

## *Aliud pro alio*

### Context and narratives within a neo-Nazi community of practice

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This article explores how narratives create connections between the micro-context and the macro-context, focusing on the narratives produced by a neo-Nazi group within 'Blood and Honour', a neo-Nazi gathering in Italy. The analysis presents a series of thematic narratives that describe how the neo-Nazi members see themselves in daily life, with their private and family sphere and how they aim to impact the political and cultural world. From these narratives, it is possible to understand how the neo-Nazi group sees society and justify the marginal role that they occupy in modern society. From this perspective, narratives operate as symbolic practice of identity creation in which members of the group negotiate new images of themselves and of their political and cultural movement. As we show, the neo-Nazi members aim to obtain legitimation and recognition in order to express a greater symbolic and social power.

**Keywords:** narrative, context, neo-Nazi, ideology, community of practice

#### 1. Introduction

Narratives are widely regarded as playing a crucial role in structuring cognitive and discourse dynamics. They represent “the primary scheme by which human existence is rendered meaningful” (Polkinghorne 1988) because they allow for organization of events in a temporal and causal dimension, and interpretation of them from a particular perspective (Labov 1972). According to extant research, narratives can be interpreted as a method to investigate the human realm (Freeman 2015, 22), as a theory regarding the human condition of “storytelling animal” (MacIntyre 2013, 201), or as a social practice in which human lives are embedded (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2008).

Concerning practices, in the last fifteen years approaches to narrative analysis have emphasized the context and situatedness of narrative production. According to De Fina (2008, 421), “narratives exhibit complex and fascinating relationships with different contexts, and that their functions and structure vary a great deal as a result of their insertion in interactional situations and social practices”. These perspectives have enriched traditional approaches based on “decontextualized” analyses, as they have for sociolinguistic interviews (see Labov and Waletzky 1967), conversational stories (see Ochs and Capps 2009) and autobiography and self-report analysis (Linde 1993; Smith and Watson 2010). Recent research on the role of narratives within specific contexts highlights how narratives are produced and how they are functional to accomplishing interactional and social goals (De Fina 2006; 2008; De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2008). For this reason, studies in various disciplines contextualize the role and function of narratives in specific situations such as family meetings (see Gordon 2015), institutional events such as criminal trials and depositions (see Pascual, 2006), the workplace (Holmes 2006) and classrooms events (Comber and Simpson 2001).

Building upon this approach, this study makes use of original data gathered by means of ethnographic observation within the community of practice of ‘Blood and Honour’ (henceforth, ‘B&H’), to explore how thematic narratives enable neo-Nazi activists to create connections between the micro-context of their everyday life, and the macro-context of their political and cultural environment. The value added of focusing on a subcultural far-rightist community is twofold. On the one hand, this allows us to take an ‘internalist’ perspective, thus tackling the notorious limit of contemporary research on the far right which has been overwhelmingly based on the external observation of far-right groups and activists (Goodwin 2006; Mudde 2007). On the other, it helps to shed light on how far-right phenomena transform from marginal subcultures to emergent social movements with a clearly defined culture and ideology (Pollard 2016).

Indeed, the investigation of narratives as part of social contexts has allowed understanding to what extent narrative-production depends on the context itself. In this sense, narratives are considered cognitive and discursive practices that shape, and are shaped by, the context. This triggered scholarly interest towards the study of whether narratives expressed within a certain context fit wider social settings, and the relation between micro and macro contexts. As De Fina (2008, 422) points out:

narrative analysis has also showed that there are far-reaching connections between the micro and the macro, the interaction at hand, and social roles and relationships that transcend the immediate concerns of interactants involved in local exchanges

The relationship between micro and macro levels of analysis has been shown in several lines of research. Gender studies have shown that narratives produced by children and teenagers are recycled into wider levels of society, such as the division of tasks between working men and women (see Georgakopoulou 2006). More recently, De Fina (2013) investigated identity-creation processes, describing how narratives about stories of language conflict were affected by the ideologies about language and migration produced by mass-media. These studies claim that different levels of interaction can be connected by narrative production and that links between micro and macro levels depend on interaction needs.

In this article, we follow on the steps of previous research on the production of narratives, and on the creation of social contexts within communities of practice (De Fina 2008; 2013; De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2008, see also: Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992; Wenger 1998). This approach is particularly fruitful for the empirical observation of the B&H community of practice and its neo-Nazi milieu in Italy. We define a community of practice as a context in which participants “share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 2).

