

# The appeal of neo-fascism in times of crisis. The experience of CasaPound Italia

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## Abstract

The present work sets up to analyze the relationship between radical right activism and the unfolding of the financial crisis in Europe, investigating the extent to which the current economic circumstances have influenced right-wing movements' political supply and repertoires of action. Using the case study of the Italian neo-fascist group *CasaPound*, and based on a mix of historiography and ethnographic methods, the present work systematically analyzes the ways in which the group tackles the economic crisis. We find that the crisis offers a whole new set of opportunities for the radical right to reconnect with its fascist legacy, and to develop and innovate crisis-related policy proposals and practices. The crisis shapes the groups' self-understanding and its practices of identity building, both in terms of collective rediscovery of the fascist regime's legislation, and in terms of promotion of the fascist model as a 'third way' alternative to market capitalism. Even more importantly, the financial crisis plays the role of the enemy against which the fascist identity is built, and enables neo-fascist movements to selectively reproduce their identity and ideology within its practices of protest, propaganda, and consensus building.

## Keywords

CasaPound; neo-fascism; radical right; economic crisis; technocracy; austerity; Italy

## Political change and the economic crisis in Europe

Is there a relationship between the activism of neo-fascist organizations and national economic performances? Are there specific strategies by which

neo-fascist groups build consensus in times of crisis? Do crisis situations influence the repertoire of actions of radical and extreme right groups?<sup>1</sup> Over the past years, these and similar questions have gathered the attention of an entire generation of social scientists and historians. Still, the recent developments of the financial crisis in Europe seem to offer a new set of opportunities for the study of these phenomena.

The 'Eurocrisis' has brought about not only social and economic changes, but also a fundamental reshaping of the composition of the political systems within each of the crisis-ridden countries. The major parties that had ruled over the 1990s and 2000s are facing today a progressive and apparently inexorable unpopularity, and new actors of various origins are gaining increasing electoral and popular support. Italy, 'the World's most dangerous economy',<sup>2</sup> represents no exception in this respect. Data on the economic crisis are in fact pretty straightforward: the unemployment rate in Italy is currently about thirteen per cent, five points higher than just three years ago, and more than double than in Germany or the Netherlands. In addition to that, between December 2007 and March 2012 youth unemployment has climbed from 21.3% to 35.9%, whereas the Italian NEET rate (the amount of people who are Not in Education, Employment or Training), is the second in the world, with a score of almost twenty per cent.<sup>3</sup> In terms of economic performances, finally, the real GDP growth rate has fallen to -2.4% in 2012.<sup>4</sup>

Pretty much like in the other P.I.I.G.S.<sup>5</sup> countries, moreover, the first elections of the crisis were characterized by the fact that almost one third of the Italian electorate supported a newly born political movement.<sup>6</sup> The electorates of the traditional blocks of Italian politics, in other words, had been

<sup>1</sup> In the present paper, the terms 'radical right' and 'extreme right' are used interchangeably. Previous literature has found that there are twenty-six different ways to identify this party family. Michael Minkenberg, 'The renewal of the radical right: Between modernity and anti-modernity,' *Government and Opposition* 35 (2007): 170–188. Despite the terminological and conceptual debate is still open, the groups pertaining to the 'radical right' or 'extreme right' are generally associated with values such as nationalism and exclusivism, xenophobia, welfare chauvinism, revisionism and conservatism. Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Rana Foroohar, 'The Man Behind the World's Most Dangerous Economy,' *The Times*, November 21, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Source: OECD.

<sup>4</sup> Source: Eurostat, consulted on August 5, 2013. For a broader overview of the macroeconomic statistics of Italy during the crisis see the OECD report 'Crisis squeezes income and puts pressure on inequality and poverty', <http://www.oecd.org/els/soc/OECD2013-Inequality-and-Poverty-8p.pdf>, accessed August 4, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> The acronym P.I.I.G.S. (or G.I.P.S.I.) is used in economics to refer to the economies of Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain.

<sup>6</sup> The *Movimento Cinque Stelle*. See: Lorenzo De Sio, Matteo Cataldi e Federico de Lucia, ed., *Dossier CISE n. 4 | Le Elezioni Politiche 2013* (Rome: CISE, 2013).

completely eroded by the crisis of legitimization of the Italian political system. A crisis which had started in the early 1990s, it evolved throughout the 2000s, and reached the climax with the outburst of the economic crisis.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the academic awareness that times of economic and social turmoil are often accompanied by the emergence and growth of radical political organizations, the study of contemporary extreme-right organizations at times of crisis remains rather underdeveloped.<sup>8</sup> Previous research has established that there is a connection between economic crises and the emergence of fascism, and that the critique of neo-liberalism and market economy constitutes a central feature of neo-fascist groups.<sup>9</sup>

On the one hand this is related to the experience of the French *Nouvelle Droite*,<sup>10</sup> and to its leaders' well known criticism of modern economic thinking, which he accused of 'commercializing' the existing reality.<sup>11</sup> On the other, this has to do with the long lasting myth concerning 'socialization through fascism', which has characterized a whole generation of post-fascist activists in Italy, who recognized in the experience of the Italian Social Republic a successful model of corporatism and a socio-political project of state building beyond Western liberalism.<sup>12</sup>

Very little attention, however, has been dedicated to how the various social organizations populating the contemporary radical right area are responding to the needs and social demands that are generated by the ongoing financial crisis. What ideological and rhetorical apparatuses are mobilized in order to provide a neo-fascist interpretation of the crisis? What type of anti-capitalism

<sup>7</sup> Piero Ignazi, *Forza Senza Legittimità: Il vicolo cieco dei partiti* (Roma/Bari: Laterza, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Manuela Caiani, Donatella della Porta and Claudius Wagemann, *Mobilizing on the Extreme Right: Germany, Italy, and the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Roger Griffin, *Fascism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Richard Stöss, 'The Problem of Right-Wing Extremism Parties in West Germany,' *West European Politics* 11 (1988): 34-46; Robert Miles, 'A rise of racism and fascism in contemporary Europe? Some sceptical reflections on its nature and extent,' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 20 (1994): 547-562; Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991); Hans-Georg Betz and Stefan Immerfall, ed., *The new politics of the Right: Neo-Populist parties and movements in established democracies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Nando Tasciotti, 'Certe divisioni servono soltanto ai politici: E'ora di discutere dei problemi reali: Come il mercato e l'ecologia,' interview with Alain de Benoist, *L'Europeo*, October 1992; Michel Marmin, *Alain de Benoist: Bibliographie 1960-2010* (Paris: Les Amis d'Alain de Benoist, 2009); Alain de Benoist, *Au temps des ideologie 'à la mode' (1977-1982)* (Paris: Les Amis d'Alain de Benoist, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Alain de Benoist, *Comunità e decrescita: Critica della Ragion Mercantile: Dal sistema dei consumi globali alla civiltà dell'economia locale* (Casalecchio di Reno: Arianna Editrice, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Luciano Lanna and Filippo Rossi, *Fascisti Immaginari: Tutto quello che c'è da sapere sulla destra* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 2003); Gianpasquale Santomassimo, *La terza via fascista: Il mito del corporativismo* (Rome: Carocci, 2006); Guido Caldiron, *La destra sociale da Salò a Tremonti* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 2009).

is proposed by radical right actors and movements? What repertoires of action are mobilized in order to build consensus under these circumstances?

