire, and practices of social movements (Rao 2006, 2010).<sup>2</sup>

CasaPound claims its origins in Italian Fascism and, in line with a tradition developed in the Nouvelle Droite of the 1970s (overview: Tarchi 2003), builds its political message on the framework of "metapolitics" – a Gramscian approach to politics, in which cultural change precedes political change (Toscano and Di Nunzio 2011).<sup>3</sup> Otherwise, most CasaPound activities are explicitly inspired by Italian Fascist ideology, and most notably by its "social doctrine". In this respect, CasaPound gives special attention to the Labour Charter of 1927 and to the later Manifesto di Verona (1943), but strategically downplays the

2 In 2013, CasaPound stood with its own list in the parliamentary elections, the regional elections in Lazio, and the municipal elections in Rome, but obtained disappointing electoral results (only 0.14 percent in the House and Senate, less than 1 percent

in the municipal and regional elections). Still, the decision to run marks an important change in its strategy, especially with respect to its self-definition as a "social movement."

3 For more detail, see "Intervista a Marco Tarchi sulla metapolitica" <http://www.ilribelle.com>.

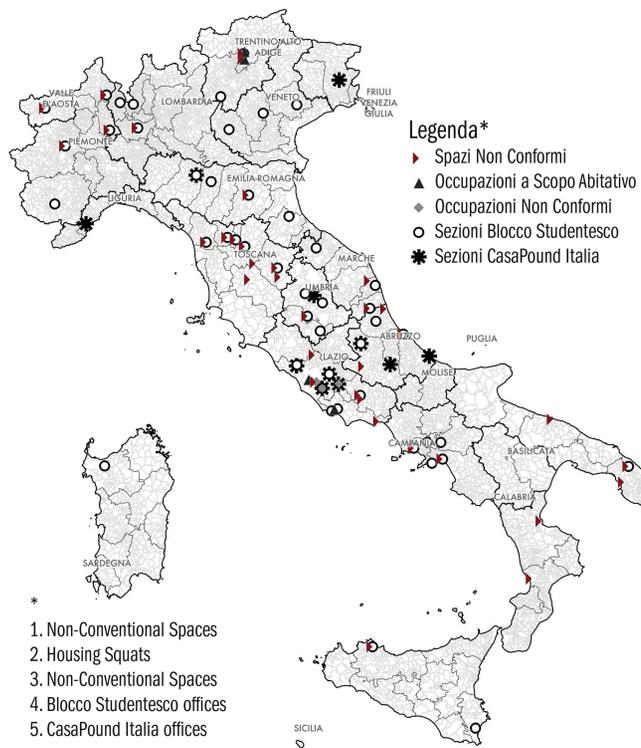
most stigmatized aspects, such as anti-Semitism and racism (Castelli Gattinara et al. 2013).

The origins of CasaPound lie in the 2003 squatting of a building in the centre of Rome by a group of young neo-fascists who did not feel unrepresented by the established right-wing parties. In 2008, the group changed its official status to “social organization” CasaPound Italia, an explicit reference to the housing problem and rising rents in Rome (casa is the Italian for “house”). The reference to Ezra Pound stems from the American poet’s theory of rent as “usury” (Pound 1985),<sup>4</sup> and in general to his support of the Italian Social Republic (1943–45).

CasaPound’s real genesis, however, has to do with the subcultural activities of the disenfranchised extreme right youth in Rome, and in particular with Gianluca Iannone, the future leader of the movement. In 1997, Iannone founded the rock band ZetaZeroAlfa, which gave voice to concerns that had been disregarded by institutional parties of the radical right: housing, globalization, and the need to revolt against the establishment (Tarchi 2010).<sup>5</sup>

Today, CasaPound is present in virtually all Italian regions, and can count on about five thousand militants and a distinct youth wing, Blocco Studentesco (see Figure 1). It owns fifteen bookshops, twenty pubs, a web radio station (Black Flag Radio) and a web TV channel (TortugaTV). CasaPound also produces publications such as the monthly journal *L’Occidentale* and the quarterly *Fare Quadrato*. Over the years, the group has initiated a series of demonstrative actions, including the occupation of a state-owned building on the periphery of Rome in 2002 (CasaMontag), and the setting up of various “non-conventional” squats.