Focusing on the neo-Nazi B&H gathering of November 2016, this paper explores how narratives can be related to wider social dynamics at the macro-level and how they contribute to shaping the moral and symbolic image of the gathering, and of individuals within it. More precisely, we identify a series of content-specific thematic narratives (see: Barkhuizen, 2015, 100) and illustrate how they link the (micro) sense-making processes occurring within the social context of the neo-Nazi gathering, and the (macro) social processes configuring the relationship between neo-Nazi supporters and their wider social context. Positions and role are expressed through narratives articulating moral and symbolic values as part of the general cultural practices operated by the neo-Nazi gathering in other dimensions of social life. From this, we claim that a connection between local sense-making activities (micro level) and dynamics within society (macro level) can be identified in the negotiation of the position and roles of the political group in the wider social context (De Fina 2008, 423). Similar positions and roles are structured by thematic narratives that include explanatory and representational processes of social and political relations and moral values. These aspects give shape to a wide range of cultural practices in which the neo-Nazi group engages as a collective entity. Accordingly, thematic narratives can be conceived as symbolic practices (Bourdieu 2002 [1977]) in which a “social group engages to achieve legitimation and recognition, in order to accumulate symbolic capital and greater social power” (De Fina 2008, 423).

## 2. Data and subjects

This paper is based on the ethnographic observation (involving face-to-face interviews and audio recordings) of a group of five Italian neo-Nazis – aged 20–38 – during a B&H gathering taking place in the surrounding of Milan, in November 2016. “Blood & Honour” was originally founded in the United Kingdom in 1987 as a group with no membership, primarily devoted to organizing racialized sound production and audition (Tourle 2017). Over time, it developed into a decentralized politico-cultural entity “structured around numerous autonomous but interconnected nodal points of organization, performance, production, and distribution” of White Noise music in Europe (Griffin 2003, 32). Today, B&H represents an international neo-Nazi platform which claims branches in at least 18 countries, and which describes itself as “a world-wide pan Aryan organization dedicated to the struggle for survival and prosperity of the White Race” (Meleagrou-Hitchens & Standing 2010).

Its ideology is driven primarily by revolutionary National Socialism, and is imbued with racial and religious hatred. The armed wing of B&H “aspires to be a fully fledged white-supremacist terrorist movement, and openly calls for acts of violence in the name of reviving Nazism” (Meleagrou-Hitchens & Standing 2010, 10). Accordingly, B&H differs not only from the vast majority of radical right parties in Europe, which have progressively shed their revolutionary goals in the search for votes (Golder 2016), but also from much of the extreme right in Italy, which provides considerably less importance to the issue of the ‘white race’, focusing instead on the cultural and political patrimony of Italian Fascism (Marchi 1997, 332). B&H can thus be considered as a neo-Nazi subcultural community which sets out to overcome the decadence of the liberal democratic systems with meta-political, rather than primarily party-political, means (Griffin 2003).

While B&H was originally only in contact with the *Veneto Fronte Skinhead* (VFS) (Ferrari 2006), it progressively expanded its network in Italy by organizing skinhead music events (Caldiron 2013). Skinhead communities are political and ideological counter-cultures, and can be considered as a “non-hierarchical, leaderless and centreless (or rather polycentric) movement with fluid boundaries and constantly changing components” (Griffin 2003, 30). After a series of repressive moves by the Italian authorities, however most of the groups in this area have been dismantled, or have converged towards a few recognized hubs that remained active, such as VFS. Today, no skinhead group in Italy can count on networks comparable – in size and scope – to that of neo-fascist parties such as *CasaPound* or *Forza Nuova* (Albanese et al. 2014; Froio and Castelli Gattinara 2015). Still, the skinhead movement continues to be active in the subcultural music milieu. Northern Italy’s region in fact regularly host international events, such as the the 20th anniversary of the European *Hammerskin* network in 2010 (Ferrari 2011).

In fall 2016, the Italian media reported that B&H would organize a gathering in Milan on November 19th, and a series of music events with bands from Italy and Northern Europe.<sup>1</sup> As this generated much clamor among commentators and anti-fascist organizations (B&H is considered an illegal organization in Germany, Spain and Belgium), Italian authorities ultimately denied the authorization to use public space to host the events, and threatened the use of force. Yet, the organizers decided not to call off the gathering, and promoted a series of small music events in private properties, to avoid possible sanctions.

The ethnographic observation focused on five Italian activists, who took part in six meetings across four locations. Access to the field was negotiated with one insider who was contacted preventively, and who agreed to grant access to the research team. Hence, all participants were informed of our position as researchers and of the main objectives of the research.

The social background of the participants was middle and lower-middle class: the two oldest members of the group (38 and 32-year-old) worked as salespersons, while two others were manual workers and one was unemployed. The members of the group lived in towns close to one another, and they were members of a group of supporters of a local football team. They also belonged to a neo-Nazi organization based in Milan and engaged in political and cultural meetings and events.

Each of the observed B&H meetings lasted several hours, for a total of thirteen hours of direct observation. They had very different purposes and formats. In one occasion, participants met informally in a pub, upon going to a concert. More formal sessions included a meeting organized by neo-Nazi activists from different parts of Italy, who wanted to get in contact with other groups. In this case, the format was more similar to a conference, even though it included a barbecue lunch.