Moreover, while studies on political parties of the radical right are becoming more and more elaborated and diffused, very little research has focused on groups that remain outside the spectrum of official politics. In what follows, we shall try to fill this gap, being convinced that it is in the dialectic between national political projects and transnational politics that the most innovative forms of organization and the most original reformulations of traditional ideologies take place. More in detail, the present paper focuses on the case of *CasaPound Italia*, founded in December 2003 and one of the most visible organizations of the Italian radical right area.<sup>13</sup>

The aim of this paper is to trace the political and ideological roots of the group and of its militants, while focusing on the central question of how the ideas and practices of the group are formulated at the time of the financial crisis. We shall illustrate that the international crisis facilitates the public visibility and development of movements like CasaPound, because it provides new impetus to their social interpretation of reality, and enables and legitimates their selective reconstruction of fascist ideology and history. Unlike other radical right organizations in Western Europe, which concentrate their attention almost exclusively on issues pertaining to the so called socio-cultural cleavage of party politics,<sup>14</sup> we shall demonstrate that the bulk of CasaPound's policy positions, ideas and practices revolve around economic and social areas that are strongly interrelated with the crisis and its consequences.

In order to achieve this goal, the remainder of the present paper is structured as follows. We first introduce the broader framework of this research, focusing on the relationship between fascism and international economic crises. Then, we describe the case-study, and the sources and methods of this research. Subsequently, we analyze how CasaPound interprets the ongoing crisis and how this discourse is translated into political repertoires of action. In conclusion, we discuss the findings of our ethnographic experience within CasaPound and we highlight the promising avenues for research dealing with neo-fascist groups and movements in times of crisis.

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<sup>13</sup> Despite its very limited dimensions (the interviewees claim no more than five thousand members in 2013), the group has managed over the past years to attract a vast amount of media attention, way beyond the level of other organizations and parties of the same area. In a recent media analysis performed by the authors, we could identify more than three hundred news stories involving CasaPound in the period 2004-2012, among which almost half were concentrated in the period following the assignment of the technocratic government in Italy (2011-2012).

<sup>14</sup> Hanspeter Kriesi et al., *West European politics in the age of globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

## Italian Fascism, neo-fascism and the international economic crisis

The aim of this very brief historiographical note is to understand the links between CasaPound and historical fascism, and to discuss the heritage of neo-fascist movements on the group's ideology. We shall therefore focus on the interpretation of the economic crisis that was pushed forward by the fascist regime first, and by neo-fascists groups later, in order to see how these have influenced CasaPound's political discourse and practices. Hence, this section cannot be considered a literature review about fascism and the crisis, but rather as an attempt to contextualize CasaPound within the broad political family of fascism and neo-fascism, whose roots and nature are still strongly discussed among scholars.

To facilitate the understanding of a complex and long lasting debate, we may distinguish for analytical reasons between two main historiography tendencies. On the one hand, studies from the Marxist school, claiming that fascism originated primarily from the crisis of the economic system of the early century.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, there is a stream of literature suggesting that fascism is a product of the political destabilization of the after-war period – and of the subsequent crisis – rather than a result of a specific economic conjuncture.<sup>16</sup>

Concerning the first approach, Italian historiography<sup>17</sup> underlined the critique of capitalism developed within Italian Fascism. Marxist historiography put much emphasis on Mussolini's socialist past as an explanation for the fascist interpretation of capitalism as an imperialist project of expansion, dividing the world between the rich plutocracies and the rest of the nations. In addition to that, Marxist historiography built the idea of the economic roots of fascism upon the interpretation of the relationship between fascism (first as a movement, and then as a regime)<sup>18</sup> and the Italian industrial system.<sup>19</sup> In particular, Tasca claims that the fascist ideology was not fully reactionary *per se*. Rather, in his view the fascist movement developed into a reactionary one when it chose to stand against the working class organizations.

<sup>15</sup> Guido Quazza, *Resistenza e storia d'Italia: Problemi e ipotesi di ricerca* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1976); Enzo Collotti, *Fascismo, Fascismi* (Firenze: Sansoni Editore, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Emilio Gentile, *Modernità Totalitaria* (Roma: Laterza, 2008); Stanley G. Payne, *A history of fascism* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> Alberto De Bernardi, *Una dittatura moderna: Il fascismo come problema storico* (Milano: Paravia, 2006); Guido Quazza, *Resistenza e storia d'Italia: Problemi e ipotesi di ricerca* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1976).

<sup>18</sup> Renzo De Felice, *Intervista sul fascismo* (Roma: Laterza, 1975); Antonio Gramsci, *I quaderni dal carcere Il materialismo storico e la filosofia di benedetto Croce* (Roma: Einaudi, 1975); Angelo Tasca, *La Naissance du fascisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938).

<sup>19</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *I quaderni dal carcere Il materialismo storico e la filosofia di benedetto Croce* (Rome: Einaudi, 1975); Tasca, *La Naissance du fascisme*.

Focusing upon the ‘economic roots’ of fascism, Kocka wrote that ‘the susceptibility of the new middle class to right-wing extremism would not have existed without the changes, tensions, and crises that accompanied the creation of an industrial capitalist society’.<sup>20</sup> The basic idea here is that pre-industrial values had to be re-articulated in the light of the emerging industrial-capitalist economy, for which the European middle-classes were not ready. Starting from the 1920s, there has been a general agreement in believing that fascism emerged from the grievances of the *petite-bourgeoisie* or lower middle classes. According to Salvatorelli, in fact, fascism ‘represented the class struggle of the petty bourgeoisie, squeezed between capitalism and the proletariat, as the third party between two conflicting sides.’<sup>21</sup>

Complementary to these interpretations, a different stream of literature linked the rise of the Fascist regime in Italy to the country’s political crisis, and to the cultural turn that characterized the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup> De Felice and later Gentile<sup>23</sup> in particular, stressed the importance of the political level, rather than the economic one, as an explanation of the rise of Italian Fascism, underlining the crisis of a political system increasingly unable to represent the mass society emerging from the post First World War period.<sup>24</sup>

This perspective emphasizes the interaction between Italy’s ‘late industrialization’ and its predisposition towards state interventionism in the country’s economic and social life. More in detail, the upsurge of Fascism would have to do with the incumbency of ‘modernization’, with the result that it was particularly appealing for ‘certain kinds of people who see themselves as losers in modern technological civilization [and who] reject the modern industrial world’ taking refuge into an ideology of ‘utopian anti-modernism’.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Dahrendorf explains the rise of Italian Fascism mainly in terms of characteristics of the Italian society, where ‘the consequences of delayed industrialization

<sup>20</sup> Jurgen Kocka, *White collar workers in America, 1890-1940: A social-political history in international perspective* (London and Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1980), 286.

<sup>21</sup> Luigi Salvatorelli, *Nazionalfascismo* (Torino: Gobbetti, 1923), 23.

<sup>22</sup> Alberto Aquarone, *L'Italia giolittiana (1896-1915): Le premesse politiche ed economiche*, Vol. 1 (Bologna: Einaudi, 1988); Pierre Milza, *Europa estrema: Il radicalismo di Destra dal 1945 ad oggi* (Rome: Carocci, 2005); Giovanni Sabbatucci, *Il riformismo impossibile* (Rome: Laterza, 1991); Emilio Gentile, *L'Italia giolittiana, 1899-1914* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1990); Francesco Perfetti, *Il sindacalismo fascista*, vol. I: *Dalle origini alla vigilia dello Stato corporativo (1919-1930)* (Rome: Bonacci, 1988).

<sup>23</sup> Renzo De Felice, *Intervista sul fascismo* (Roma: Laterza, 1975); Gentile, *Modernità Totalitaria* Gentile, *L'Italia giolittiana, 1899-1914*.

<sup>24</sup> Gentile (2008) opposes Harendt’s denial of the totalitarian nature of fascism. See also, George Mosse, *La nazionalizzazione della masse* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2004).