Figure 1: CasaPound offices in Italy



Sources: Our data from CasaPound Italia and Blocco Studentesco; <http://www.casapounditalia.org>; <http://www.bloccostudentesco.org>.

This strategy has granted CasaPound a significant degree of media attention. News agencies seem to be interested in the phenomenon of “acquisition” of left-wing issues and repertoires of action by extreme right organizations: CasaPound’s squats, concerts, and “showpiece” protest events, as well as the attention it gives to issues such as homosexual rights and the environment (Castelli Gattinara et al. 2013). In addition, the media often report on CasaPound associating its political activities with moderate or severe forms of violence, as is exemplified by attacks on the house

4 References to the housing problem are found in Cantos 78, 100, and 108 (Pound 1985).

5 The critique was addressed primarily to the Movimento Sociale – Fiamma Tricolore, the main radical right party that emerged after the transformation of Italy’s post-fascist party (Movimento

Sociale Italiano) into a national-conservative alliance (Alleanza Nazionale). More broadly, CasaPound must be understood in the framework of a much older project of the youth of the Movimento Sociale Italiano, which aimed at promoting Fascism as a cultural struggle. In 2008, Iannone’s group offi-

cially quit the Fiamma Tricolore, after persistent tensions and the refusal by the national leadership to organize a party congress (Tarchi 2010).

of the TV show *Big Brother*, and the symbolic occupation of the EU headquarters in Rome.

In order to provide further contextual information on how the different forms of action used by CasaPound are perceived from outside the right-wing network, we applied the methodology and analytical scheme applied to similar cases by Caiani et al. (2012), who differentiate categories of action on the basis of increasing levels of radicalization (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Classification of protest actions on the basis of the level of radicalization**

Type of action	Examples
<i>Conventional actions</i>	Lobbying, electoral campaigns, press conferences, etc.
<i>Demonstrative actions</i>	Large mobilization, demonstrations, petitions, rallies
<i>Expressive actions</i>	Addressing members and sympathizers
<i>Confrontational actions</i>	Illegal demonstrations, blockades, occupations, disturbances
<i>Violent actions</i>	Involving symbolic (light) and physical (heavy) violence

Source: Caiani, della Porta, and Wagemann (2012)

Reports on CasaPound in the newspaper *La Repubblica* between 2004 and 2012 show that about 15 percent of reported CasaPound actions were confrontational (squatting abandoned buildings, blockades, illegal demonstrations), while an additional 35 percent of events involved some form of violence. “Light forms of violence” (Caiani, della Porta, and Wagemann 2012) are symbolic acts, such as threats, graffiti, and damage to buildings of political opponents, whereas heavy violence means collective violence against political opponents, clashes during street demonstrations and marches, and individual acts of violence in non-political contexts. Our data show that viol-

ent actions by CasaPound targeted its political adversaries, especially those involved in counter-movements. Light forms of violence were advocated by the movement in order to radicalize the political campaigns to which they attach particular importance.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 2: Forms of CasaPound mobilization reported in the media (2004–2012)**

Forms of action	%
Conventional	15.3
Demonstrative	23.1
Expressive events	11.7
Confrontational	14.7
Light violence	15.3
Heavy violence	19.9
<i>Total</i>	100
<i>N</i>	307

Source: Own analysis of archive data from La Repubblica.