The use of ethnographic methods to study the far right has been the object of a considerable amount of previous reflections (Albanese et al. 2014; Blee 2007; Klandermans and Meyer 2006). This research suggests that confronting the political other, the one which is politically “distasteful” to the observer (Esseveld and Eyerman 1992) forces the researcher to question and innovate on crucial aspects of ethnographic research. In our case, this resulted in a considerable degree of ‘unpredictability’ concerning the interaction with participants. Accordingly, we did not deploy a specific observation scheme, but mainly followed the activities of the meetings.<sup>2</sup> Still, when given the opportunity, we introduced relevant topics to the discussion, eliciting the explicit response of participants. While informal

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1. <http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/premium/articoli/neonazi-a-milano-settimana-nera-di-rock-e-svastiche/>

2. This is the same approach applied in previous research on similar contexts, see e.g. Albanese et al. (2014)Castelli Gattinara and Froio (2014).

conversation did not configure a structured interview, we took advantage of ‘socializing’ moments address participant and observe the interaction among them.

### 3. Narratives and micro-context

In this section, we address the motivations of neo-Nazi activists choosing certain narratives, and the function of different narratives. In addressing the micro-context, we follow Goodwin and Duranti’s approach (1992), considering context as the framing construction enabling the interpretation and understanding of focal events such as setting, language and extra-situational conditions. Similarly, Bauman (1986) claims that the narrative function of dog-traders in Texas can only be understood by taking into account the social dimension of dog trading, its role and the organization to which the traders bring their own motives and goals. Following De Fina (2008, 425):

to understand any kind of narrative activity, it is necessary to uncover through ethnographic observation the particular and often subtle links that connect narrators and the narratives they tell with the social activities in which they are engaged.

As regards the narrative produced by B&H we focus on three crucial elements to understand the relationship between narratives and the frame of social events: (i) ‘the topic of the narratives’, (ii) the ‘activity within the event’ and (iii) ‘the identity of the participants.’<sup>3</sup> The interplay between these elements allows researchers to understand how meanings are created at the micro level of narrative production. In addition, we will take into account elements that connect narrative production at the micro level to aspects of the macro level (Section 4). Three main thematic narratives (Barkhuizen 2015, 100) that reflect roles, positions and topics within the neo-Nazi universe stood out in our analysis:<sup>4</sup>

1. *Being a neo-Nazi in daily life*
2. *Neo-Nazi and private/family relationships*
3. *The role and position of the neo-Nazi in the cultural and political world*

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3. To preserve the privacy of participants and people mentioned in their speech, all names are reduced to initials of invented names. Interventions by the authors are reported in brackets. All narratives are presented in their translated form and only some crucial terms are left in the original Italian form.

4. As our notion of thematic narrative concerns the content of narratives (Barkhuizen 2015, 100) rather than other elements such as their structure, we will not divide them into clauses as is generally done for other narrative analyses

### 3.1 Being a neo-Nazi in daily life

The first thematic narrative concerns the everyday experience of being a neo-Nazi, with respect to ideology and political attitudes. This does not refer to particular events connected to the meeting, but rather to the recollection of past experiences.

- (1) 1 (A) YOU (.) have to be careful about your hair (.) and even your jacket in case the police call (.) We're not hiding, not at all (.) It's just we're the victims here. You're democratic and I can't talk It's just a big hypocrisy [ 2 (K) ] And police come to your place and ask where you're gonna be - 3 (G) There was trouble somewhere...and they call (R) 4 (A) They turn up just like that (.) that's why you need to be careful, the system's against us!!!
- (2) 1 (A) I work and I'm lucky (.) but nobody's ever given me anything (.) it's = 2 (D) You need to sell your arse or you get nothing!!! 3 (A) He's ok (.) look at him but you're out (R) 4 (K) Would you hire me? I'm like this and if you don't like me? And that's normal[ 5 (A) ] It's always like that (.) it's hard for us = 6 (G) I don't have any job because of this (.) that is the hypocrisy and it's fair my arse = 7 (A) It's a big system (.) man and it's against certain ideas and what do you call it? Democracy!!!
- (3) 1 (D) I'd like to but we can't (.) communists can (.) they are free (.) millions of dead (.) gulags and shit (.) but they can [ 2 (K) ] They can do everything they want, the only difference is that we don't hide behind anything...we're like this (.) that's it = 3 (A) You perceive it when you go (.) there and talk and it's always like this but we're ok with that = 4 (D) We prefer to keep our ideas and never change(R) 5 (G) Never change is the key so you can understand - 6 (K) (.) It's a matter of honor [ 7 (A) ] HONOR and pride and we are what we are, but we know that- the system's against us...and work (.) the bank (.) the rent and shit and we know it = 8 (E) Everything is impossible for us (.) and this is the real discrimination not like [ 9 (A) ] Like, yes, say it (R) 10 (K) The (.) like (.) we discriminate (.) but it's for a deep reason and for your shit = 11 (G) The shit in their brains!!! 12 (K) BRAIN 13 (A) And - you understand at the end (.) very clearly

