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Framing Exclusion in the Public Sphere: Far-Right Mobilisation and the Debate on *Charlie Hebdo* in Italy

Pietro Castelli Gattinara

ABSTRACT

While the January 2015 Paris terrorist attacks presented a crucial opportunity for far-right mobilisation, the focus on liberal democratic values and *Charlie Hebdo's* non-conformist progressive profile presented challenges for right-wing discourse. Taking Italy as a paradigmatic case of public controversies on cultural and religious affairs, this article examines the opportunities and constraints generated by multicultural crises for far-right framing choices. A qualitative frame analysis analyses the discourse of three types of far-right actors. While the populist radical right, extreme right, and ultra-religious right groups disagree on crucial criteria for outgroup exclusion, they collectively employed the *Charlie Hebdo* controversy to redefine their exclusionary discourse on liberal grounds with the goal of gaining legitimacy in the mainstream public sphere.

KEYWORDS

Far right; *Charlie Hebdo*; frame analysis; public sphere; multiculturalism; Lega Nord; CasaPound; Forza Nuova

On 7 January 2015, two self-proclaimed Islamist gunmen forced their way into the meeting room of the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, killing 12 people. Within two days, two additional attacks resulted in five more victims, including a police officer and four customers in a kosher supermarket.¹ As the shooting was claimed as an act of revenge against the publication of satirical cartoons portraying the Prophet Mohammed, numerous demonstrations and rallies both in support of and against *Charlie Hebdo* were held across the globe in the following days (see Mayer & Tiberj 2016). The hashtag #JeSuisCharlie [I am Charlie] became a global trend on Twitter as a symbol of solidarity with the magazine's right to satirise any subject, including religion. The emotional reaction to these attacks involved people virtually everywhere in the world, triggering debates on contentious issues such as national identity, freedom of expression, and secularism.

At the same time, the attacks reactivated longstanding tensions concerning immigration, state–church relations, and liberal democratic values in European societies (Titley et al. 2017). While the clamour around these issues arguably represented a crucial opportunity for far-right actors to set in motion a backlash against multiculturalism and immigration (Fassin 2015), the target of the attacks – a magazine often identified with non-conformist left-progressive and atheist ideals – also presented challenges to the articulation of far-right discourse (see Marzouki, Roy & McDonnell 2016). The far right found itself in a short-circuit: if it could, on the one hand, benefit from the symbolic consequences of terrorism, which

echoed themes closely tied with its authoritarian exclusionary narrative, it was also, on the other, forced to confront with issues connected to liberal democratic freedoms and values.

An analysis of how the far right coped discursively with these opportunities and constraints is crucial to the scholarly understanding of contemporary right-wing politics. Indeed, in recent decades, a turning point in the self-understanding of the far right has consisted in the shift from biological to cultural racism, which marked the transition from considering ethnic outgroups 'inferior', to deeming them 'incompatible' with Western values (Barker 1981). In this respect, researchers have focused attention on far-right parties' attempts to construct a 'civic' discourse based on liberal – as opposed to illiberal – values, as the far right comes to recognise that national identities are increasingly predicated on liberal and civic terms (Halikiopoulou, Mock & Vasilopoulou 2013; Halikiopoulou & Vasilopoulou 2010). To achieve acceptability in mainstream society, in fact, a number of far-right groups now mobilise strategically on liberal and progressive values, targeting the cultural identity of specific groups of migrants, and their supposed incompatibility with liberal principles such as gender equality, free speech and secularism (Mondon 2015; Skenderovic 2007).

The attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* offices arguably offered further incentives for far-right actors to curb their exclusionary discourse on liberal arguments. Whether and to what extent this was the case, however, is an empirical question. Consequently, it seems crucial to reflect on the following questions: How did the far right articulate its discourse in the shadow of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks? How did it cope with the liberal democratic principles embedded in the controversy? What were the main collective action frames used to interpret the events? Moreover, since the far right is much less a united family than is often assumed (Minkenberg 2003), to fully appreciate the changing nature of its discourse, I appraise it in its multiple manifestations, comparing framing strategies among ideologically different right-wing groups.

Focusing on Italy as a paradigmatic case for public controversies on cultural and religious affairs, the goal of this study is to investigate how the far right participated in the debate following the attacks, unveiling the discursive strategies promoted by different types of actors, and the main frames by which they attributed meaning to the events. The next sections discuss the relevance of this approach for a study of the far right and multicultural crises. After presenting the threefold categorisation of far-right actors that will guide the comparative analysis, I shall address the added value of studying the case of Italy. The empirical analysis, based on a qualitative examination of far-right discourse in the three months following the attacks, helps shed light on the relationship between the framing choices of the far right and the discursive opportunities offered by the attacks. In the final discussion, I summarise the main comparative findings, suggesting that radical, extremist and ultra-religious right-wing actors have taken advantage of the salience of debates on freedom of expression to redefine their exclusionary discourse, using liberal arguments.

Framing multicultural crises

In recent decades, several controversies related to ethno-cultural and religious issues have entered European public debates. The 1989 'Rushdie Fatwa', the debates on the Islamic scarf in France, the Muhammad cartoons controversy in Denmark and the debate on the movies and subsequent murder of Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands are only a few examples of contentious issues of this type (Lindekilde 2008; Ozzano & Giorgi 2015). Lindekilde (2008)

refers to these as 'multicultural crises', to indicate controversies in which conflict evolves around ethno-cultural difference made visible by the development of multicultural societies through processes of immigration (see also Morawska 2003).