<sup>25</sup> Edward R. Tannenbaum, *The Fascist experience: Italian society and culture, 1922-1945* (New York: Basic Books 1972), 4.

combined closely with the absence of bourgeois revolution and the absence of parliamentarization to form decisive brakes on political democratization and social emancipation.<sup>26</sup>

Focusing on the political origins of Fascism, other historians insist on the effects of the *Biennio Rosso* [Two red years, 1919–1920] (in particular the insurgency of the working-classes).<sup>27</sup> Eley argues that the Italian establishment of the time was unable to respond not only to the new demands of the middle-classes, but also to those of agriculture workers and urban populations; it couldn't tackle the ambitions of the emerging mass organizations of the industrial working-class, and it couldn't handle the aims of a petty bourgeoisie increasingly interested in a new professional working status. In this context, the demands for national unity and radical nationalism became rapidly popular, *vis-à-vis* the structural inability of the established ruling class to confront the popular mobilization and to maintain social cohesion.<sup>28</sup> In this sense, fascism may be understood as a counter-revolutionary, nationalistic ideological project devoted to reconstruct and maintain social cohesion and order.

The twofold interpretation of the origins of fascism helps understanding CasaPound's political discourse. Its way of looking at the crisis, in fact, recalls not only the critique towards the distortions of the capitalist (market oriented) system, but it also builds upon the crisis of the Italian party system, the corruption of the Italian establishment, and the lack of representation of the sectors of the population who suffer the crisis the most.

At the same time, however, it is not possible to tackle CasaPound's understanding of fascism and the economic crisis without taking into account the long and complex history of the fascist groups and parties which emerged after the end of the war. Accordingly, we shall look here at the strategic selection of ideas that CasaPound pushes forward with respect to the experience of Italian and European neo-fascism, and discuss which notions are kept and used in order to build its political identity. In particular, we shall highlight three major concepts that connect CasaPound to three different tendencies of neo-fascism: the *Destra Sociale* [Social Right], the spiritualism of *Ordine Nuovo* [New Order], and the tradition of the *Nouvelle Droite* [New Right].

The *Destra Sociale* was a group internal to the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* [MSI; Italian Social Movement] and a cultural tendency which connected directly with the experience of the Italian Social Republic.<sup>29</sup> Partisans of this

<sup>26</sup> Ralf Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 9.

<sup>27</sup> Geoff Eley, 'What Produces Fascism: Preindustrial Traditions or a Crisis of the Capitalist State,' *Politics and Society* 12 (1983): 53–82.

<sup>28</sup> Geoff Eley, 'Nationalism and Social History,' *Social History* 6 (1981): 83–107. Renzo De Felice, *Intervista sul Fascismo*.

<sup>29</sup> Giuseppe Parlato, *La sinistra fascista: Storia di un progetto mancato* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2000).

political trend stressed the ‘socialist’ aspects of the fascist doctrine, claiming for a strong state able to take care of its citizens from the cradle to the grave. In this understanding, politics are expected to have a predominant position towards economy and the state has to centralize all economic activities for the sake and the wealth of the nation. Similarly, as we shall see later on, CasaPound calls for a stronger state to protect the citizens from the dictatorship of the banks and the international financial system, and it pushes forward a social agenda taking direct inspiration from the social doctrine developed within the Italian Social Republic.

If the link with the *Destra Sociale* is claimed by CasaPound itself, the connection with *Ordine Nuovo* is far more complex. *Ordine Nuovo* was founded in 1956 by Pino Rauti and other militants of the MSI, who disagreed with the party on a number of grounds among which the recognition of NATO.<sup>30</sup> Following Evola’s doctrine, the group developed a strong cultural commitment but also a sense of militancy where particular importance was given to violent actions against opponents. Over the last decades, many among its militants have been accused of terrorist activities, for which it is very difficult for CasaPound to show open support for this tradition. Nevertheless, during the interviews the militants made explicit references to notions close to this experience, using a vocabulary connected to tradition, the ‘inner sense’ of history, spiritual racism, and revolution.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, CasaPound inspires parts of its ideology from the experience and practice of the *Nouvelle Droite* of Alain de Benoist.<sup>32</sup> Together with the *Nuova Destra* in Italy,<sup>33</sup> these were among the most interesting political experiments of the 1970s. Following the cultural wave of the protest movement started in May 1968 in Paris,<sup>34</sup> these intellectuals tried to renovate the right-wing adding to it themes and issues such as federalism and ecology, but also an ethnic-identitarian vision, communitarism, anti-imperialism and Europeanism.<sup>35</sup> Again, CasaPound explicitly tries to connect with this experience, uptaking some of its ideological features, most notably with respect to the anti-American and Europeanist preferences, the explicit laicism of its political identity,

<sup>30</sup> See: Piero Ignazi, *Il polo escluso: Profilo del Movimento Sociale Italiano* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1989).

<sup>31</sup> Interview conducted by authors on April 27, 2012 in Rome and on January 6, 2012 in Verona.

<sup>32</sup> Francesco Germinario, *La destra degli dei: Alain de Benoist e la cultura politica della nouvelle droite* (Torino: Bollati & Boringhieri, 2002).

<sup>33</sup> Marco Tarchi, *La rivoluzione impossibile: Dai campi hobbit alla nuova destra* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 2010).

<sup>34</sup> Pierre Taguieff, *Sulla Nuova Destra: Itinerario di un intellettuale atipico* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 2003).

<sup>35</sup> Andrea Mammone, ‘The transnational reaction to 1968: Neo-Fascists Fronts and political cultures in France and Italy,’ *Contemporary European History* 17 (2008): 213–236.



and the anti-imperialist rhetoric, but also in terms of activities related to environmental protection and the ecology.

We shall now introduce in detail the case of CasaPound Italia, as a paradigmatic example of a group that benefits from the interrelations between, on the one hand, worsening socio-economic conditions and progressive deterioration of the representative institutions of liberal democracies,<sup>36</sup> and on the other hand, the reinterpretation of a mix between the fascist and neo-fascist ideology.

### CasaPound Italia

Our choice for the case of the Italian organization CasaPound has to do with the way the group describes itself: a ‘neo-fascist movement’ whose identity is rooted in the Italian Fascist tradition and ideology rather than in the traditional ‘left’ and ‘right’ categories.<sup>37</sup> Hence, CasaPound explicitly self-identifies as a social movement. This is confirmed by its preferred modes of activism, which includes organizing protests, demonstrative and expressive actions, unauthorized marches and riots, rather than (only) formal political engagement. At the rhetorical level, the group has always claimed its difference from traditional parties, privileging the organization, repertoire and practices of social movements.<sup>38</sup>

CasaPound claims its origins in the Italian Fascism. In line with the above-mentioned ideological debate, CasaPound conceives its self-styled revolutionary fascism beyond the traditional left-right divides.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the opposition to neo-liberalist policies has been of the utmost importance for the movement since its very origins. CasaPound was born in Rome in 2003, with the squatting of a building in the core of Rome’s Chinatown, but already in 2008 it changed its official status to that of ‘association for social promotion’, and took the new name of *CasaPound Italia*.

<sup>36</sup> Tamir Bar On, ‘A Critical Response to Roger Griffin’s “Fascism’s new faces and new facelessness in the post-fascist epoch”’, *Erwagen, Wissen, Ethik* 15 (2004): 307–309; Andrea Mammone, Godin Emmanuel and Jenkins Brian, ‘The Extreme Right in Contemporary Europe: History, Interpretations, Performances’, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 17, no. 2 (2009) [special issue].

<sup>37</sup> Adriano Scianca, *Riprendersi Tutto* (Cusano Milanino: Società Editrice Barbarossa, 2011).

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Gianluca Iannone, in Nicola Rao, *La Fiamma e la Celtica* (Milano: Sperlinger & Kupfer, 2009), 355. In October 2012, however, CasaPound started a campaign for the local elections in Rome and Lazio. There are several aspects of CasaPound that differentiate it substantively from traditional definitions of social movements, especially with respect to the internal organization, the allocation of responsibilities and the role of hierarchies. These aspects, however, are not of primary importance for the purposes of the present paper.

<sup>39</sup> Daniele Di Nunzio and Emanuele Toscano, *Dentro e Fuori CasaPound* (Rome: Armando Editore, 2011).