#### 4. The Discursive Dimension: CasaPound’s Official Framing of Political Violence

CasaPound’s most explicit position with respect to violence can be found on its official website, in the “frequently asked questions” section: “Is CasaPound a violent movement?”:

CasaPound Italia does politics, not hooliganism. CasaPound is not interested in showing its muscles. CasaPound calls for quiet force. At the same time, however, CasaPound does not allow others to challenge its legitimate right to exist and take action. We are open to dialogue, but we don’t reject confrontation when this is imposed on us and when our political and physical survival is at stake.<sup>7</sup>

So violence is not officially endorsed, yet neither is it fully rejected, as it remains an important corollary to political activism and opposition. CasaPound members are very careful when it comes to the issue of violence: all the interviewees were well prepared, and very cautious in their words.

<sup>6</sup> Although there are limits to their scope (Caiani, della Porta, and Wagemann 2012), newspaper analyses represent an effective instrument for analysing protest. We chose the centre-left *La Repubblica*

because of the space it dedicates to local news in the Rome region, where CasaPound is most active. In order to address potential ideological biases, we controlled using reports in the centre-right newspaper *Il*

*Corriere della Sera* for 2011. The results showed no relevant cross-newspaper differences.

<sup>7</sup> Our translation from <http://www.casapounditalia.org/p/le-faq-di-cpi.html>.

The legacy of the strategy of tension of the 1960s and 1970s, and the subsequent state repression, is likely to play a role here. This was confirmed by our interviewees, who were very explicit in differentiating themselves from old fashioned “thugs” (*picchiatori*) (Interviews 2b and 2c, 27 April 2012). CasaPound seems to be fully aware of the dangers of mishandling its public image with respect to violence, as the fragile legitimacy that the movement enjoys is also based on its capability of providing an image that corresponds to CasaPound’s self-definition as a “social association”. In this sense, everyone in CasaPound is expected to have an in-depth understanding of the movement’s position on violence (Toscano and Di Nunzio 2011), which represents an important element for its collective activities as well as a fundamental factor structuring its external credibility (82).

CasaPound’s collective position on violence, therefore, has to come to terms with two opposing forces: on the one hand, the necessity of protecting the movement’s external credibility, which would require a full and uncontroversial rejection of violence; and on the other the ideas and rhetoric of Italian Fascism, which build upon a number of inherently violent elements, such as the cult of bravery and squadristo. It is hence impossible for the movement to completely disregard violence. Italian Fascism justified the use of all forms of violence against its opponents on the basis of the alleged superiority of its political ethics (G. Gentile 1934).

The result is that CasaPound reframes the issue of violence in the way most convenient to the movement itself, by flipping the discussion from “CasaPound as a vector of political violence” to “CasaPound as a victim of political violence”. Apart from the abovementioned sentences rejecting “hooliganism” and the show of “muscles”, no reference is ever made to CasaPound as a conveyer of violence; attention is instead shifted to forms of resistance against external forces. In our interviews, CasaPound cadres often underlined how physical training is fundamental for CasaPound militants, as they should always be

ready and “physically trained for any threat” (Interview 3a, 1 June 2012).

CasaPound hence exploits its position as a semi-legitimized political actor: the use of violence is justified as a tool to safeguard the group’s right to expression, against (legal or confrontational) coercion and repression from the outside world. In this sense, violence represents the noblest form of resistance against a hostile, repressive external world, and becomes a means not only of survival but also of self-determination:

The ethical code of CasaPound provides that sometimes we actually have to fight. To defend our political freedom from those that want to deny it, and in order to challenge intolerance and arrogance, to save our lives, or to defend a comrade. Yes, we fight. It’s not nice, it is not polite. But it is more vital, transparent, and clear than any public display of moralism pretending to dehumanize others in the name of a “struggle against barbarianism”.

(translated from Scianca 2011, 362)

In other words, CasaPound constructs a discourse where violence is justified if it holds a special meaning, beyond individual self-realization in terms of honour, courage, and strength. It is conceived, at the collective level, in terms of *necessity*: it represents the way in which the movement opposes repression and protects its “vital space” (Interviews 2b and 2c, 27 April 2012).<sup>8</sup> This discourse reveals shades of complex relations between means and ends of violence, a deliberate confusion which could also be found in the understanding of violence of early Italian Fascism: having to cope with the political opportunities and constraints of its time, early Fascism defined violence in the same terms, whereas late Fascism openly endorsed it as a tool to keep the nation alive (G. Gentile 1934).