Albeit with exceptions, most of these crises had not originated from an act of clandestine political violence; this arguably explains the unprecedented attention that the *Charlie Hebdo* attack received in the mass media and the wider public (Fassin 2015). Still, just like these earlier crises, its symbolic consequences set in motion profound debates on issues central to contemporary multicultural democracies, including the nature of national identity, the limits of freedom of speech, and the concept of secularism (Titley et al. 2017). As pointed out by della Porta (2013), in fact, political violence aims not only at terrorising but also at articulating claims: the forms of action and its victims are part of the message that the perpetrators want to spread, with symbolic consequences. While the debate emanating from the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks can be generally categorised as an instance of contentious politics, defined by episodic, public, collective interactions on specific issues in the public sphere (McAdam et al. 2001), in terms of its specific content it echoes that of earlier multicultural crises, in its focus on the divide between insiders and outsiders, and on secular and religious values (Lindekilde 2008).

Focusing on this type of controversy is crucial to our understanding of collective action, not only because the unexpected nature of such attacks forces all political actors to take a position (Castelli Gattinara 2016) but also because their emotional impact bears consequences at the symbolic level (Lindekilde 2008). It is during these 'junctures' that existing interpretations of social phenomena are challenged and established meanings renegotiated (Tarrow 2015). Social movements research has long emphasised the ways in which collective actors use cultural tool-kits to develop persuasive narratives (Pedriana & Stryker 1997; Swidler 1986), suggesting that claims-making is primarily aimed at constructing or renegotiating the meaning of public problems (Snow & Byrd 2007). Accordingly, these scholars address social movements as 'signifying movements', actively engaged in constructing meaning through claims-making and framing activities (Snow & Benford 1988, p. 198).

The concept of frame is thus central to an understanding of how social movements adapt to new circumstances, because 'meanings do not automatically or naturally attach themselves to the objects, events, or experiences we encounter, but often arise, instead, through interactively-based interpretive processes' (Snow 2004, p. 384). Frames thus interpret the characteristics and definitions of people, issues and events in space and time, attributing responsibility and outlining means of achieving goals (della Porta & Mattoni 2014; Snow 2004). In social movement research, frame analysis focuses on the ways in which organisations bridge different issues in the symbolic construction of external reality (Snow & Byrd 2007). Framing researchers thus investigate how people and collective actors organise experience and provide coherence to concepts and elements (Ferree 2002). Framing, thus involves not only selection and salience but also diagnosis, evaluation and prescription (Gamson et al. 1992): frames define problems, detect their causes, make moral judgments and suggest remedies in function of costs and benefits.

I deem this approach particularly suited to studying how the far right reacted to the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in the public sphere. Analysing frames, in fact, allows us to consider how collective actors make sense of, and communicate, reality. In what follows, I shall build on the concept of framing, to understand the ways in which the far right adapted to the debates that followed the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, paying attention to how different types of

actors defined political problems, suggested solutions and offered incentives for people to mobilise. Specifically, I consider three different types of frame, corresponding to the three principal ways of attributing meaning to social phenomena, according to the social movement literature (Caiani & Conti 2014; Snow & Benford 1988). First, there is the social construction of a political problem (the identification of responsibilities), which takes the form of *diagnostic* framing. Second, there is the process by which actors articulate proposals for change, which produces *prognostic* frames. Third, actors engage in the production of symbols that provide motivations and incentives for action, by generalising specific problems into wider controversies. This is referred to as *motivational* framing. Diagnostic, prognostic and motivational framing thus represent three different ways in which political actors address and define social problems (Caiani, della Porta & Wagemann 2012; Tilly 2004).

Far-right actors in the public sphere: a comparative account

In line with extant social movement research, I look at the far-right frames of the *Charlie Hebdo* debate, not only to understand the content of their public interventions but also to appraise the strategies by which they have been trying to appropriate discursive opportunities in the aftermath of the attack. Previous research on contentious politics has addressed discursive strategies emerging in relation to issues of specific interest for the far right, such as immigration and Europe (Koopmans et al. 2005; Koopmans & Statham 2010). Similarly, Caiani et al. (2012) suggest that the construction of meaning is a crucial dimension of far-right organisational activities because frames can be considered as resources as well as constraints for action. Indeed, frames are the building blocks upon which far right activists construct their own identity vis-à-vis their surrounding environment, clarifying the identities of the contenders and defining who is a friend and who is an enemy (Caiani & Conti 2014, p. 185). Hence, framing is crucial for a comparative account of the discourse promoted by groups within the far-right milieu.

In this respect, the debate on the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks relates to crucial ideological dimensions of far-right politics, including national identity, secularism and the management of cultural and religious diversity. A defining feature of this debate is the contention that the motivation for publishing the images of the Prophet Mohammad was originally grounded on defence of freedom of speech, whereas criticism of the publication was generally motivated by discrimination (Lindekilde 2008). On the one hand, therefore, the debate hinged upon values defining the relationship between the state, the nation and different religious and ethnic minorities. On the other, it opened discussions concerning the compatibility between multiculturalism and Western liberalism. Put differently, the debate crucially mobilised two fundamental dimensions defining the ideology of the far right: the relationship with liberal democratic principles, and the definition of the racial, ethnic or religious 'other'.

Over the past three decades of research on far-right politics there has been much disagreement on the definition of European organisations acting on the fringes of the political space (Mudde 1996). Today, most scholars agree on a minimum definition of 'far right' based on the centrality of nativism, authoritarianism and populism (Mudde 2007). Nativism holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by natives, as alien persons or ideas pose a threat to the homogeneity of the nation state (Minkenberg 1998). Authoritarianism refers to the belief in a strictly ordered society based on authority, which is commonly

articulated through 'law and order' narratives (Mudde 2007). Lastly, populism, understood as an ideological feature rather than merely a political style, considers societies as being divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite' (Betz 1994; Mudde 2004; Taggart 2000).

For a comparative analysis of far-right strategies, however, some further distinctions along ideological lines should be considered. In fact, ideological differentiation *within* the far-right family is likely to bear consequences on the nature of the issues advocated by these actors. This is in line with a vast array of previous research that has looked at the ideology of the far right (Carter 2005; Ignazi 2003; Kitschelt 1997). Building upon Ignazi's distinction between classical and post-industrial right-wing movements (2003), and Minkenberg's (1998) definition of ideological exclusionism, I propose a threefold categorisation of far-right actors that is sensitive to the crucial dilemmas embedded in the *Charlie Hebdo* debate. These three variants of far-right forces are populist radical right actors, extreme right-wing actors, and ultra-religious actors.