The name CasaPound in fact refers to ‘house’ and Ezra Pound. In the first case, it is obvious the reference to the problems related to housing in Italy and in Rome, as well as to the real-estate bubble in Europe. To this regard, the largest number of eviction orders in 2008 (when CasaPound changed its status to ‘association for social promotion’) were issued in Rome (7,574), among which almost five thousands were for arrearage. Over the past five years, the evictions were over 31,000 of which 19,273 for arrearage. In Rome over the past five years, the evictions were 11,612, among those 2,209 have been executed in 2008, with an increase of eighteen per cent compared to 2007.<sup>40</sup>

The reference to Ezra Pound has to do with his theory of the rent as ‘usury’.<sup>41</sup> For the American poet everything that is not used by its owner becomes capital, which is then brought in the market obliging others (the ones who do not own that capital) to pay a monthly tangent: the rent. More in general, the whole repertoire of activities of CasaPound is directly and explicitly inspired by interpretations of the Italian Fascist ideology, and most notably of its ‘social doctrine’, which the neo-fascist group strategically selects among the various texts and legislation produced in this area over the fascist regime.

The genesis of the movement, however, dates back to 1997, when the future leader of the movement, Gianluca Iannone, founded the rock band *ZetaZeroAlfa*.<sup>42</sup> With them, he gave voice to the ideals of a group of young Roman neo-fascists,<sup>43</sup> singing of globalization<sup>44</sup> market

40) More than 350 thousand families in Rome pay a rent to own house. In recent years rents have increased: in 1999 there was an average increase of 150%, with peaks in the major centers of 165%. Despite the increase in rental offer the level of fees has not been reduced: in Rome the average value for an accommodation of eighty square meters is 1300 euros per month, with maximum values for bedroom apartments in the city center come to almost two thousand euro per month. Source: Sunia ‘Dossier sulla condizione abitativa a Roma’, available at [www.sunia.it](http://www.sunia.it), accessed August 8, 2013.

41) Ezra Pound, *I Cantos* (Milano: Mondadori, 2005).

42) Gianluca Iannone (born in 1973) is the leader of CasaPound and of the rock band *ZetaZeroAlfa*. Starting from the youth of the MSI, he has long been involved in active politics in the extreme right, running as a candidate for the national elections in the lists of the MSI-FT in 2006. Over the years, he has developed several projects which accompanied the development of CasaPound Italia. These are mainly related to the ZetaZeroAlfa’s musical activity, but also more generally to cultural production (he founded the record label *Rupe Tarpea*) and journalism (he manages the monthly review *L’Occidentale* and the web radio *Radio Bandiera Nera*). For more details, see Nicola Rao, *La Fiamma e la Celtica* (Milano: Sperling & Kupfer, 2006).

43) One of the albums of the ZetaZeroAlfa is called ‘EstremoCentroAlto’. It was released in 2007 (one year before the occupation that marks the official birth of CasaPound), and it gives the name to the ideological manifesto (and political positioning) of CasaPound. Similarly, the song ‘Fare Blocco’ is the anthem of the *Blocco Studentesco* [the youth section of CasaPound]. Additionally the ZetaZeroAlfa ‘Santa teppa’ [Holy hooligans] is dedicated to the *Cuttu Sark*, the official pub of CasaPound. The lyric ‘Zetazeroalfa’ by the homonymous group describes the ideological stances of the group.

44) On the anti-global and anti-capitalist discourse of CasaPound see the song ‘Boicotta’ [Boycott] available at <http://archiviononconforme.blogspot.it>, accessed August 4, 2013.

economy,<sup>45</sup> violence,<sup>46</sup> and the necessity to revolt against the establishment.<sup>47</sup> At that time, these concerns were not really embodied in the political discourse of the main party of the extreme-right, the *Movimento Sociale Italiano – Fiamma Tricolore* [MSI-FT; Tricolour Flame Italian Social Movement], whose youth organization was led by Iannone himself. In 2008, Iannone's group, already known in Rome as CasaPound, quitted the party, after lasting tensions between the rigidity of the party's apparatus and the flexibility demanded by the youths. Officially, the split took place after the leadership of the party rejected the request of Iannone to organize a party congress.<sup>48</sup>

Meanwhile the group was protagonist of a series of demonstrative actions, among which the occupation of a state-owned building in the periphery of Rome in 2002 (*CasaMontag*),<sup>49</sup> the setting up of a number of 'non-conventional' squats, the attack against the emission 'Big Brother',<sup>50</sup> and numerous violent riots involving *Blocco Studentesco*, the student organization of the movement. In December 2011, a sympathizer of CasaPound gunned down two Senegalese street vendors and wounded three others before killing himself in Florence. Currently, CasaPound can count on a few thousands of militants all over Italy. It has fifteen book-shops, twenty pubs, and a web radio (Black Flag Radio) in twenty-five countries. CasaPound is also producing publications such as the monthly journal *L'Occidentale* and the quarterly *Fare Quadrato*.

In terms of electoral support, however, CasaPound did not emerge yet as a relevant competitor in the Italian party system. Its choice to run for the elections in 2013 could not be considered a strong success, at the general level. CasaPound obtained very deceiving electoral results: only 0.14% between the House and Senate, and less than one per cent at the municipal and regional

<sup>45</sup> On the anti-liberal discourse of CasaPound see the song 'Nemica Banca' [Enemy Bank] available at <http://archiviononconforme.blogspot.it>, accessed August 4, 2013.

<sup>46</sup> On the discourse on violence of CasaPound see the songs 'Cinghiamattanza' [Massacrebelt] and 'Nel dubbio mena' [In case of doubt, hit]. Both are available at <http://archiviononconforme.blogspot.it/>, accessed August 4, 2013.

<sup>47</sup> On the anti-establishment discourse of CasaPound see the song 'Fronte dell'essere' [Front of the existence] available at <http://archiviononconforme.blogspot.it>, accessed August 4, 2013.

<sup>48</sup> According to our interviewees, the split resulted from the growing intolerance of the youth section towards the rules and the obligations characterizing the party's understanding of politics and its desire to do politics by means of independent and unconventional political activities. In this sense, the group clearly originated from the desire to move towards more movement-like forms of activism and organization (Interviews no. 1b, 1c, 1d realized on April 19, 2012). This argument is also confirmed by a communiqué released by Iannone on that occasion and that the reader may find at <http://www.vivamafarka.com/forum/index.php?topic;29274.0>, accessed July 29, 2013.

<sup>49</sup> The importance of CasaMontag as a symbolic place see the Album 'Kryptonite' by Zetazeroalfa.

<sup>50</sup> See the song 'Grande Fratello' by Zetazeroalfa.

elections.<sup>51</sup> The modest electoral performance was also acknowledged by the group in the first public declaration after the elections.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, however, the group could identify encouraging signs as well. Its communicative and expressive strategies were very successful in attracting the media attention, so that now basically everyone can associate the group to a certain number of policy proposals, especially the crisis-related ones. In addition to that, the geographical distribution of the vote for CasaPound at the national elections indicates that the group is now the undisputed leader of the radical right in Central Italy. As an illustration, the reader may retain that in this area CasaPound obtains more votes than both *Forza Nuova* and *Fiamma Tricolore*, the two traditional parties that occupy the electoral space of the radical right in Italy.<sup>53</sup>

## Methods and sources

As far as CasaPound is concerned, the sources tend to be scarce compared to other political organizations of the same area. This is mainly due to CasaPound being a recent and numerically limited experience, which did not yet capture the attention of scholars, and which remains very hard to access for fieldwork. The present paper, however, relies on three different types of sources for its analysis, as the authors not only made text analyses of the available material on CasaPound, but were also able to gain access for fieldwork within the spaces and the communities of CasaPound. We therefore performed: 1) the content analysis of the movements' web information and propagandistic material (official website, Facebook page and blogs; flyers, manifestos and books); 2) in-depth interviews with CasaPound militants and cadres; and 3) participant observations at events, concerts and political activities. The three types of

<sup>51</sup> CasaPound Italy (CPI) ran with an independent list for the Parliamentary and Regional elections in Lazio (February 2013), and for the elections of Rome Municipality (May 2013). The decision to run for the elections is an important change in the strategy of CPI and to its rhetoric of being a 'movement'. At the same time, however, this choice is not an absolute novelty since candidates related to CasaPound had supported local lists of right and center-right parties back in 2008. Additionally, the leader of the group –Iannone –ran as an independent for the *Fiamma Tricolore* during the elections of 2006. Data from Ministero dell'Interno: <http://elezioni.interno.it/>, accessed July 21, 2013.