- (4) 1 (A) The state is like that (.) if you're a communist you have a career (.) writing books (F) being nice and - pretty and sending your kids to private schools (.) if you're one of us (.) you're the worst in society (F) But history says we both did horrible things, doesn't it? Or are certain horrible things different from others? =  
2 (E) and the history books are also written by the winners (.) not by us [  
3 (K) ] and you can imagine =  
4 (D) and you can imagine where the truth is then  
5 (E) INDEED =  
6 (K) And...and you can imagine then what the real face of history is

### *The topic of the narrative*

The four fragments, taken from two meetings, illustrate the crucial role played by victimization, in relation to police repression, and (missing) life achievements. Specifically, fragment (1) shows that subjects describe themselves as “victims” of a “system” in which authorities (“police”) control all their movements to preserve public security (“There was trouble somewhere...and they call”). What emerges in (2–4) is related instead to difficulties neo-Nazis encounter in occupational situations. Subjects claim that their political ideas (“It’s a big system, man and it’s against certain ideas...”) represent an obstacle to finding a job (“Would you hire me? I’m like this and if you don’t like me?...”; “It’s always like that, it’s hard for us”). This pertains to other aspects of everyday life, including economic and financial issues such as asking for a loan or renting a house (“the system’s against us...and work, the bank, the rent...”). Moreover, the lives of people with different political views is represented in idealistic terms, “They can do everything they want...”, and in contrast with the opportunities of neo-Nazis: “Everything is impossible for us and this is the real discrimination...”.

Perceived injustice is a crucial dimension in the identity of far-right militants, especially when they base their political activism on openly anti-democratic and extremist ideals, such as in our case (Klandermans and Mayer 2006). While previous studies have noted that extreme right-wing militants perceive to be discriminated against because of their ideology (Castellani, Milesi and Crescentini 2006), our empirical observation suggests that this is not exclusively related to their (actual or perceived) status, but also to their relative deprivation *vis-à-vis* other groups enjoying a right to express their ideas openly.

At first glance, these narratives seem to have a paradoxical relationship with democracy. On the one hand, they criticize liberal democracy for it is a hypocritical and dysfunctional system, which neo-Nazis fiercely oppose (“the only difference is that we don’t hide behind anything...we’re like this, that’s it”). On the other, liberal democratic values are mobilized strategically to call for equal treatment and freedom of expression. Still, this is not uncommon among far-right actors, who often attempt to construct ‘civic’ narratives based on liberal values to argue



that certain groups of migrants could not be integrated, due to the incompatibility of their cultural identities with Western liberalism (Halikiopoulou et al. 2010; 2013). Moreover, far rightists often criticize the “double standard” of liberal values, arguing that ruling elites and the mass media grant free speech only to public intellectuals who support multiculturalism, while they deny it to those who challenge the mainstream consensus (see e.g. Albanese et al. 2014). While this type of argument has a long tradition in the Italian right, its relevance was further amplified by the public discourse promoted in the aftermaths of the January 2015 attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris (Fassin 2015; Mondon 2015).

### *Activity within the event*

The above mentioned narratives were produced, respectively, before the concert (1 and 4) and in the dining area following the neo-Nazi group’s presentations (2 and 3). While in the first case, the narratives were produced by deliberate initiatives of the subjects, the second set of conversations was triggered by the content of a speech during the presentation.

### *The identity of the participants*

The narratives played a role in shaping identity. Daily life narratives worked as “justification” for negative events/conditions that the subjects experienced: “I don’t have any job because of this, that’s the hypocrisy and it’s fair my arse”. The hypocrisy of the ‘democratic’ system and discrimination against neo-Nazi political views are thus mobilized to explain the condition of unemployment. These narratives also reinforce the self-image of the group: living in a “hypocritical” system that denies dissident is considered an expression of “honor and pride”, defining their identity and role in society (“honor and pride and we are what we are, but we know the system’s against us”).

## 3.2 Neo-Nazi and private/family relationships

These thematic narrative reflects how private and family life is related to belonging to a neo-Nazi group, describing how political views can interfere or shape personal life.