This typology suggests that the ideological variants can be identified based on the relationship of these organisations with representative democracy, and on the criteria they use to motivate the inclusion and exclusion of people from the national community. These are crucial dimensions both for far-right politics and for the specific debate under observation. In line with previous research, the first dimension distinguishes 'extreme' from 'radical' far-right actors: while both ideological types share a desire to create a strictly ordered authoritarian society based on a law-and-order system (Mudde 2007), the former want to achieve this by means of substantial political reforms which do not explicitly question the grounds of democratic systems, whereas the latter are ideologically opposed to democracy (Eatwell 2004; Golder 2016).

The second dimension follows the example of Minkenberg (2011), who suggested that the distinction between ethnic-, culture- and religion-based exclusionism is crucial to understanding the identity politics of far-right actors. While all far-right actors agree that different groups should stay separate, and that the interests of natives should be prioritised, the way in which the separation between 'us' and 'them' is articulated varies across far-right groups. While extremist and radical right-wing organisations normally define target groups in either ethnic or cultural terms, ultra-religious actors are set apart in that their ideology uses primarily religious arguments to articulate national superiority (see also Froio 2017).

If there are undoubtedly overlaps and fluid transitions in the different individual versions of each category, the three variants have in common a strong quest for internal homogeneity of the nation, and a rejection of ethnic, cultural and religious difference. On the one hand, the far right builds its identity by singling out a set of enemies and, depending on its predominant exclusionary criteria, presents itself as a bulwark against immigration, multiculturalism or religious diversity and Islam (Skenderovic 2007). On the other, depending on its relationship with democracy, it may use civic values – rather than racial or ethno-religious superiority – to claim incompatibility between Western liberalism and the cultural identities of some groups of migrants (Halikiopoulou, Mock & Vasilopoulou 2013; Mudde 2004). To illustrate these distinctions, the empirical section sheds light on how different types of far-right actors have framed the issues embedded in the *Charlie Hebdo* debate. It will do so by unveiling the prevalent discursive strategies deployed by far-right actors in their coping with the symbolic consequences of the ethno-cultural crisis, focusing on the paradigmatic case of Italy.

Contextualising the debate on *Charlie Hebdo*

When it comes to controversies related to religious and cultural issues, Italy represents a paradigmatic case. First, this is because of the crucial role of the Vatican and Catholicism, and the embeddedness of cultural debates, in national politics. Second, moreover, there are the favourable opportunities for political actors mobilising on ethical and civilisational issues, most notably the far right. With respect to the *Charlie Hebdo* debate, however, these actors were also confronted with the difficult choice of siding with a magazine that they had long considered blasphemous (Marzouki, Roy & McDonnell 2016). In this sense, Italy can be considered a case of special interest, to observe how collective action frames were constructed, but also contested and transformed, within the far-right milieu.

Multicultural crises and public controversies on the secular divide between public and private religion have long been embedded in Italian politics, including debates on the end of life, discussions on religious instruction in education, on mosque construction and on the Muslim dress code (Ozzano & Giorgi 2015). Ten years earlier, at the time of the original publication of the Mohammad cartoons,² the vignettes featured in several Italian newspapers (*Libero* and *La Padania*), including the mainstream press (*Corriere della Sera*, *La Stampa* and *La Repubblica*). Virtually no actor in the public sphere has explicitly supported violence against either *Charlie Hebdo* or *Jyllands-Posten*. Yet, the controversy ignited the emergence of two opposing camps (Lindekilde 2008): supporters claimed that the publication was a legitimate exercise of free speech, underlying the freedom of the press to question religious values and rules, whereas critics questioned the exercise of this freedom, describing the cartoons as Islamophobic, blasphemous and offensive towards Muslims. The debate gained further momentum when an Italian priest was murdered by a young fanatic in Turkey, allegedly in reaction to the publication of the cartoons. The peak of the crisis was reached in February 2006, when a mob attacked the Italian consulate in Benghazi in reaction to the reproductions of the cartoons on a t-shirt worn by Roberto Calderoli (*Lega Nord*) in a prime-time show on public television.

Hence, the January 2015 events unearthed issues that are not only deeply embedded in recent Italian politics but also at the heart of Italian right-wing narratives. Still, the nature of the attacks also challenged established patterns of argumentation of the far right, since the target was a journal that had long been opposing traditional religious values. This implied that, to engage in its preferred campaigns against multiculturalism, the Italian far right had to defend the free expression of a blasphemous, anti-nationalist outlet. This phenomenon is best observed in a context, like Italy, where the far right is not only highly influential in national politics but is also characterised by enhanced communication between established political parties and grassroots movements and *groupuscules* (Caiani, della Porta & Wagemann 2012). In Italy, in fact, populist radical right parties enjoy much electoral support and access to the public sphere while at the same time they maintain a privileged channel of communication with the social movement arena (Rao 2014; Wetzel 2009, p. 337). Overall, therefore, Italy represents a suitable case to study the communication strategies of the far right, due to the embeddedness of the controversy in national politics, the favourable opportunities for right-wing mobilisation, and the specific nature of the political conflict ignited by the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks.

Data and methods

The study applies a qualitative frame analysis, following previous social movement research that has looked at frames as everyday interpretive scripts that enable us to disentangle how ideas, ideology and culture are used to make sense of the world, especially in relation to external events (Lindekilde 2014). Snow and Benford (1988) argue that collective action frames transform the understanding of social reality by combining events and social facts, and by focusing attention on specific issues and conflict dimensions. Framing thus represents a public relations strategy (Berbrier 1998), or the strategic attempt to craft discourse with the purpose of mobilising consensus. In this sense, frame analysis is the most appropriate approach by which to compare the interpretation of a social reality across different actors.