<sup>52</sup> 'La meravigliosa dichiarazione di Casapound sulle elezioni,' <http://www.giornalettismo.com/archives/801515/la-meravigliosa-dichiarazione-di-casapound-sui-risultati-delle-elezioni/>, accessed July 21, 2013.

<sup>53</sup> *Forza Nuova* remains strong in the North of Italy where it collects 42.5% of its votes (in particularly in the regions of Lombardy and Veneto). *Fiamma Tricolore* keeps its electoral support mainly in the South where it collects 38.7% of its votes (in particularly in Puglia and Calabria). CasaPound prevails in central Italy, where it gets 59.2% of its votes (principally in Lazio). Data from Ministero dell'Interno: <http://elezioni.interno.it/>, accessed July 21, 2013.

sources reflect in detail the repertoire of CasaPound, allowing an in-depth understanding of how the economic crisis is framed and integrated within the organization's ideology.

Moreover, the differentiated set of sources allows a transversal view of the discursive practices of CasaPound: at the first level there is the most 'external' discourse, the one by which the movement addresses the outside world, emerging from the material produced for the web and for public campaigns; at the intermediate level, there is the discourse applying both to the external public and to the internal supporters, which emerges from the interviews with the cadres of the movement; finally, the insider's gaze, the one exclusively addressed to the militants of the movement, could only be gathered by means of participant observation.

The bulk of the present research is derived from nineteen in-depth interviews granted to the authors between February and November 2012, and collected in the headquarters of CasaPound across five Italian cities: Florence, Turin, Verona, Rome, and Naples. More specifically, in each office interviews were conducted with the local secretary, the person in charge of cultural activities, and a varying number of militants. The interviews constituted a hermeneutical mode of understanding how CasaPound framed the discourse on the crisis in its ideological discourse and political action, as well as a preliminary introduction to CasaPound's militancy, addressed by reconstructing the life-histories of the interviewees. In this sense, the interviews provide a frame of reference for investigating group understanding of external reality and political action.

This material was then complemented by participant observation at conferences, celebrations, concerts and demonstrations organized by CasaPound, which allowed analyzing how collective emotions are built in the movement, and how they are expressed in the codes of its subcultures.<sup>54</sup> This experience was important in assessing the extent to which the external discourse is internalized by militants and supporters.<sup>55</sup> In addition to that, text analyses of different material collected over the participant observation at public events allowed having an insight into CasaPound's discourse upon interacting with the public. This was then integrated with texts used by CasaPound as 'ideological pillars', as well as the movement's internal publications and other web material.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Stephen G. Brown and Sidney I. Dobrin, *Ethnography Unbound: From Theory Shock to Critical Praxis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004); See also: Toscano and Di Nunzio, *Dentro e Fuori CasaPound*.

<sup>55</sup> Ron Eyerman, 'Music in Movement: cultural politics and old and new social movements,' *Qualitative Sociology* 25 (2002): 443–458; Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2007).

<sup>56</sup> The web material derives from the official website ([www.casapounditalia.org/](http://www.casapounditalia.org/)), the blog for discussions ([www.ideodromocasapound.org/](http://www.ideodromocasapound.org/)), the facebook page ([www.facebook.com/](http://www.facebook.com/)

## The economic crisis in the ideology of CasaPound

CasaPound was born on the idea of crisis, as the first squat in Rome was supposed to respond to the housing crisis that the city has faced for long time. Although the claim of the action maintained to a certain extent a racial connotation (squats and houses for Italians only), the leaders of CasaPound have argued that the movement was not born on a purely ideological basis, but rather as a result of a social need: the lack of housing spaces for Italian families, and the excessive prices for rents. CasaPound, in other words, wants to represent itself as 'being forced' to take political action to provide an answer to the social needs of our society.

In this sense, the ongoing financial crisis directly speaks to the origins of CasaPound, especially if we take into account that at its origins lays the sub-prime mortgage crisis, and hence – in CasaPound's understanding – the inability of U.S. families to pay back their loans, to cover the expenses of their mortgages, to own a house. Since its very first days, CasaPound has given lots of attention to this dimension, underlining Ezra Pound's reflections on the house as a holy place, as the place for the family, as the only safe place for a person. The house for CasaPound does not only hold a material value, but a symbolic one in defining the meaning of a person's life, which cannot follow the material logics of market capitalism.

In addition to that, CasaPound's political discourse reproduces the nationalist and anti-imperialist features of Italian Fascism. In this sense, the crisis directly originates from the contradictions of capitalism and its 'wild' economic regime, which CasaPound would instead control by means of a strong state capable of avoiding the inequalities of market economy. The strong state, moreover, would also enable nation states to gain back the sovereignty that they have given up in favor of transnational organizations, in particular the European Union, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank.

The idea of a strong state responsible for the control of the national economy is a clear reference to the ideology of the Fascist National Party, and of the later Italian Social Republic.<sup>57</sup> Many of our interviewees, in fact, considered the state as a monolithic entity, representing a unique community and devoid of any internal dialectic process.<sup>58</sup> Like fascism, CasaPound aims at giving

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votacasapound) and the website of the Zetazeroalfa (<http://www.zetazeroalfa.org/>). Accessed February 12, 2013.

<sup>57</sup> Giuseppe Belardelli, *Il ventennio degli intellettuali: Cultura, politica, ideologia nell'Italia fascista* (Rome: Laterza, 2005).

<sup>58</sup> Interview no. 2b, conducted by the authors on April 27, 2012.

martial order to the masses, accompanying the process towards modernity with identity processes linked to the heroic narration of the state.

At the same time, however, CasaPound self-defines as a pro-European organization, unlike many contemporary radical-right movements. Once more, this element connects them to the tradition of the neo-fascist right dating back to the early 1950s, when fascist groups were transnational actors proposing an ideal-type of 'European nation-state' based on shared traditions and homogeneous cultures and values. To these ideals, CasaPound adds the proposal of a protectionist Europe, with the goal of achieving a European-wide area of economic and welfare self-sufficiency. Once again, the ideological pillars of CasaPound's view of the economy remind of the Weimar's campaigns of economic supremacy (against the corrupted financial system), and the Italian ambitions for food production self-sufficiency in the 1930s.

Economic self-sufficiency is also a way to reconnect with nature, within a bucolic image of naturalism which is not fully new to radical right organizations. In this sense, CasaPound builds a discourse on natural order which affects the environment, but also the economy and the society at large: a societal ecology which restores the ideals of the projects of the Italian New Right of the late 1970s.<sup>59</sup>

CasaPound takes direct inspiration from Italian Fascism in terms of its claim for a restless fight against international capitalism. The reference here is to Mussolini's attacks against the international plutocracies which were held responsible for the destruction of national economies, including the Italian one. The processes of identity building of historic fascism and Cold War neo-fascism, however, were based on another fundamental element: the identification of the enemy, namely communism.