- (5) 1 (K) That’s a complicated issue, especially nowadays =  
 2 (G) Now - it’s just madness(R)  
 3 (K) Yes (.) but that’s not the issue[  
 4 (D) ] This is the issue of course!!!  
 5 (A) The issue is the huge amount of propaganda against people like us =  
 6 (E) YES (.) but women like us even if they don’t say it like that  
 7 (Researcher) How come?  
 8 (E) Because we have a different view (.) a true way to be man (.) I mean

- 9 (D) Family!!! [  
10 (E) ] We believe in family (.) that's not about the way we look and so on like other men do nowadays (F)  
11 (K) It's a matter of - true values (.) there are faggots everywhere now if they are gay and stuff like that =  
12 (D) Trans, bi and tri sexual and this shit(R)  
13 (E) This - is just another lobby, another *magna magna*<sup>5</sup> big hidden power that moves the STRINGS  
=  
14 (D) Family (.) I mean (.) caring about your bloodline, your identity and not just the way I look in the mirror these are false and perverse values(R)  
15 (E) Values, these are fears - fear of yourself and so on (F) we carry a true value that women appreciate - but they are too subjugated by society to admit it clearly -
- (6) 1 (D) I've never had any problem, never [  
2 (E) ] and I told you, they like it, trust me(R)  
3 (D) It's like having different views (.) but deep down inside they prefer true men to fake stuff [  
4 (K) ] I'd say they are just scared by other people's judgement
- (7) 1 (A) A specific identity that believes in family; real love (.) I'd say, and deep inside my family appreciates this - because they know we fight for what they are -  
2 (K) My family loves that too and so does my girlfriend because they know we represent (.) the last chance in a world that - is falling apart with all this shit of gays homos and other sick people(R)

### *The topic of the narrative*

The fragments present two main thematic narratives related to private and family issues. First, 'being' a neo-Nazi is represented as seductive ("women like us even if they don't say it like that") and attractive for women ("Because we have a different view, a true way to be a man, I mean"). Having certain political and moral posture is a distinctive sign showing that neo-Nazis protect family values ("We believe in family...") and oppose issues such as vanity ("...that's not about the way we look and so on like other men do nowadays"), homosexuality ("It's a matter of true values, there are faggots everywhere now...") and the loss of identity in racialized terms ("I mean, caring about your bloodline, your identity...").

The performance of (a certain idea of) masculinity, and its alleged attractiveness to women, is another typical discursive repertoire of the far right. The far right invests itself with the mission of saving the 'pure race', protecting the nation and its women from all forms of corruption, including 'sexual deviants', homosexuals, and foreigners threatening native women with their 'culture of rape' (see e.g. Kottig et al. 2017). Appreciation by women for the far right, however, is not made explicit because of societal repression (" - we carry a true value that women appreciate but

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5. *Magna magna* = slang, "large personal interests"

they are too subjugated by society to admit it clearly”) and conformity to social standards (“I’d say they are just scared by other people’s judgement”).<sup>6</sup>

Finally, the relation with the family is idealized by describing neo-Nazis as a last chance for the family itself (“...my family appreciates this because they know we fight for what they are” and “My family loves that too [...] because they know we represent the last chance in a world that is falling apart with all this shit of gays, homos and other sick people”). This implies a naturalization of the divide between the public and the private sphere, which has to do with a hierarchical understanding of social relations based on an idealization of the traditional family model. The key concepts of nationalism, nativism and ‘national preference’ have thus the main purpose of preserving the traditional family, and women within the family, as this represents the foundation of the natural social order (Peto 2017; Scrinzi 2017).

Overall, the three narratives discussed here describe different idealizations of the relationship between the subjects and their partners and family, filtered by the political and moral views of the group.

#### *Activity within the event*

The fragments reported in this section were produced during the lunch just after the neo-Nazi group’s presentation. The discussion emerged spontaneously, but it is also possible that it was triggered by an earlier observation made by the researcher about the lack of women at the meeting.

#### *The identity of the participants*

This set of narratives contributes to the communication of the identity of the participants by showing how neo-Nazis see themselves in relation to other people. The narratives are thus intended to enhance self-esteem and foster a positive view of social relationships. Previous studies have suggested that people join far-right movements for a variety of reasons, which often have little to do with political ideology, and much to do with the search for community and affirmation of masculinity and adulthood through violence (Blee 2002). In line with previous ethnographic work on skinhead communities, the narratives outlined above may represent more of an effort to secure a masculine identity and experience community than a commitment to neo-Nazi ideology *per se* (Kimmel 2007).

Even though we do not possess detailed information about the private/marital status of participants, it is likely that family narratives work to compensate or justify personal dissatisfaction, similar to what was observed when discussing employment status. This explains why participants present themselves as an expression of a deeper attraction (“... deep down inside they prefer true men to fake stuff”) and

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6. This subtle misogyny was also reported by Ezekiel (1995, 2002)

fascination (“we carry a true value that women appreciate...”). Similar to daily life narratives, these narratives also describe a dominant system ruled by factions opposed to the ideals of neo-Nazis (“[homosexuals are] another lobby, another big hidden power that moves the strings”). Accordingly, participants see themselves as the only opponents in a system corrupted by “perverse” values (“because they know we represent the last chance in a world that is falling apart with all this shit of gays, homos and other sick people”). Moreover, identity construction also relates to the construction of masculinity, as opposed to female identity (see Ezekiel 1995; 2002). Although women represent the “proof” of their higher value (“I told you, they like it, trust me), women are silent, fearful and subjugated entities (“...they are too subjugated by society to admit it clearly”; “I’d say they are just scared of other people’s judgement”). As we will discuss in the section on narratives in the macro context, the presentation of neo-Nazism in terms of opposition to an oppressive system, and the exaltation of manhood, are common narrative constructions.