Empirically, the study is based on a qualitative content analysis of statements from far-right organisations in Italy. Building on previous research, the focus of the data collection for this study was single statements that could be retrieved online. Put differently, the units of analysis are single statements that make an explicit reference to the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks. These are understood as single sentences, parts of sentences, or combinations of more than a sentence – depending on the beginning, or end, of any single affirmation (Caiani, della Porta & Wagemann 2012). In using the internet as a source of data, my approach inevitably faces questions concerning the sampling of groups, and the dimensions and nature of the observed population (Schafer 2002). I have addressed this problem following the example of previous research (Caiani & Parenti 2013), and applied a snowball technique based on a multiplicity of sources and databases, including secondary literature, publications by watchdog organisations, as well as previous experience in the field.

More precisely, I collected data from three main sources that offered the identification of public interventions concerning the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, between January and March 2015. First, I surveyed the official websites of all actors considered, identifying all pages referring to the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, using a dedicated search string developed in the framework of the M4D project.³ As a second step, if no, or too little, relevant material could be retrieved from the group website (indeed, often web portals or organisations do not report information on everyday politics but only general information about groups), I complemented the data with material retrieved from the official Facebook page of each group. Facebook in fact represents an arena of communication where political actors engage more dynamically on ongoing events. Third, in order to have a more exhaustive account of public interventions and statements by far-right groups, I surveyed online news platforms and forums that provide specific information on the everyday activities of political actors of the Italian far right, and collected all statements that were not already selected from the other sources. While some of these portals also promoted statements of their own (e.g. editorials, comment pieces), thus increasing the width of the observed population, this part of the analysis mainly allowed me to detect statements that had not been uploaded by far-right groups onto their own online platforms.

This allowed me to single out 27 far-right actors and online platforms and over 200 items, including documents, press releases, comment pieces, transcripts of political speeches and calls for action, transcripts from radio or television talk shows and newspaper and magazine accounts, all making explicit reference to *Charlie Hebdo* over the first three months after the attacks. Table 1 provides an overview of the groups considered in the analysis, summarising the type of material that was used in terms of four broad categories: press statements,

Table 1. Groups and types of statements included in the analysis.

		Press statements	Comment pieces	Social media	Public events	Total
Ultra-religious right						
<i>Groups</i>	Militia Christi	2	–	5	1	8
	Corrispondenza Romana	3	10	–	–	13
	Fondazione Lepanto (FL)	2	5	–	–	7
	Italia Cristiana (IC)	1	1	2	–	4
	Civiltà Cristiana (CC)	2	2	–	–	4
				–	–	0
<i>News Forums</i>	Magdicristianoallam.it	2	7	–	–	9
	NoCristianofobia	–	4	–	–	4
	LaCroce	–	2	–	–	2
Populist radical right						
<i>Groups</i>	Lega Nord (LN)	7	–	5	5	17
	Fratelli d'Italia – AN (FdI-AN)	5	–	–	2	7
	Gioventù Nazionale (GN)	1	–	–	1	2
	Progetto Nazionale (PrNz)	–	1	–	1	2
	La Destra (ID)	2	2	–	–	4
				–	–	0
<i>News Forums</i>	Il Giornale d'Italia	5	10	–	–	15
	Atuttadestra.net	10	7	–	1	18
	lostoonoriana.it	3	2	11	–	16
Extreme right						
<i>Groups</i>	Mov. Soc.-Fiamma Tricolore (MSFT)	5	1	–	–	6
	Forza Nuova (FN)	12	3	–	7	22
	CasaPound Italia (CPI)	3	1	–	1	5
	Veneto Fronte Skinhead (VFS)			–	1	1
	Lealtà-Azione (LA)	2	1	–	1	4
				–	–	0
<i>News Forums</i>	NoReporter	14	10	–	–	24
	Il Primato Nazionale	13	18	–	–	31
	StormFront Italia (SF)	–	–	10	–	10
Total		94	87	33	21	235

comment pieces, social media posts, and reports of public events.⁴ For each item, I then collected information about two main dimensions: the main actor promoting the statement (the three variants of far-right organisations); and Snow's and Benford's (1988) main types of frames (diagnostic, prognostic and motivational).

The Italian far right and the *Charlie Hebdo* controversy

At the time of the attacks, political opportunities for far-right mobilisation were quite open in Italy, as right-wing organisations in the protest arena enjoyed a privileged channel of communication with electoral actors of their area, and with the mass media. Thanks especially to the brokering role of *Lega Nord*, street-based organisations could count on considerable resources to gain visibility in the public sphere (Wetzel 2009, 337; Rao 2014). Furthermore, at least three defining elements of the *Charlie Hebdo* debate were already embedded in

far-right discourse since before the January attacks. First, there was the perceived disjunction between the need for security of the 'common man' and the multiculturalist 'do-goodism' of the elite culture.⁵ Second was the revindication of the freedom to call oneself 'Fascist', articulated primarily in terms of the freedom to criticise mainstream consensus. The third concerned the right to publish the cartoons at the time of the first controversy, which saw authoritarian-populist actors supporting the publication, whereas several ultra-religious and extreme-right organisations condemned the 'blasphemous', and 'offensive' nature of the vignettes targeting the Pope. To illustrate the divergent paths followed by extreme, radical and ultra-religious right-wing organisations, the next sections will look at each group of actors separately, and compare the ways in which they constructed their public narratives in relation to the *Charlie Hebdo* multicultural controversy.