In this sense, CasaPound differs from these experiences. Although a confrontational rhetoric *vis à vis* the organization of the radical left persists vividly in the movement's imageries, today's societies do not feel the threat of the Soviet expansionism, and they do not face the emergence of a credible alternative model to the neo-liberal one. Hence, most of the efforts for the identification of the enemy are directed towards neo-liberal doctrines of market economy. As it appears, CasaPound has built some sort of fascist ideology *à la carte*, in the sense that it picks the aspects and elements of the traditional fascist discourse that could better fit today's moods and necessities. In the context of the ongoing crisis, hence, it comes as no surprise that the fight against economic neo-liberalism and the defense of the working classes plays such an important role in the movement's self-understanding and political supply.

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<sup>59</sup> Marco Tarchi, *La rivoluzione impossibile: Dai Campi Hobbit alla Nuova Destra* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 2010).

Special attention, in this sense, is dedicated to the segments of society that suffer the most the consequences of the crisis. CasaPound hence develops the social attitude of the radical right towards the working class and peasantry.<sup>60</sup> CasaPound has set up its own workers' union, and has dedicated much attention in political campaigns targeting this type of issues, hoping to break through with messages blaming Italy's technocratic government and targeting the country's economic subordination to foreign international powers.

These and similar messages on technocracy are expected to become quickly popular, in a similar way as happened with the discourse by Mussolini on plutocracy.<sup>61</sup> In the past months, for example, thousands of posters have been hung all around the country representing tax collection agents as vampires ready to suck bloods from their victims.<sup>62</sup> More generally, the specific attention of CasaPound towards the weakest groups of the society is confirmed by its attention towards social policies. As we shall see later on in this paper, the group promotes a series of 'para-welfare activities' addressed to Italian families facing difficult times. These activities range from food distribution to health assistance, and help for disabled and elderly people, but also involve a CasaPound-specific service of civil protection. As a matter of fact, these projects are inspired by the so called social doctrine of Italian Fascism, which is symbolized by the *Manifesto di Verona* [Verona's Manifest, approved in 1943], the founding document of the Italian Social Republic.

The overview of the ideological elements connecting CasaPound to the economic crisis provided in this section illustrate that the movement mobilizes a set of slogans and ideas directly borrowed from the fascist tradition of the

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<sup>60</sup> Interview no. 5b, conducted by the authors on June 28, 2012.

<sup>61</sup> In Mussolini's rhetoric the term 'plutocracy' makes reference to societies dominated by economic lobbies and technocrats. *Enciclopedia Italiana* (1935), available at [www.treccani.it](http://www.treccani.it), accessed August 22, 2013.

<sup>62</sup> In a similar fashion, the image of the vampire has been also used in the Nazi propaganda where the Jews were portrayed first as rats and subsequently as vampires. For more information see John J. Hartman, 'A Psychoanalytic View of Racial Myths in a Nazi Propaganda Film: Der Ewige Jude (The Eternal Jew)', *Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 2 (2000): 329-346. The discussion of anti-Semitism in CasaPound goes beyond the scope of the present paper, as it would require an investigation of individual attitudes rather than ideological positions. At the level of the official rhetoric, in fact, the group explicitly opposes anti-Semitism. In a recent interview, the leader of the group has been very straightforward on this matter: 'We are not afraid to say that the racial laws were a great mistake. We fully condemn them. Also because the racial laws set the Jews apart from the fascist revolution, even if they had been involved in the revolution since the days of the march on Rome. In the Mussolini government of 1932, the minister of finance was Guido Jung, who was a Jew. And it could not be otherwise, because our Mediterranean culture has always been a mélange of different cultures.' Alessandro Capriccioli, 'Roma, CasaPound spiazza tutti', *L'Espresso*, February 8, 2012, available at <http://espresso.repubblica.it/dettaglio/roma-casapound-spiazza-tutti/2173562>, accessed August 4, 2013. At the individual level, however, a recent judicial investigation has uncovered that a certain level of fascination towards that political culture has survived.



1920s, 1930s and of the Cold War era. These interpretative lines refer to the broad concepts of nationalism, anti-neo-liberalism, and economic self-sufficiency, but also to projects for European autarchy, and opposition to technocracy and plutocracy. At the same time, however, CasaPound strategically selects among the menu of policy offers, ideological pillars and symbolic repertoires available from the fascist tradition. Leaders and militants of CasaPound alike, in fact, made constant reference to the *Manifesto di Verona* as a fundamental document for the ideology of the movement. Still, out of the eighteen points of the *Manifesto di Verona* focusing on social legislation and labor, CasaPound picks only the ones dealing with workers' rights protection, whereas no reference is made to the document's explicitly racist connotations.

In concrete terms, most leaders of the movement do not seem to have clear ideas as to how to implement or develop similar projects, nor do they actually seem to ask themselves questions on the taking of power and on the concrete possibilities for change. In this sense, CasaPound seems to lack an interiorized ideological base, and its references to the social doctrine of fascism seem to be mainly driven by a broader anti-austerity *Zeitgeist*, framed in terms of a romantic claim for an imaginary fascism.

### The international crisis and the practices of CasaPound

If one looks at the political activities undertaken by CasaPound from 2003 till now, it is impossible not to notice the diversity of fields of action that the movement has addressed. Although, as already underlined, CasaPound was born as a single-issue movement, based in Rome and focused on the housing problem, the movement has over the years developed a variety of different campaigns and activities. The progressive diversification of the political activities is in line with CasaPound's interpretation of fascism, which is understood as a *modus vivendi* affecting all spheres of the everyday life.<sup>63</sup> In this sense, they refer to Gentile's definition of being a fascist as 'a total conception of life. . . . One cannot be a fascist in politics and not a fascist in school, in family, in the workplace.' Fascism, in other words, 'is an ideal that [does] not allows us to rest'.<sup>64</sup> Militants are therefore expected to share a sense of comradeship springing from the mission of national regeneration, which in turn results in the total dedication of the individual to the community and to its discipline.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Interview no. 5b, conducted by the authors on June 27, 2012.

<sup>64</sup> Giovanni Gentile, *Che cosa è il Fascismo* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1925), 38-39.

<sup>65</sup> Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo: Storia e Interpretazione* (Roma/Bari: Laterza, 2002). Emilio Gentile, *Il Culto del Littorio: La Sacralizzazione della Politica nell'Italia Fascista* (Roma/Bari, Laterza, 2003).

CasaPound, in other words, aims at constructing a sense of comradeship by diversifying its political supply across numerous issues, inspired by a philosophy of life built on fascist myths and aesthetics, and on a mix neo-romanticism, irrationalism, spiritualism and voluntarism. It is in this framework that CasaPound has developed its environmentalist project *La Foresta che avanza* [The forest that advances], which takes inspiration from the fascist's 'Mystic of the Earth', but also the referendum on positive discrimination *Tempo di essere Madri* [It's time to be mothers], which would grant part-time working schedules for working mothers. CasaPound's voluntarism is also mirrored by its social and civic engagement (*La Salamandra*, which operates in territories tormented by natural and/or humanitarian disasters), and by its efforts to provide material assistance in different fields, such as the health sector (*GR.I.M.E.S.* i.e. CasaPound's intervention group for social medicine), and national and international solidarity (*Progetto Braccia Tese* - Arms Outstretched Project - and *Solidarité-Identités*). The same logic applies to the many activities with respect to culture, through which CasaPound attempts to build a self-styled neo-fascist and neo-futurist aesthetics, be that for visual arts (*Turbodinamismo*, *Artisti per CasaPound*), music (*Bunkernoise Academy*, *Area 19*) and several other recreational and sport activities.<sup>66</sup>

This organizational differentiation springs out from CasaPound's conception of fascism as a 'lay religion', it is also true that the enlargement of its original political supply resulted from the movement's ambition to widen its support beyond the limits of the capital city. In other words, the socio-economic issues related to the housing question (a problem that is very urgent in Rome) were not sufficiently attractive to audiences residing in areas of the country where the problem was felt sensibly less.<sup>67</sup> But this was the case before the outbreak of the Italian crisis. In this sense, it appears now that the elaboration of the crisis and the struggle against neo-liberal capitalism has regained its centrality in CasaPound's discourse and propaganda, at the national level. This is the topic that we shall address in the following section.