In order to assess the role of violence in CasaPound public discourse, we examined how it is addressed in the group’s press releases. We found that violence is largely downplayed in CasaPound’s external discourse: only 16 percent of the statements released by the organization between 2009 and 2012 concerned violent events. In these, more

8 The expression “vital space” was an expansionist concept of Italian Fascism (Rodogno 2006).

than 60 percent of the items concerned denunciations of acts of violence towards CasaPound members and offices, whereas less than 30 percent claimed responsibility for protests which involved violence.

Here again, in the public domain CasaPound shifts the attention away from its own use of political violence, focusing instead on repression it suffers. This strategy allows the group to avoid the stigmatization often suffered by extreme right organizations and enables it to justify the use of violence in terms of necessity, survival, and defence of its right to express its political opinions.

### 5. The Aesthetic Dimension: Romanticizing Violence

As already mentioned, our investigation of CasaPound's violence differentiates between an external analytical level, where violence is framed as a reaction to oppression, and an internal one, where violence represents a tool to strengthen solidarity and comradeship. The present section deals with the intermediate analytical level of the aesthetic dimension of violence in CasaPound.

The aesthetic dimension reconnects CasaPound to the conceptualization of violence synthesized in Mussolini's cult of the Lictor (Gentile 2009).<sup>9</sup> This idea was introduced by Walter Benjamin, who underlined the major role played by the regime's romantic view of violence (Koeppnik 1999), providing an idea of power as a transformative, vital force accompanying the anthropological revolution of the "new man" towards a new secular religion of the State (Gentile 1990).

Similarly, figurative choices and image selection are of primary importance to understand how violence is reproduced and transmitted. CasaPound's initiatives are almost always accompanied by showcase visual campaigns, mainly aimed at increasing the visibility of its political action. This

is why the group has been very active in producing shocking visual material for propaganda. As noted by Toscano and Di Nunzio (2011, 109) the political traits of the CasaPound communication strategy are always accompanied by elements derived from pop culture. While similar attention to communication is not a novelty for social movements in general (Downing 2000; Pickard 2000; Koopmans 2004), it is rather innovative among extreme right groups.

Although this imagery is often ironic and provocative, a large share of the movement's propaganda is built on the strategic use of violence as a means to attract attention. Here the symbolic apparatus is based on the ideas of "death", "destruction" and "pain", visually represented with the colour of blood and demise. The "Social Mortgage" campaign,<sup>10</sup> for example, uses hanged mannequins to symbolise the struggle of people who are unable to pay their rent.<sup>11</sup> The "Stop Equitalia" campaign is based on images of the suicides of taxpayers: a man cutting his veins, a man shooting himself in front of a window, a man taking an overdose of pills.<sup>12</sup>

Images traditionally associated with Italian Fascism, such as warriors, soldiers, etc., are also part of CasaPound's visual communication (Mosse 1996). This is the case with the symbol of Artists for CasaPound (which portrays a man holding a brush as if it was a musket), and in the photographic poses of CasaPound militants, which are intended to symbolize bravery and heroism in war and in the political struggle. These symbols are, however, far less visible than were in pre-war Fascist propaganda. Instead, the movement makes recurrent use of other typical features of Fascist iconography, such as fists and masculine limbs, statue-like bodies, weapons, and references to classic antiquity (Mosse 1996).

Music is another fundamental element for understanding CasaPound's semiotic of violence, constituting a collective

9 CasaPound wants to revive the activities of the Squadre d'Azione Fasciste (in line with the idea of the "holy militia" described by Gentile 2009): "I believe that it is to CasaPound's credit that the phenomenon of *squadrisimo* has been rediscovered even if, clearly, it can't be reproduced exactly in the same forms" (Interview 2b, 27 April 2012).