Populist radical right actors

As populist radical right actors, I address two national political parties, the first of which is *Lega Nord* (LN), which has long combined regionalism with radical right populism (e.g. Zaslove 2011), and *Fratelli d'Italia – Alleanza Nazionale* (Fdl-AN), including its youth section *Gioventù Nazionale* (GN), which was founded in 2014 with the goal of giving new impetus to Italian nationalism, sovereigntism and right-wing conservatism. In addition, I consider the smaller *la Destra*, and the political association *Progetto Nazionale*. These actors all qualify as radical right in that they locate themselves outside the political mainstream but without intending to replace democracy with an authoritarian order (Mudde 2007). To contextualise and integrate information about them, I looked at two online news portals which regularly report on events and initiatives in this political area (*Il Giornale d'Italia*, and *Atuttadestra.it*) as well as the forum *io sto con oriana.it*, which promotes and publicises the views and pamphlets of the journalist and writer Oriana Fallaci (1929–2006), a major reference for the LN and most of the Italian radical right (Zúquete 2008).

Most groups in this area share an interpretation of the January attacks that is grounded on issues of migration and security, and on a critique of Islam. In terms of diagnosis, thus, the problem rests in multiculturalist policies. On the day of the attacks, key political figures from LN released statements criticising uncontrolled migration, and arguing that Europe is currently hosting millions of potential Muslim 'slaughterers'. While all forms of migration are deemed problematic, the crucial target is Islam, which is 'unlike any other religion, and thus must be treated differently' (Liberio Quotidiano 2015). Fdl-AN called on increased security to protect Italian citizens, criticising Italian and EU migration policies for underestimating the risks of international migration (Fdl-AN 2015a). In this respect, the radical right accuses Western governments of having excessively indulged in respecting the cultures of immigrant communities, thus posing a threat to the Italian nation and its traditions.

'After 9/11 and the Paris massacres, we cannot afford the risk that more Islamic fundamentalists arrive in Italy to attack us. If we do not send back all illegal migrants who land here, we risk becoming a crossroads of international terrorism.' (LN 2015)

'For too many years we underestimated the risk of Islamic fundamentalism. We underestimated the threat to our culture and identity. An ill-conceived idea of "respecting the other" led to the demise of the symbols of our tradition.' (la Destra 2015)

In terms of prognostic frames, radical right actors call for various forms of restriction on the access of migrants. Their main targets are pro-multiculturalist elites and mainstream parties

who are deemed responsible for dysfunctional interracial societies and the Islamisation of Europe. As answers to these problems, radical right actors promote several possible solutions: some focus on educational and cultural classes for Muslim residents, or the policing of places of worship (la Destra 2015); others suggest either the abolition of multiculturalist measures, or the immediate halt of all influx of foreigners to Italy (Progetto Nazionale 2015). Some actors also focus on international politics, calling for military intervention in the Middle East to put a stop to international terrorism (Fdl-AN 2015b). In short, most prognostic framing focuses on border control, military intervention and cultural assimilation, albeit references to liberal democratic values and secularism are not uncommon.

'If there is fundamentalism in the Muslim world, and if Islam does not accept the role of religion in the secular state, we must halt immigration from Muslim nations, repatriate all illegal immigrants, and put Islamic centres under police control.' (Fdl-AN 2015a).

As for motivational framing, the main collective action frame is the revolt against the promoters of 'do-goodism' and tolerance. The derogatory term *buonismo* is a recurring concept in Italian far-right politics addressing political correctness, and the behaviour of people willing to help society by championing oppressed minorities through philanthropic or egalitarian means. Do-gooders are accused not only of imposing a progressive agenda on issues such as gender equality and multiculturalism but also of denying free speech to anyone who does not share their political paradigm. Populist radical right actors, however, suggest that the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks might help people understand the need to revolt against the tyranny of do-goodism.

'[It is] a paradox: some have a right to blasphemy, but others are still persecuted for anachronistic crimes of opinion ... They forbid nativity scenes and crucifixes in our schools; they want to exclude Le Pen from the rally; they accuse Magdi Allam of Islamophobia; they wish they could sanction us when we criticise Mare Nostrum; they criminalise the reproach of gay marriage and adoption.' (Fdl-AN 2015c)

In this example, the hypocritical, politically-correct, urban-cosmopolitan elite is contraposed with the traditional 'common sense' of the people, their traditions and values. The dominant do-goodism of mainstream elites, in other words, is used as the functional alternative of the common sense of the people, and as such it constitutes the building block of the populist right's anti-establishment motivational narrative.

In sum, the populist radical right was not much affected by the contradiction inherent to the *Charlie Hebdo* debate, and overwhelmingly solidarised with the journal (despite minor caveats concerning blasphemy). Most notably, the debate allowed these actors to stress their liberal democratic credentials by underlining the dysfunctionality of Islam in western democracies, thus presenting themselves as the last defenders of national interests. In terms of predominant diagnostic frames, they identify the causes of the attacks with uncontrolled immigration from countries that are culturally incompatible with European traditions and values. As for prognostic framing, they suggest that immigration control and immigrant assimilation are crucial to preserve the principles at the basis of European democratic systems. Finally, to motivate collective action they focus on challenging the tyranny of do-goodism which denies free speech to those contesting the political mainstream.

Extreme-right actors

I address three groups representing the most visible extremist right-wing organisations in Italy: *Movimento Sociale-Fiamma Tricolore* (MSFT), *Forza Nuova* (FN), and *CasaPound Italia* (CPI). These groups claim an ideological linkage with Fascism, and have consistently opposed the democratic turn imposed after WWII and, more recently, regret the demise of *Movimento Sociale Italiano* in 1995 (Rao 2014). While striving for political legitimacy, they are still mainly engaged in street politics, and divide their attention between social issues (employment, housing), and opposition to migration (Froio & Castelli Gattinara 2016). In addition, I consider two subcultural groups of the skinhead milieu, which qualify as extreme right for their self-proclaimed opposition to democracy, pluralism and tolerance (Meleagrou-Hitchens & Brun 2013): *Veneto Fronte Skinhead* (VFS), and *Lealtà-Azione* (LA). Information on extreme right groups was then complemented using data from three information platforms: the online newspaper *Il Primato Nazionale* (the in-house publication of CPI); the neo-Fascist news blog *NoReporter*; and the white nationalist Internet forum *StormFront Italia*.