### **Labor, housing and austerity: the crisis-related activities of CasaPound**

According to the leadership of CasaPound, the movements' interpretation of Mussolini's Fascism explains why its political supply is coherent with the context of international crisis.<sup>68</sup> In this sense, there are three activities of CasaPound that can be considered directly crisis-related: BLU, the CasaPound's

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<sup>66</sup> CasaPound Italia, Sport, available at <http://www.casapounditalia.org>. Accessed July 22, 2012.

<sup>67</sup> Interview no. 3a, conducted by the authors on June 1, 2012.

<sup>68</sup> Adriano Scianca, *Riprendersi Tutto*.

union; the proposal Stop Equitalia; and the Social Loan campaign.<sup>69</sup> Before discussing each of them in detail, it is important to note that these activities are generally portrayed as a fascist-answer to neo-liberal economy and to the ‘financial stranglers’.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, they are defined in function of a clear enemy: the crisis, be that in function of the labor market, the austerity measures (and technocracy), or the financial markets. The identification of the enemies is essential for CasaPound’s identity, as it feeds its anti-ideological pragmatism. In this sense, the crisis offers to the group an invaluable source of differentiation and, hence, self-identification.<sup>71</sup>

As will be noticed, each of the proposed activities is directly related to specific political actions that may be conceived of as institutional (or ‘conventional’ in the language of CasaPound) or not-institutional (‘unconventional’). In the political discourse of the group, all the activities are framed as a fascist response to capitalist dictatorship, to the financial crisis and to the inability of traditional parties, elites and technocrats to provide solutions to the crisis.<sup>72</sup>

These activities are of great importance, not only because they address a broad audience of potential supporters, but also because they grant CasaPound the possibility of framing its public image by focusing on specific dimensions of fascism (the social and the labor legislation), whilst avoiding all aspects risking stigmatization (above all, racism and violence). Table 1 below illustrates these activities, the related repertoires of action and the dimension of the crisis that they address.

*Blocco Lavoratori Unitario* [BLU; United Workers Block], is one of CasaPound’s most recent experiments. This confirms the idea that CasaPound’s attention to socioeconomic matters has grown with the outbreak of the Italian crisis. In general, the idea beneath BLU is that of fighting precarity in working relations. As explained in the interviews, BLU is directly inspired by the fascist *Labor Charter* of 1927,<sup>73</sup> which outlined the ethics of fascist unionism and political economy at the basis of Mussolini’s social reforms.

Although BLU’s visibility is still minimal, the group is actively participating on the hottest debates on labor relations in Italy, in that facilitated by a dramatic labor market situation suffering the highest unemployment rate of the last decade especially among the youth. In particular BLU addressed the issue

<sup>69</sup> See the song ‘Manicomio’ at [http://youtu.be/7\\_irFihEWIo](http://youtu.be/7_irFihEWIo), accessed December 8, 2012.

<sup>70</sup> Interview no. 2b, 2c and 2d, conducted by the authors on July 24, 2012.

<sup>71</sup> Karl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>72</sup> Interview no. 2c, conducted by the authors on July 24, 2012.

<sup>73</sup> Interview no. 2b, conducted by the authors on July 24, 2012.

Table 1. The crisis-related activities of CasaPound Italia and the corresponding political actions

Proposals		<i>BLU-Union</i>	<i>Stop Equitalia</i>	<i>Social Loan</i>
		Unionization	Policy proposal (signatures collection)	Policy proposal (signatures collection)
	<i>Institutional</i>	Help desk		
		Authorized street protest	Authorized street protest	Authorized street protest
<b>Corresponding Activities</b>	<i>Non-institutional</i>	Unauthorized street protest	Unauthorized street protest	Unauthorized street protest
				Squatting
<b>Issue</b>		Labor	Technocracy Austerity	Housing

Source: Own elaboration from data available at <http://www.casapounditalia.org/>.

of *Articolo 18*<sup>74</sup> and *Ilva di Taranto*<sup>75</sup> as they degenerated in the broader context of the austerity measures implemented by the technical government ruling Italy since November 2011, which pushed for a drastic revision of the Italian labor legislation.

By analyzing the material produced by BLU's activists, it is straightforward that CasaPound uses the crisis as the picklock to address the abovementioned debates: 'Art. 18: workers are desperate. Markets are reassured'; 'Art. 18: workers are fired, markets are delighted'; 'Enslaved workers, the spread goes down'.<sup>76</sup> From the interviews with the leaders, it also emerged that BLU has recently pushed forward the creation of a Workers' Help Desk (*Sportello dei lavoratori*) in Naples, in order to provide legal and social assistance to workers facing difficulties in the workplace.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>74</sup> The *Articolo 18* is part of the Statute of Italian workers. It implements the so called real protection of workers, disciplining the case of unfair dismissal. Recently, the Italian government led by Mario Monti proposed to modify the law in a restrictive sense.

<sup>75</sup> The *Ilva Steelworks* is a factory that employs twelve thousand people and breathes life into the depressed economy of Apulia. It has long been accused of killing off local people by belching into the air a mix of carcinogenic substances. A magistrate in August 2011 ordered the shutdown of the most polluting furnaces. Unions went on strike to protest against the decision, suggesting an agenda based on the environmental clean-up and the modernization of the factory.

<sup>76</sup> Banners and flyers available at [www.facebook.com/pages/Sindacato-BLU](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Sindacato-BLU), accessed December 7, 2012.

<sup>77</sup> Interview no. 5a and 5b, conducted by the authors on June 28, 2012.

In addition to that, given the group's opposition to the Italian austerity programs, CasaPound has also launched the campaign *Ferma Equitalia* [Stop Equitalia].<sup>78</sup> *Equitalia* is the public company in charge of tax collection, hence for many Italians the symbol of austerity. Concerning this issue, the repertoire of action of CasaPound includes not only a rather articulated law proposal, but also street protests in different Italian cities.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, since November 2011, this campaign boosted its relative importance in CasaPound as it directly antagonizes the austerity measures and the technical government.<sup>80</sup> A recurring argument in CasaPound's discourse has to do with the malaise caused by the social and economic consequences of austerity.

The symbolic apparatus that the group mobilizes for the campaign is based on the ideas of death, destruction and pain, and it insists visually on the colors of blood and demise, reporting of CasaPound's intense and violent discourse on the crisis. The main protagonist of this campaign is a stylized black man with a briefcase and vampire teeth, accompanied by postcards showing an arm with veins cut that comes out from a bathtub, a man that is shooting himself in the head in front of a window, someone who committed suicide with pills, or still the hangmen game in which the word that appears is 'Equitalia'.<sup>81</sup>

Directly related to the Stop Equitalia campaign is the abovementioned *Mutuo Sociale* [Social Loan] campaign. One of the words that characterized the ongoing financial crisis is without doubt 'house', since real estate bubbles and the related subprime mortgages have been the symbolic and material starting points of the crisis. In this sense, the crisis has boosted the original struggle of CasaPound: the one for generalized housing rights and for the social loan.<sup>82</sup>

The Social Loan campaign also explains CasaPound's repertoire of action based on squatting practices *Occupazioni a Scopo Abitativo* [OSA; Occupations for the purpose of housing]. Although in actual terms there are only three CasaPound's OSA in the whole Italian territory, these experiences are exploited by the group to increase its visibility and originality and as a viaticum for its political discourse on the crisis. Conceiving of housing as a priority derives in

<sup>78</sup> 'Ferma Equitalia, Firma la legge!' available at <http://www.fermaequitalia.org/>, accessed December 7, 2012.