10 CasaPound argues for a form of housing policy (social mortgage) that would guarantee the right to own a property.

11 <http://www.mutuosociale.org>.

12 "Ferma Equitalia, Firma la legge!" URL: <http://www.fermaequitalia.org/propaganda.htm>, (07/12/12).

structure of feelings and a tool for the diffusion of ideas and messages (Eyerman and Jamison 1991). Although extreme right musical culture has generally been associated with the skinhead scene, similar tendencies have recently permeated other subcultures (O’Connell and Castelo-Branco 2010). Similarly, CasaPound’s identitarian rock aims at conveying a sense of malaise towards the contemporary society and at promoting alternative cultural models based on Fascist values, voluntarism, irrationalism, and violence.

In the music of CasaPound’s band, ZetaZeroAlfa, violence is associated with a set of different meanings. First of all, it represents a revolutionary tool to fight the habits of consumerism and cultural homologation, and to oppose the rulers of the country and the economic system:

All faces of a monstrous project, all children of a perfect world.  
Under the guise of your altruism, millions of victims of neoliberalism.  
Reject homologation! Boycott hypocrisy! Fight the multinationals of the New World Order!

“Boicotta”, by ZetaZeroAlfa (translation)

Violence is also referenced in the context of self-determination of oppressed minorities (in particular in Latin America and South-east Asia),<sup>13</sup> as a tool for self-defence,<sup>14</sup> and as self-identification, either in terms of CasaPound’s codified practices of belonging,<sup>15</sup> or simply because not everybody is worthy to join CasaPound:

“We are the ones who beat you up on a Saturday night because you too often forget your manners. We are the kindest people in some ways, but not in others!”

“Kryptonite”, by ZetaZeroAlfa (translated)

The widespread use of a violent vocabulary is not, however, restricted to the language of music. The majority of our interviewees made extensive use of what we define as the linguistic code of the battlefield, employing a vast range of expressions, words, and concepts which reconnect to the

idea of war and armed combat. This has to be understood as an explicit reference to Italian Fascism, which was strongly characterized by a martial rhetoric and by the glorification of violence (Blinkhorn 2000, 69). In Mussolini’s system of values, violence represented the most just and moral, as well as the most practical way to defend one’s ideas (cleansing violence). Its symbols were the regenerating blood of the martyrs and the cult of the dead (Gentile 2009).

In a similar way, CasaPound’s militants glorify their political activism in terms of battlefield values and concepts. Our interviewees described militancy as the desire to “live like a warrior who has to assault the enemy lines” (Interview 3a, 1 June 2012), the national headquarters in Rome as a “trench that is guarded twenty-four hours a day” (Interview 2c, 27 April 2012), and the leader of the movement as a “soldier, brother, and friend” (Interview 3c, 1 June 2012). Similarly, the CasaPound pursues its political goals by being the “sword and shield” of Italy, which “fights the battle” for the social mortgage etc.

Traces of a similar understanding of violence can also be found in CasaPound’s rhetoric and narrative of “not one step back”, which refers to a vaguely defined “street code” where violence and fights are regulated by experience, honour, and courage in a collective experience of virility. On the one hand, this motto reiterates the idea of violence as a necessity for the defence of the *vital space* (Toscano and Di Nunzio 2011). On the other, however, this rhetoric paves the way to celebrations of audacious acts and brave struggles, to exhibitions of force, masculinity and bravery, and to glorifications of the group’s unity and comradeship.

In this sense, CasaPound’s “official” novel (Di Tullio 2010) fully reflects the tension between an explosive urge for violence on the part of the individual militants and the need to

13 “You can’t buy the pride, this land is ours. Drums in the jungle when the sun is red and white. Freedom is a must, and it is the daughter of our blood. The Scolopendra warriors. Karen, freedom fighters!” “Guerrieri della Scolopendra” by ZetaZeroAlfa.