Unlike the populist radical right, the extreme right rejects any solidarity with *Charlie Hebdo* and its journalists, and constructs the problem by focusing on the fallacies of liberal democracy. For FN, the problem is the relativistic worldview that allows the publication of blasphemous cartoons (FN 2015a). Accordingly, the group promotes claims such as 'Neither Islam nor Charlie: Christian Europe wake up!' (FN 2015b). CPI condemns the hypocrisy of journalists who pretend to challenge the political establishment but only 'shocked the bourgeoisie' [*épater le bourgeois*] (*Il Primato Nazionale* 2015a). In this case, the repertoire focuses on the contradictions of liberal democracy, which considers cartoons as a legitimate act of free expression, whereas it condemns 'satire on immigration' (*Il Primato Nazionale* 2015b).

Diagnostic framing also addresses the relationship between Islam and European culture, stressing the impossibility of integrating or assimilating Muslim people. The theme of the population 'replacement' was found in many extreme right statements accusing global elites of promoting irresponsible and unsustainable immigration policies that lead to major terrorist attacks, as well as insecurity in everyday life. Islam is defined as 'a bloody culture that has nothing to do with the millenary history of Europe' (*Corriere della Sera* 2015). At times, cultural incompatibility is not associated with Islam per se but rather with the failure of multiculturalism, since 'the authors of the massacre are the children of the failed integration of the French multiracial society' (CPI 2015).

'the real problem is not the faith of a minority of manipulated fanatics, but the ongoing replacement of European populations with inflows of exogenous people, with the sponsorship of the UN and all global players' (*NoReporter* 2015a)

Like the radical right, prognostic framing by the extreme right focuses on halting immigration. However, the extreme right's proposals for change do not address exclusively border control and security but articulate a broader cultural revolt against globalisation. In so doing, extremist right-wing actors hint at a meta-political project of cultural revolt against hypocritical humanitarianism, which estranges people from their roots and traditions (*NoReporter* 2015b). Globalisation is thus considered detrimental for both migrants and native Europeans, since all people should be allowed 'to keep a link with their own history and land' (CPI 2015). This means not only that they should be helped at home by supporting secular Islamic nationalism in the Middle East but also that European countries should abolish

the *Ius-Soli*, eliminate mosques and facilitate the return (or repatriation) of migrants to their countries of origin.

'We must start the humanitarian and respectful repatriation of citizens who come from Islamic countries even if they have respected the law and lived honestly in Europe. We must take into account that, after the tragic Paris events, an era is over.' (FN 2015c)

In this context, terms such as 'humanitarian and respectful', and the reference to the end of 'an era' seek to portray these proposals as an inevitable corollary to the dysfunctionality of multiculturalism and globalisation.

In terms of motivational framing, two discursive elements stand out: Europe as a crucial community of reference, and the right to freedom of expression as a justification for action. First, extreme right actors argue that citizens must act to reinstate the sovereignty of European nation states (Progetto Nazionale 2015). This implies the rediscovery of true European values, which have been betrayed by corrupt political elites allowing foreigners onto 'Sacred European soil' (FN 2015c). Some go as far as to consider mass migration and terror as a conspiracy against European nations, orchestrated by cosmopolitan oligarchies (NoReporter 2015c). Second, the extreme right articulates a critique of the selective nature of free expression in liberal democracies. Put differently, the mainstream consensus is hypocritical in that it denies the right to self-define as Fascists, to criticise immigration and to offer alternative interpretations of the Holocaust.

'This is yet another demonstration that, for some, the right to freedom of expression and opinion only works one-way. There is always someone, in the decaying Western democracy, who acts as the good schoolmaster giving you permission to speak.' (Il Primato Nazionale 2015c)

Motivational frames thus oppose the dominant ideology marginalising all radical critiques. This suggests that the extreme right has seized at least some of the discursive opportunities made available by the attacks, distinguishing between those who are granted democratic rights and those who are not.

Overall, like the populist radical right, extreme right actors also engage with liberal democratic principles to articulate responsibility, solutions and motivations for actions in the *Charlie Hebdo* debate. Still, their focus is primarily on the fallacies of liberal democracy, which grants selective freedoms only to some groups of actors, and denies it to extremist groups. Prognostic frames promote a meta-political cultural revolt against globalisation, which is in line with the extreme right's subcultural arena of engagement. Motivations for action are similarly linked to democratic principles: while Europe is identified as the battlefield of the cultural clash between the elites and the people, citizens are urged to mobilise in the name of the right to express opinions that deviate from the political mainstream.

Ultra-religious actors

While many far-right groups mobilise on Catholic values, the category of ultra-religious organisations only addresses those that justify national superiority primarily on grounds of religion, arguing that Christianity should influence law and politics. I retrieved information on five ultra-religious organisations, and further analysed data from three news portals mobilising against abortion, euthanasia and gay rights. *Militia Christi* is a right-wing Catholic political movement promoting the 'evangelisation' of society, whereas *Italia Cristiana* and *Civiltà Cristiana* are confederations promoting conservative Catholicism in Italian politics. The political association *Fondazione Lepanto* and the related *Corrispondenza Romana*

proclaim to be engaged in the active defence of Christian civilisation. I then integrated information from the portal *NoCristianofobia*, which circulates news on discrimination against Christians in Europe, and from the pro-life online newspaper *La Croce*. Finally, I considered the blog of the journalist and writer Magdi Cristiano Allam, who enjoys a position as ‘former Muslim’, which confers him much prestige in the Italian ultra-religious right-wing field and beyond (Cousin & Vitale 2014).