### 3.3 The role and the position of the neo-Nazi in cultural and political world

The following narratives are used by participants to describe themselves as cultural and political expressions of a movement that has marked the history of the twentieth century.

- (8) 1 (D) The mistake that people and - maybe even you make is to think we are dead (.) or extinct and that’s what most people think (.) but we know that these movements are growing [
- 2 (A) ] Growth is a matter of fact (.) it’s just like that -
- 3 (K) There are events everywhere =
- 4 (A) There are events everywhere (.) but you should also consider that many political parties in Europe are closer to us than ever before (F)
- 5 (G) Hungary and Austria =
- 6 (A) HUNGARY, Austria and the Netherlands and [
- 7 (G) ] and also Poland and Greece
- 8 (A) why not Le Pen? But not Salvini<sup>7</sup> for God’s sake. All these people are inspired by the idea of order [
- 9 (G) ] ORDER (.) identity, nation(R)
- 10 (K) Nation and national pride (R)
- 11 (A) These movements are clearly growing and (.) we’re just their purest expression (.) They want to be like us but they are too scared of losing votes
- 12 (K) That’s FEAR again (.) People are scared to have ideas and so are politicians (R)
- 13 (K) That’s fear again people are scared to have ideas and so politicians
- 14 (A) The crucial thing - is to convince people to change their minds, not

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7. The leader of Lega Nord, a regionalist Italian political party with anti-immigration, Euroscepticism and anti-globalization positions for which the neo-Nazi group shows criticism for reasons not known to the researcher.

- to hide your own ideas (.) that's another form of hypocrisy!!!
- 15 (G) We're what we
- 16 (D) Coherence first of all =
- 17 (A) I am PROUD of what I am because I am what millions of people want to be(R)
- 18 (G) We're - not radicals (.) like people say we are - We're the purest (.) no compromises (.) we're for this holy nation (.) No compromises: we're against fucking Islam (.) but not like 'yes we dislike them but some of them are nice'. I mean all of them (.) all of them!!!
- 19 (K) The idea of compromise is for *paraculi*<sup>8</sup>
- 20 (A) Just ask yourself why people are so ashamed to just say 'Fuck, I hate Islam' (.) Why so much pressure? They are just scared to offend someone that can just blow himself up and that is hypocrisy(R)
- (9) 1 (G) I am excited that we're growing and (.) so are our ideas and not only as a movement (.) I mean -
- 2 (A) You know how many people on the street come to talk to me and say in my ear "yes there are some niggers (.) where I live and if you burn them I will just be happy" (.) But they are normal old folks per bene.<sup>9</sup> You'd believe that they have similar feelings [
- 3 (K) ] And that's the thing (.) even very normal people have these sorts of ideas and that's why I think we're growing and our ideas are becoming popular(R)
- 4 (A) There are ideas and values (.) people are normally scared of these things (.) now things are changing because people are getting tired of this situation =
- 5 (Researcher) What situation?
- 6 (K) = and immigration and Merkel, who tells you what to do and how to spend my money and the Islam shit everywhere and these faggot shits and niggers everywhere(R)
- 7 (G) Have you ever been close to the Station after 7?<sup>10</sup> Man it's like Iraq, a war area and that's my home!!!
- 8 (A) PEOPLE ARE TIRED (.) exhausted and we represent their ideas (F)
- 9 (K) also the pride they [
- 10 (A) ] the pride they had to hide for so long (.) I mean behind this rhetorical society and that's why they need us =
- 11 (G) they need us to bring their real ideas out(R)

### *The topic of the narrative*

The narratives that can be inferred from these transcriptions reflect how neo-Nazi activists express their ideas in the cultural and political world. First, they describe themselves as part of a movement that is growing in Europe ("...you should also consider that many political parties in Europe are closer to us than ever before"), and that represent Europe's most authentic segment ("We're not radicals like people say we are. We're the purest..."). Second, their ideas are considered an

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8. A cunning opportunist individual

9. People that live for conformism, prissiness and respectability

10. We guess they are referring to Milan Central Station

expression of what people really think (“And that’s the thing, even very normal people have these sorts of ideas and that’s why I think we’re growing. Our ideas are becoming popular”), but are too afraid to express (“They are just scared to offend someone that can just blow himself up and that is hypocrisy”). Most notably people would be increasingly prone to neo-Nazi ideals because of the economic and social crises in Europe (“and – immigration and – Merkel, who tells you what to do and how to spend my money and the Islam shit everywhere and these faggot shits and niggers everywhere”) (“People are tired, exhausted...”).