14 “Don’t be doubtful! If you have doubts, just beat them and you’ll live longer” “Nel dubbio mena” by ZetaZeroAlfa.

15 “One: I take off my belt. Two: the dance starts. Three: I take aim. Four: Massacrebelt! “Cinghiamattanza” by ZetaZeroAlfa.

constrain and regulate it which applies to the collective entity. CasaPound militants aim at reproducing the epic warrior's behaviour whenever they are involved in struggles with their opponents, because the "fascists were sick and tired of hiding; and so were all the militants of their generation" (71, translated). The act of bravery is considered as an act of beauty, reconnecting the movement with "what it really is" and what it "has always been" (35–36).

Similarly, activists often talk about the "battles" they took part in, be they against the state or against leftist groups, with reference to the stories of the "martyrs" of the 1960s and 1970s. Although the framework is always self-defensive, the narrative is one that mythologizes heroic action that leads to injuries or to the arrest of activists protecting their comrades or defending the group's existence and political activities. This applies to clashes with left-wing activists (2012), to the riots against the police in the student demonstrations (2008 and 2012), and to all the fights of a militant's political education:

There are seven of them [opponents]. There might be even more, but the numbers are not a problem. It's the first rule you are taught: some things must be done, always. [...] It doesn't matter if they are thousands, because the first rule that you learn is this, and this rule governs your life, it makes your bones into steel, shuts out any pain and fear. Some things must be done, even if it is not convenient. [...] And anyway, how could they [the opponents] dare to confront those who attack screaming the names of the ancient gods, awakening the very essence of earth, letting themselves explode and laugh?

*Nessun Dolore* (translated from Di Tullio 2010, 13)

On the one hand, the legendary stories of fights and battles have an educational function, as they represent "lessons of kicks, fists, and life" (Di Tullio 2010, 137, translated) by which militants are taught the values of heroism and irrational bravery. On the other, the warriors' code is used to denigrate opponents and to describe them as weak and disorganized. Unlike CasaPound's heroes, political opponents are not compelled to be "an example for the others, as they don't compete about who is the bravest" (36). In other words, grappling with the enemy is necessary for the group to define itself, to understand its own nature and limits vis-à-vis its opponents.

## 6. Violence as a Practice of Identity-building

The previous sections have repeatedly hinted at the importance of the sense of community among the members of CasaPound: the use of the grammatical pronoun "we" always precedes the use of the individual "I" – if not substituting it altogether (Caiani, della Porta, and Wagemann 2012). In addition, our fieldwork confirmed that identity-building in CasaPound is mediated by the recognition of a collective belonging (Melucci 1989), and that the organization itself is perceived by its members as a community in which individuals come together to achieve common goals and share common practices.

Previous studies have underlined that common practices are of special importance in building and strengthening the collective sense of belonging to a community, since they work as aggregators between individuals within the group, and because they substantiate the tendency towards full-time activism of extreme right groups (Wenger 1998). In CasaPound, similar practices can be identified in collective experiences at concerts and leisure time activities in the official pubs and concert halls of the group.

Our ethnographic research revealed that violent practices stand out as important in binding militants to one another. We refer here to practices of physical violence, which are used to build feelings of comradeship and respect among members of the group. In particular, the organization tries to reproduce the cult of the (virile) body that played an important role in the ideology of Italian Fascism (Mangan 1999, 2000; McDonald 2007). The *medium* through which networks of solidarity are built within the community is the (male) *body*, through practices of physical contact where the body of the militant is symbolically blended with the collective body of the community.

These practices are either codified and ritualized, or spontaneous and deliberately unrestrained. Yet, they share a *vitalistic* understanding of physical pain that is not, however, nihilist or self-destructive. Rather, it represents a collective, vital, reaction against a dominant cultural model that has reduced the human body to a commodity:

the idea of going home with a bruise made with a belt ... the idea of getting into the crowd even at the price of physical injury. Or, the audacity to take repossession of your own body ... in this sense, the pain. Today in this society there is a fear of physical pain that may annihilate you, in the sense that even if you are the victim of an injustice, this injustice will never be challenged.