After the attacks, most of these actors explicitly reject identification with *Charlie*, which is accused of vulgarity, blasphemy and pornography. In terms of diagnostic framing, the main interpretations are grounded on a critique of liberal secularism. In this understanding, Europe is incompatible with the stale secularist values of the French republic, and liberal secularism is addressed as a self-defeating ideology that breeds Islamic fundamentalism (Militia Christi 2015a). Most notably, ultra-religious actors equate individual freedoms granted by liberal democracy with the political motivations of ISIS: ‘while the one murders families, the other kills The Family’ (Militia Christi 2015). This critique of ‘Jacobin’ laicism is accompanied by more traditional far-right narratives of Islam – defined as a religion of conquest and submission (Civiltà Cristiana 2015). Just like the populist radical and extreme right, some actors address Islam as ‘intrinsically violent’. These frames are based on the religious superiority of Christianity and on the idea that there is no distinction between so-called ‘moderate’ Muslims and terrorists, because the two disagree only on the means to convert all society to Islam (Magdi Allam 2015).

‘We too often forget that while al Qaeda, Isis and all Islamic criminals are agents of international non-Muslim powers ..., the easiest thing in the world is to convince a militant Islamist to kill a Christian.’ (Civiltà Cristiana 2015)

In particular, this construction combines anti-Islamic narratives and opposition to liberal secularism, suggesting that the international freemasonry uses Jihadi terrorism to influence public opinion against religions, promote a secularist agenda and – ultimately – dissolve western civilisations (Civiltà Cristiana 2015).

Since the enemies of Christianity are both inside (immigrants) and outside Europe (international elites), prognostic frames address primarily the moral and spiritual crisis of the West. Again, the target is liberal democracy, whose values have replaced Christianity and corrupted European identity. Western states must thus prohibit the humiliation of religions in the public sphere. In this framework, the concept of freedom of expression is detached from its liberal democratic connotation, and instead linked to the Christian roots of the West (Corrispondenza Romana 2015a).

‘the West lost and will always lose the clash of civilisations [because] if one puts no limits to freedom and abolishes all identities (such as family and gender), European culture will become nothing but an empty shell’ (Militia Christi 2015b).

In this example, the reference to ‘freedom’ and ‘identities’ is used to stress the relativistic nature of liberal democracy, which is regarded as a self-defeating ideology that will lead Europe to chaos. The predominant understanding is that Europe must rediscover its Christian roots against the nihilistic and relativistic ideologies that have come to dominate the continent (Corrispondenza Romana 2015b). Furthermore, ultra-religious groups demand that Western states put a halt to the ‘criminalisation of Islamophobia’, for which right-wing actors are censored whenever they move critiques to Islam, immigration and multiculturalism (Corrispondenza Romana 2015c; Magdi Allam 2015).

The struggle against secularism and relativism is also at the core of motivational frames. Similar to the extreme right, identification is at the European, rather than at the national level. The main idea is that Europe needs a strong ideology to fight the threats posed by radical Islam, as 'one cannot fight Islam in the name of the Enlightenment' (Corrispondenza Romana 2015c). European people must therefore return to the unchallenged spiritual and moral resources that are rooted in their history. At the same time, however, the liberal democratic principles embedded in the *Charlie Hebdo* debate are mobilised strategically on other issues that are central for the ultra-religious right. Similar to the 'civic' turn in far-right politics, ultra-religious actors mobilised on the issue of freedom of expression and on the symbols of *Charlie Hebdo*, to claim the right of public servants to oppose mainstream values such as 'homosexuality'⁶ and 'gender theory' (La Croce 2015). While accusing liberal democracy of being a weak ideology, therefore, ultra-religious groups use liberal democratic arguments to justify their actions. In this sense, those who contest mainstream values deserve not only the right to have a say in the public sphere but also some form of differential treatment, because they represent a minority within a society dominated by a single hegemonic ideology.

Overall, while ultra-religious actors share some of the basic features of far-right discourse on *Charlie Hebdo*, they stand out for a strictly religious interpretation of the problem, and for a more openly negative approach to liberal secularism. In terms of prevalent explanations, diagnostic interpretations focus on Islam and liberal secularism as incompatible with European Christian values. Prognostic frames focus on the self-defeating nature of liberal democracy, and on the related concept of moral relativism. Like the extreme right, however, motivations for action revolve around the idea of Europe as a shared place of Christianity, and mobilise on the issue of free speech to legitimise opposition to Islam, gay rights and gender equality.

The far-right milieu: united and fragmented

Overall, the far-right discourse during the *Charlie Hebdo* juncture displayed a considerable degree of variation not only in terms of the values upon which different types of actors mobilised but also with regards to the main frames by which they articulated their positions in the controversy. While, as expected, ideological differences resulted in diverging interpretations among the three categories of actors, the analysis also shows a common trend towards the incorporation of liberal democratic principles within narratives of exclusion. Irrespective of ideological and organisational differences between groups, the juncture seems to have given further momentum to the process of renovation in far-right narratives of exclusion, towards new forms of ethnocentrism. Rather than postulating the ethnic superiority of the national in-group, these narratives articulate the harmfulness of pluralism on the basis of the incompatibility of cultural differences, traditions and lifestyles.

If, collectively, the far right recognises itself as a bulwark against multiculturalism and Islamisation, it also presents itself as the true representative of the will of the people, against corrupt political elites. In this respect, the relationship with liberal democracy has proved to be a crucial analytical category by which to disentangle the discourse of different types of far-right actors. The degree of articulation of liberal democratic principles in exclusionist discourse, in fact, appears to be linked to the extent to which far right actors have been embedded in the political system. This is most evident in the case of the populist radical

right, which capitalised on the *Charlie Hebdo* events to stress their liberal democratic credentials against the alleged illiberal nature of Islam. Successfully operating within the democratic system, radical right parties in particular have been best able to tailor their discourse on civic and liberal characteristics of national identity, thus presenting themselves as authentic defenders of Italian democracy. Similarly, extreme-right and ultra-religious right-wing organisations motivated collective action by focusing on the oppressive nature of mainstream consensus. Being considerably more marginal within the system and being engaged primarily in the protest arena, however, these actors attacked do-goodism for its denial of free speech to political and ideological minorities. By portraying themselves as a marginalised – yet loyal – component of the democratic polity, they thus bridged exclusionary ethnic narratives and civic frames. By calling on the right to freely criticise Islam, immigration and religious pluralism, and by addressing gender equality and gay rights as absolutist ideologies, they presented themselves as the real wardens of political tolerance in Italy.