To make sense of this narrative, one has to take into account the so-called ‘multiculturalism backlash’ in Europe (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010). Much of the far right argues that Western Europe is subjugated to a single multicultural ideology, imposed by corrupt elites and the mass media, which obfuscates the ability of the citizens to see things clearly, and – even more so – to speak about them truthfully. The combination of multiculturalist consensus and political correctness, in other words, would lead to a generalized refusal to acknowledge social problems connected with migration. In this respect, far right activists recognize themselves as a bulwark against multiculturalism and Islamization, and as the true representative of the will of the people (Mudde 2007).

In addition, these narratives describe a scenario in which contextual and historical factors facilitate the expression of certain ideas (“I am proud of what I am because I am what millions of people want to be”). In other words, Europe is experiencing a change, in that the peoples of Europe are uniting against the cultural hegemony of the so called ‘do-gooders’ (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010). Interesting, ‘self-censorship’ would not pertain to normal citizens only, but also to European politicians (“That’s fear again. People are scared to have ideas and so are politicians”). Even so, far right political parties across Europe are imagined as part of a growing pan-European movement (“Hungary and Austria”; “Hungary, Austria and the Netherlands...”; “and also Poland and Greece”, “why not Le Pen?...”).

#### *Activity within the event*

This set of narratives addresses the main topics that we encountered in our ethnographic observation at the B&H gathering. Still, they were most prominent in a meeting in which various groups from Italy presented themselves and their political activities to the audience.

#### *The identity of participants*

We decided to address these narratives at the micro-level because we are convinced that identity construction of the role and position of neo-Nazis in their cultural and political world depends on the identification with ideals. The role that each member plays is not only related to his/her attitudes towards a cultural and

political view, but it operates as a form of embodiment. Put differently, subjects experience the success of the movement not only as a collective achievement, but also as a personal improvement. Identification with ideals is thus a crucial dimension of the lives of neo-Nazi militants, as shown in fragments like “I am proud of what I am because I am what millions of people want to be” and “I am excited that we’re growing and so are our ideas and not only as a movement, I mean” (Ezekiel 1995; Whitsel 2001). As for the other sets of narratives, the identity of the subjects is shaped by the awareness of representing the last “solution” to an ‘hypocritical’ cultural and political system (“I mean behind this rhetorical society and that’s why they [people] need us”). In other words, subjects believe that they represent the vanguard of a collective awakening of the peoples of Europe, so that the actions and narratives developed within their milieu provide an example for fellow citizens who are progressively rediscovering the spiritual and moral values of Europe.

#### 4. Narratives and macro-context

As we have discussed, we consider the notion of macro-context in relation to the social spaces in which people interact in their ordinary life. In this sense, macro-context is a dimension that transcends “the immediate concerns of interactants involved in local exchanges” (De Fina 2008, 422). As Bourdieu claimed (2002 [1977], 179), the role of people within these contexts mainly depends on their cultural power, which is the ability to gain and show their distinctness thanks to the accumulation of “a capital of honour and prestige”. This cultural power is created through symbolic practices, as narratives for instance, since they allow one to frame and communicate relations through the expressions of values, ideas and attitudes, the reinterpretation of past and current events and the description of future scenarios. As De Fina (2008, 437) claims “[t]hrough the construction of positive images of themselves, social groups can accumulate symbolic power and ultimately achieve changes in their position”. This process, which generally applies to subaltern groups such as immigrants, minorities or people discriminated against because of their sexual preferences, also concerns subcultural neo-Nazi groups. Movements and groups that refer to iconic ideologies such as the Nazi Party live a contradiction, believing in ideas that have indelibly marked the history of humankind, while occupying an extremely marginal space in contemporary society (Lee 2013). This lack of identity seems to be compensated by a series of narratives that describe ‘ideological’ scenarios in which neo-Nazi members still have a great impact on life, both in the sphere of private lives and in terms of the public context/sphere. In theoretical terms, the relation between narrative, identity and ideological scenarios has been described by Hammack (2008, 232). Specifically:

If the content of identity assumes an ideological quality – a cognition of self in relation to discourse – it is through the development of a personal narrative that such cognition is rendered comprehensible and meaningful to an individual and to the group or groups to which he or she belongs. If ideology provides the basic cognitive content of identity, it is in narrative that ideological identifications assume a coherent structure.