<sup>79</sup> The list of protests is quite long and it involves the whole Italian territory from North to South. Recently CasaPound has demonstrated against Equitalia and austerity measures in Rome on December 24, 2012. The participant observation of the authors confirms that 'Ferma Equitalia' was held as a big banner that constituted a block of the parade including six thousand demonstrators, according to the Roma political police DIGOS.

<sup>80</sup> Interview no. 3a, conducted by the authors on June 1, 2012.

<sup>81</sup> 'Ferma Equitalia, Firma la legge! La propaganda,' available at <http://www.fermaequitalia.org/propaganda.htm>, accessed December 7, 2012.

<sup>82</sup> 'Il Mutuo Sociale: La proposta,' available at <http://www.mutuosociale.org>, accessed December 7, 2012.

the first place from point fifteen of the Fascist *Manifesto di Verona* (1943), which defines the house as a right that the state will assure to the all citizens, stating that the payment of the rent grants the right to own the property.

The effect of the crisis on CasaPound's campaigns about the social loan is clear if one considers that these actions are by now always associated, in the visual propaganda, to the loss of the housing-right for Italian citizens due to Equitalia's 'expropriation'.<sup>83</sup> Accordingly, the flyers read slogans such as 'You gave everything to the state, now it's time to give your house!'<sup>84</sup> Similarly CasaPound's activists in demonstration chant that 'usury kills the nation', and call for a 'revolution against the banks'. Other emblematic slogans on that read 'By the end of the month the rent will kill you. I want social rent, I want to own my house!'<sup>85</sup>

In conclusion, this section offered an empirical overview of the crisis-related activities of CasaPound, with the goal of highlighting the aspects of the ongoing Eurocrisis that hold particular importance for the group and that connote its repertoire of actions. As we have seen, on the one hand the crisis gave the opportunity to the movement to broaden the scope of its activities including a whole set of new dimensions and projects related to fascism as a socializing force. These activities and policy proposals refer to labor issues, austerity policies, anti-capitalist and anti-establishment protests. On the other, the crisis nourished CasaPound's main original interest, that is the projects related to housing and housing rights, which now seem to play an even more central role in its discourse and practices.

## Conclusions

The present research has set up to analyze the ways in which neo-fascist organizations organize their activities and build their consensus in times of crisis, and investigated whether, under these circumstances, radical right groups modify their repertoire of action to achieve consensus. In particular, we focused on a neo-fascist group which is active in one of the main crisis-ridden countries: Italy. We have illustrated that CasaPound Italia, a relatively young group of activists, has given large space to crisis-related issues, and is actively trying to build support around these by selecting strategically from

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<sup>83</sup> 'Campagna per il Mutuo Sociale: Documenti', available at [www.mutuosociale.org](http://www.mutuosociale.org), accessed December 07, 2012.

<sup>84</sup> 'Ferma Equitalia, Firma la legge! La propaganda', available at [www.fermaequitalia.org/propaganda.htm](http://www.fermaequitalia.org/propaganda.htm), accessed December 7, 2012.

<sup>85</sup> Slogans recorded during the participant observation of the authors to the national demonstration of CasaPound against the technical government and the crisis (*No Monti day*) in Rome on November 11, 2012.

the menu of fascism and neo-fascism, rather than by renovating its ideological and organizational repertoires.

In order to understand in-depth the legacy of CasaPound in fascist ideology, we first summarized the existing debates explaining how Italian Fascism has benefited from the political and economic crises that Italy (but not only) experienced in the beginning of the twentieth century. Building upon this theoretical framework, we tried to identify the crisis-related discourse and ideas that are pushed forward by CasaPound, in relation to the social doctrine developed during the Italian Social Republic and by Italian and European neo-fascism. Moreover, we looked at how the crisis has influenced the actual practices, forms of protest and repertoires of action of the movement. To achieve this goal, the research made use of different types of sources, investigating not only the dimension by which CasaPound addresses the external public (web communication materials, flyers), but also the ones which pertain to the internal public (interviews with the chiefs and the militants, and participant observation).

Our analyses of the crisis-related ideas of CasaPound illustrate that the discourse of the group is entirely inherited from fascist ideas, which are selectively extrapolated from the large amount of material available from the long social tradition of the Italian radical right. In particular, CasaPound borrows directly from Italian Fascism the concepts of nationalism and economic self-sufficiency, whereas it develops from previous neo-fascist experiences the claims of European autarchy, anti-imperialism and opposition to technocracy, which they deem particularly appealing in the wake of the ongoing crisis.

In other words, we illustrated that the Eurocrisis is used by CasaPound to elaborate and propose a form of fascism *à la carte*, where aspects and elements of the traditional fascist discourse are selected and prioritized over others, reconstructing the idea of fascism as a revolutionary anti-neo-liberal force. The focus is on creating a sentimental and political connection with the labor regulations of the Italian Social Republic, as the corporatist and social experience of the late Italian Fascism represents (when looked from the perspective of today's crisis) the most convincing and captivating aspect of fascist history.

In addition to that, the study of the crisis-related discourse of CasaPound highlighted that the focus on the crisis is also functional to the group for the identification of the enemy. This is confirmed as well by our analysis of the practices and repertoires of CasaPound, as the activities targeting the actors held responsible for the current economic conditions play a fundamental role in building the group's identity. In other words, the absence of a confrontational dynamic with the internal enemy (communism) is sublimated by the concentration of all the efforts against the external enemy of financial capitalism.

Moreover, we highlighted that although this group often combines in its repertoire of action different forms of political participation (from more conventional ones such as policy proposals to more unconventional and protest-oriented ones), the number and type of activities that relate to the crisis are increasingly growing in number and importance. In this sense, the defense of labor rights, the opposition to technocracy and austerity policies, as well as the focus on housing problems, constitute the humus for a vast set of crisis-related activities by which CasaPound attempts to create an emotional connection with the values represented within the political and social model of the fascist regime.

At the concrete level, moreover, we have described how these messages are conveyed by means of the material distribution of goods and services within the everyday practices of the group. In this respect, CasaPound builds on the consequences of the crisis in terms of worsening living conditions and dismantlement of the welfare state, in order to push forward its consensus-building practices, filling the gap of nation-state redistributive services with the voluntary offer of services justified on the basis of a fascist interpretation of capitalism and the role of the state.

Even if the choice to participate to the elections in 2013 did not seem to pay off for CasaPound, the high media visibility that the group achieved, its increasing presence on various regions in Italy, are all factors that indicate that economic turmoil is a fertile ground for extreme-right organizations pushing forward a fascist economic agenda. Whether the structural opportunities which helped CasaPound becoming publicly visible and somewhat influential within its political space may continue over the next years, is a matter of empirical enquiry. The discussion pushed forward in the present paper, however, underlines that fascism may become an efficient tool for extremist organizations to overcome their status of marginality and, leveraging on the increasing spectacularization of mediatized politics, achieve the core of the political system.

In conclusion, we believe that the study of CasaPound constitutes a representative example of the extent to which fascist interpretations of the crisis become attractive in times of economic struggle, as well as an ideal case study to look at how radical-right groups try to exploit economic crises in order to reconstruct the legacy with their fascist past. In particular, at times in which economic policy appears to drive political decisions, and the gap between representatives and represented is enlarging more and more, extreme-right movements have an easy way in depicting the fascist model as a 'third way' towards economic autarchy and national self-sufficiency.

Hence, we are convinced that the present study can contribute to the broader research dealing with how crisis situations shape the consensus for radical-right movements, parties and organizations. Moreover, by mixing a historiography approach to the issue of the social origins of fascism, and an



ethnographic experience within contemporary right-wing movements, we offer here an attempt for a multidisciplinary understanding of the success (or failure) of the neo-fascist right. Future research shall continue in the avenue traced here for the Italian case, investigating whether similar patterns are confirmed across the continent, and what are the consequences of the unfolding of crisis with respect to the politics of the European extreme right.

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