(Interview 2c, 27 April 2012)

The most widespread of these practices is collective training in combat sports. Virtually all the male cadres and militants interviewed during the fieldwork were trained in combat sports, either as athletes or as teachers. Moreover, all the fifteen male militants interviewed during the 2012 CasaPound enrolment event in northern Italy reported practising a combat sport. Importantly, gyms are often described as recruitment hubs where sympathizers first encounter CasaPound. In this sense, common participation in combat sports is a fundamental moment where the militant joins (in spirit and body) the collective entity. As a matter of fact, all national political meetings of CasaPound are generally accompanied by sessions of collective training in combat sports. CasaPound also built an organization (the Circle of Fighters for CasaPound) providing sympathizers and militants with equipment, space, and expertise for training in different combat-related disciplines.

Another experience of physical contact is pogo dancing, which in the ZetaZeroAlfa concerts takes the form of team pogo. Traditional pogo was an individual dance of the punk scene, in which participants did not necessarily collide with one another. In CasaPound, pogo more resembles version developed in hard-core punk and heavy metal milieus, where it is known as moshing or slam dancing. While there are no fixed rules (this type of pogo can be danced individually or in groups), participants generally push or slam into each other. CasaPound members dance the pogo by splitting into two groups, which collide and fight right under the stage. Similar dancing practices may be interpreted as expressions of enjoyment, but also as “rules of rebellion” where violence and aggressiveness become a constitutive part of the game (Hebdige 1979; Tsitsos 1999).

Finally, the most widely known practice of physical violence in CasaPound is the *cinghiamattanza* (literally: mass-accrue belt), where a large group of bare-chested men deliberately hit each other with buckle-less belts on all parts of the body except the head, while ZetaZeroAlfa plays the homonymous song. Our interviewees variously described *cinghiamattanza* as a dance, a martial art, or a non-conventional sport of vitalism and irrationalism: an experience enabling repossession of one’s own body.

CasaPound leaders seem to be aware that this practice has been strongly stigmatized in public opinion, which explains why they are extremely careful in describing it. One local leader claimed that today *cinghiamattanza* is no longer important for the movement (Interview 2b, 27 April 12). This defensive attitude is also clear in the FAQ on the CasaPound website, where they attack “the moralists, bigots, and talk-show sociologists” who allegedly misinterpret the meaning of this practice.<sup>16</sup>

We were not granted access to *cinghiamattanza* events, so we cannot judge whether the practice represents a rite of initiation for militants.<sup>17</sup> Still, the fact that it is built upon a strongly codified form of physical confrontation involving exclusively male militants suggests the centrality of this practice in the identity-building project of CasaPound. Moreover, its explosive violence and collective nature are in line with CasaPound’s broader idea of the relationship between the militant, his body, and the group. This impression is additionally corroborated by the mythological tone of the narratives of *cinghiamattanza*: those who practice it are a “warrior caste”; they are “brothers [...] blessed in bruises tomorrow”, who feel “more alive than ever” and find “their place in the world” (Di Tullio 2010, 96–97, translated).

## 7. Conclusion

Although social movement literature devotes substantial attention to the role of violence for group formation and collective identity in protest cycles, very little research has

16 [http://www.casapounditalia.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&id=40&Itemid=66](http://www.casapounditalia.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=40&Itemid=66).

17 During a concert, the lead singer of ZetaZeroAlfa explicitly refused to sing “Cinghiamattanza”, by giving back the belt that was thrown at him by a member of the audience.

dealt with the meaning of violence within extreme right organizations, mainly because of their traditionally limited mobilization capacity, and because of technical difficulties in accessing such groups for ethnographical study. This paper seeks to fill this gap by testing the validity of previously formulated understandings of political violence in the field of social movements, triangulating research methods, and investigating the framing of violence by CasaPound, an extreme right organization that openly draws upon the tradition of Italian Fascism and neo-Fascism.