The role of neo-Nazis in the macro-context emerges in a series of narratives that, while promoting neo-Nazi militancy, also aim to object to a society that, in turn, is represented exclusively in negative terms (“discriminative”, “hypocritical”, “rhetorical”, “fearful”, “submissive”, containing “false and perverse values”). This aspect was also described by Whitsel (2001, 89), who claimed that:

The [neo-Nazi] movement’s psychological worldview has historically been dominated by a catastrophic millennial outlook that looks forward to the destruction of an environing order perceived to be degraded and beyond hope for renewal.

Crucially, the society that is perceived in these terms is the same society that has marginalized neo-Nazi movements from history and daily life (see Ezekiel 1995). Following the content of the three sets of narratives it is possible to describe a structure that represents this “opposition” to the present society. First, opposition to society reflects opposition to modernity (Minkenberg 2000); in 3.1 the issue is the hegemony of the mainstream ideology (and the related marginalization of neo-Nazi groups and other dissenting voices); in 3.2, the problem is the spread of deviant behavior, and most notably homosexuality and in 3.3 it is immigration, most notably in terms of the political rhetoric in favor of immigrants (i.e. political correctness), which denies social problems. Second, neo-Nazi activists focus on the crucial values of “pride” and “coherence” when discussing their opposition to discrimination and hypocrisy (3.1); opposing homosexuality with “family” values (3.2); and representing the “purest” expression of political ideas that fights against pro-immigration rhetoric (3.3). Additionally, each issue identifies a specific opponent: the communists and multiculturalist elites in 3.1, the gay lobby in 3.2 and the political establishment (i.e. Angela Merkel) in 3.3. As it is possible to see, the narratives produced by the neo-Nazi group have a particular structure that takes into account different issues of society and that contributes to their attempt to acquire distinction. This distinction assumes the shape of the accumulation of ‘honor and prestige’ through the attempt to make society – according to their ideas – a better place.



## 5. Conclusion

The analysis presented in this article has taken into account how investing narratives within a micro-context of a community of practice presents connections with wider and more general contexts of society in which social activity is embedded. We have shown how narratives developed by neo-Nazi members on the individual level can give shape to relevant dynamics on the collective level. Narratives are used by the neo-Nazi members as symbolic practice of identity creation in which members of the group negotiate and create a new image of themselves and their political and cultural movement they represent.

The narratives produced in the micro-context represent perspectives about society and its contradictions, gender relations, social change, and multiculturalism. What emerges from the narratives is how neo-Nazi members create a functional representation of social and cultural relationships that justifies and explain the marginal role that they occupy in modern society. The marginalization they experience is mainly described in terms of a process that sees them as victims of discrimination conducted by influential and powerful cultural groups that do not represent – from the neo-Nazi perspective – the same moral and ethical qualities.

Blaming the victim, as well as the construction of conspiracy theories are among the most common narrative strategies used by far-right organizations in political propaganda, and by far-right militants to make sense of their everyday experience. Similar rhetorical devices enable militants to interpret individual experiences in light of societal ‘problems’, in antagonism with constructed dangerous ‘others’, and as the result of conspiracies by the ‘elites’. In particular, victim-perpetrator reversal (*trajection in alium*) appears as a crucial discursive strategy in the justification discourse of the far right, articulating a form of blame avoidance on which the responsibility is shifted on specifically constructed scapegoats (Wodak 2015). In other words, while B&H, just like other neo-Nazi groups, is an organization engaged in exclusionary politics, which calls for the discrimination of constructed political, cultural, and ethnic ‘others’, the discursive justification that they deploy involves counter-attack against accusation (and/or against the accuser) alongside the negative presentation of the political other. In this way, they are able to narrate themselves as the ‘discriminated’ rather than as the ‘discriminator’.

Future comparative studies are needed to address at least some of the shortcomings of this research, in terms of time-sensitiveness of the available data, as well as the generalizability of the findings beyond the specificities of the Italian context and neo-Nazi milieu. Nevertheless, this study offers major insights for the study of extremist activism and its rhetoric, and on the relationship between context and narratives within subcultural communities of practice. By deconstructing their narratives, in fact, we were able to understand the main messages that

far-right activists convey throughout their practices. By recognizing that neo-Nazi narratives integrate content and form, adapting to specific contexts and creating discursive links between the micro- and macro-levels, finally, this study contributed to the scholarly understanding of the resonance of exclusionary messages, with the goal of showing its danger for contemporary society.

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## Appendix

CAPS	Louder than surrounding talk	[ ]	Overlapping speech
(F)	At the end of words marks falling intonation	(( ))	Transcriber's comment
(R)	At the end of words marks slight rising intonation	(...)	Non-audible segment

-	Abrupt cutoff stammering quality when hyphenating the syllables of a word	=	No interval between adjacent utterances
!!!	Animated tone, not necessarily an exclamation	[[[]]	Uncertain transcription
<i>Italics</i>	Utterance in Italian	Number	Narrative clause
(.)	Micropause		

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