Conclusions

The centrality of freedom of expression in the *Charlie Hebdo* debate presented an important dilemma for far-right actors, as it forced them to confront with issues connected to liberal democratic principles and values. Focusing on the case of Italy, this article has examined the relationship between far-right discursive choices and the opportunities and constraints brought forward by the attacks of 7 January, and more specifically the incorporation of liberal arguments in the exclusionary narratives of radical, extremist and ultra-religious right-wing actors.

Having first argued that the far right benefits from the political climate generated by multicultural crises, I have examined how and to what extent it has coped with the need to shape its discourse in liberal terms in the aftermaths of the Paris attacks. In doing so, I have focused on the contradiction that far-right actors face upon trying to present themselves as the champions of the nation and its culture while at the same time having to recognise that national identities are increasingly rooted in liberal and civic values. I have argued that this is most visible during multicultural crises, as these offer opportunities to mobilise against Islam and immigrants, while at the same time requiring a renegotiation of aspects related to liberal values of free expression and secularism, upon which not all Italian far-right actors are open to compromise. Accordingly, I appraised framing choices comparatively across three types of far-right actors which I distinguished on the basis of their ideological relationship with the crucial dilemmas embedded in the multicultural crisis: the concept of liberal democracy and the criteria for inclusion in the national community. In so doing, this paper addresses a major shortcoming in previous research by producing the first comparative study of narratives of exclusion across types of far-right actors.

The empirical analysis showed that the targets of far right political propaganda, the values upon which they mobilised, and the frames that they used to make sense of social problems are very different depending on the ideology of the various groups that populate this political family. Still, the analysis also showed that liberal democratic principles were incorporated in the narratives not only of populist radical actors but also of extremist and ultra-religious ones. Indeed, it was populist radical right actors that took most advantage of the opportunities opened in the aftermaths of the attacks, as they could frame their rhetoric in civic terms while addressing the incompatibility of Islam with western democratic principles. Yet,

extreme and ultra-religious right-wing actors also incorporated civic principles in their discourse. By portraying themselves as victims of mainstream ideology, they mobilised strategically on the issue of *Charlie Hebdo* and freedom of expression, calling on the right to criticise Islam, immigration and religious pluralism.

In this sense, if the Italian far right does not seem to have completely abandoned its traditional exclusionary rhetoric based on ethnic and religious hate, it was successful in seizing the opportunity to shape its discourse in liberal terms, to gain legitimacy in the public sphere. Taking advantage of the salience of freedom of expression in the public sphere, the far right took up its favourite role of true representative of the will of the people. The *Charlie Hebdo* attacks thus consolidated the process of detachment from traditional racism, in favour of a new paradigm that exploits the resonance of secularism and free speech to make exclusionism appear liberal and progressive and therefore more acceptable in democratic societies. This has crucial implications for the study of the politics of exclusion, as the use of progressive tropes is key to legitimising exclusionism and to translating extremist discourse into the mainstream (Akkerman 2005; Halikiopoulou, Mock & Vasilopoulou 2013; Mondon 2015).

Ongoing multicultural crises in Europe will inevitably inspire further research on the politics of exclusion and the far right, which might come to terms with at least some of the limitations of the present study. As this paper set out to look at prevalent explanations of the Paris attacks within the far-right milieu, it could not ultimately assess whether these discursive strategies were successful in addressing audiences beyond the restricted arena of far-right politics (Mondon & Winter 2017). Similarly, I could not offer quantitative insights into the magnitude of alternative frames, or the extent to which these permeated the political mainstream, as suggested in previous studies (Vertovec & Wessendorf 2010). While acknowledging these limitations, the study further illustrates the process by which far right actors have been shifting the boundaries of national identity by incorporating liberal democratic values in exclusionary narratives.

Notes

1. This series of attacks, initially referred to as the 'Paris attacks', were later identified as the 'January 2015 Île-de-France attacks', to avoid confusion with other terrorist events in 2015 and 2016. In this paper, I use the terms '*Charlie Hebdo* attacks' and '*Charlie Hebdo* debates' without in this way intending to demean the importance of other attacks that took place between 7 and 9 January.
2. What came to be known as the 'Mohammed cartoons crisis' originates in September 2005, when the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published 12 cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed, with the stated goal of opening a debate about the compatibility of Islam with secular democracy. As Danish Muslim organisations objected to the depictions by petitioning the embassies of Islamic countries and the Danish government, the issue grew into a global crisis, receiving prominent media attention and leading to protests across the world.
3. The ERC Advanced Grant Project *Mobilizing for Democracy* was funded by the European Commissions' 7th Framework Programme, under grant agreement number 269136. Full information is available at www.cosmos.sns.it.
4. As can be noted, the number of statements and events retrieved for the ultra-religious right is somewhat lower than the figures reported for the radical and extreme right, respectively. While this is arguably linked to the limited mobilization potential of the ultra-religious right in Italy (both online and offline), the analysis provided here does not offer sufficient leverage to speculate on this finding in quantitative terms.

5. *Buonismo*, which I translated here as ‘do-goodism’ is a recurring concept in Italian far-right politics. The term is used derogatorily to refer to political correctness, and to the behaviour of people willing to help society by championing oppressed minorities through philanthropic or egalitarian means. Do-gooders are accused of imposing a progressive agenda on issues such as gender equality and multiculturalism while at the same time denying free speech to anyone who does not share this political paradigm.
6. In far-right discourse, the term ‘homosexuality’ is used to mark a difference between homosexuality as a behaviour (which is tolerated by most groups, at least publicly), and the indoctrination of the homosexual lifestyle, especially among children.

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