In order to understand the meaning of violence within an extreme right organization, we rejected the mainstream approaches which focus either on the opportunity structures available to a given group at a given point in time, or on ideology (considered as a proxy of its understanding of violence). The first approach would have only shown that CasaPound's discourse is adequate for the available discursive opportunities (as we illustrated with respect to the external communication of the group), whereas the latter would have simply identified violence with the ideological background of the group.

We therefore decided to follow a different path, focusing on the frames, narratives, and symbols of violence to investigate the different ways in which the group gives meaning to violence and, conversely, in which violence gives meaning to the group. This approach enables us to highlight the tension between the external discourse of CasaPound (the one by which the group interacts with the outside world) and the internal one (by which it makes sense of the external world). Differentiation of the discursive, aesthetic, and identity-building dimensions of political violence helped us explore its meaning and role in CasaPound's discourse and practices.

Although the data presented in this study cannot provide a systematic model of how and when activists decide to undertake violent forms of mobilization, it can help understanding the multi-dimensionality of political violence. To begin with, there is evidence suggesting that the strategic dissociation from violence is restricted only to the first dimension, the discursive, which is more exposed to the

outside world. The in-depth interviews and content analysis of press releases confirmed that CasaPound's official discourse emphasizes the violence CasaPound is subject to, justifying the use of violent means exclusively in terms of autonomy, self-determination and self-defence.

However, analysis of the images mobilized by CasaPound, and interpretation of the language used in its narratives and song lyrics, shows that violence represents a fundamental tool to strengthen solidarity and camaraderie. In particular, aesthetic and symbolic choices seem to be oriented towards the reconstruction of an emotional link with the Fascist past. By differentiating its internal and external framing strategies, CasaPound is able to accommodate legitimacy constraints while at the same time preserving most parts of the fascist cult of violence.

In a similar fashion, our ethnographic study suggested that violent practices play a central role for group formation within CasaPound, because they substantiate the ideological tendency of the group towards action. Among the practices advanced to bond the members of the group with one another, those based on violence are by far the most important: they constitute experiences of collective socialization and identity-building through which activists rediscover their body and encounter the collective body of the movement. In other words, it appears that various forms of violent practices are used by CasaPound as aggregators between militants, and to strengthen the sense of collective belonging in the community.

In sum, looking at political violence through multi-dimensional lenses helps us to understand a fundamental aspect of the relationship between the extreme right and violence. The multiple dimensions of political violence crystallize a double tension: on the one hand, between what the group perceives as legitimate to say in public (or not); on the other, between the group's willingness to differentiate from other radical right actors and its need to reconnect present activities with the collective past.

Unlike the public image of extreme right organizations, CasaPound does not conceive violence as a legitimate political instrument per se, but rather as a self-defence tool

necessary to cope with the threat of an oppressive environment. At the same time, the narratives, aesthetic codes, and collective experiences of the group reconnect with the idea of militancy and comradeship of Italian Fascism, by giving militants the role of defendants of the group's own existence, autonomy, and vital space.

Similar pressures are experienced by many radical groups, especially when they are active in particularly restrictive settings (such as Germany in the case of the extreme right). In this sense, even if the present research is limited to the case of CasaPound, it proposes an analytic scheme that can be extended to other studies on political violence in European contexts. In order to understand how violence is understood by the extreme right, it must be tackled across its multiple dimensions, interrogating not only the official

narratives and public images, but also the various aesthetic, symbolic, and identity-building elements through which militants build their collective belonging.

Comparative studies based on larger samples could investigate whether the same logic applies in different settings and under different circumstances. In terms of their relationship with violence, in fact, most extreme right actors have to confront the contradiction between a public discourse that has to cope with external constraints and an internal discourse that aims at nourishing inherited traditions and identities in ways that are not too distant from the example discussed in this paper. In this sense, the present work represents only a first investigation of the still unexplored world of political violence in extreme right organizations.

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