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RESEARCH ARTICLE

DIRECT SOCIAL ACTIONS IN EXTREME RIGHT MOBILISATIONS
Ideological, strategic and organisational incentives in the Italian neo-fascist right

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ABSTRACT: Social movements scholarship has increasingly turned to the study of direct social actions (DSAs) in times of economic hardship. This paper broadens this perspective to extreme right organisations. Combining a Political Claims Analysis of newspaper articles and online press releases, with a qualitative discussion of online propaganda material, we explore the engagement in direct social activism by three neo-fascist organisations in Italy: Forza Nuova, Fiamma Tricolore and CasaPound Italia (1996 -2015). Our findings suggest that their propensity to direct social activism, rather than being exclusively related to economic distress, responds to a broad set of ideological, organisational and strategic incentives. Ideologically, DSAs are linked to the interpretation of the relationship between ideas and action of historical Fascism and of parts of the Italian neo-fascist tradition. Organisationally, DSAs serve as a tool to build support and solidarity, especially at the local level. Strategically, they are used to frame activism as a direct intervention in defence of interests of native peoples, and against political elites accused of being unresponsive to the needs of citizens. Our results offer a first empirical observation of the use of DSAs by extreme right actors, paving the way for comparative work at the cross-national level and on different arenas of engagement.

KEYWORDS: direct social actions, extreme right, neo-fascism, repertoires of action, Italy

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1. **Introduction**

One of the most striking images of the current economic crisis shows Golden Dawn militants engaged in the distribution of food in the streets of Athens (Ellinas, 2013, p. 559). The example of the Greek party found resonance in the actions of far right organisations in other European countries, including Italy, where neo-fascist actors promoted the distribution of pasta to Italian families and various other forms of direct social actions. Unlike for the radical left (Bosi and Zamponi, 2015), however, this type of social campaigns have attracted little attention in studies on right-wing politics. With the goal of filling this gap in social movement and far right scholarship, this paper investigates the relevance of direct repertoires of political action among far right organisations in Italy[1], analysing their characteristics, function, and meaning for right-wing activists. Studying these phenomena, in fact, is of crucial importance not only to understand the development of far right politics, but also to apprehend the nature of social mobilisation in times of economic recession at large.

Direct social actions (from now DSAs) can be differentiated from traditional forms of political contention in that they do not address representative authorities demanding the mediation of the state for the solution of a public problem. Rather, they build on "the idea of a self-changing society" (Bosi and Zamponi, 2015, p. 371), and contribute directly to the resolution of phenomena perceived as dysfunctional. Previous studies suggested that left-wing movements deploy alternative forms of resilience, such as mutualism, boycotts, critical consumerism and solidarity actions, as a way to bypass state-addressing repertoires of action, thus blurring the distinction between the public and the private sphere in political engagement (Kousis and Paschou, 2014). Scholarship on far right politics, instead, focused predominantly on explaining the rationale for the success of the radical populist right in the electoral arena (see for an overview Mudde, 2016). While some attention has been devoted to activism outside electoral politics (Gunther and Diamond, 2003; Minkenberg, 2003), we still lack empirical investigations addressing the logics of far right collective action (Caiani et al., 2012; Kitschelt, 2006).

[1] The definition of political organisations acting at the right-wing end of the European political space caused much conceptual disagreement in this subfield of studies. This impasse has been partly resolved by the German Constitutional Court, which defined 'extreme' the organisations who openly oppose the democratic constitutional order, and 'radical' the ones that are simply hostile towards liberal democratic principles. The focus of this paper is primarily on extreme right actors inspired by the ideology of historical fascism and neo-fascism. When instead we make reference to both extreme and radical actors we use the umbrella notion of "Far right" as suggested by Mudde (Mudde, 2000, p. 12).

As of today, the study of the far right in social movement literature is in its infancy, so that strategic choices of far right actors mobilisation are largely unexplored (Bulli and Castelli Gattinara, 2013; Caiani and Borri, 2013).

This article offers a first empirical observation of the nature, role and meaning of direct social activism among extreme right organisations in Italy. Accordingly, our first research question is: what is the role of direct social activism in the mobilization of the far right? Italy was selected as the best country to conduct this research due to the presence of a number of grassroots extreme right actors, and the intensity of the economic crisis, two indispensable characteristics necessary to conduct the analysis of direct social engagement by right-wing activists. This gives rise to our second research question: is there a relation between direct social activism and the unfolding of the economic crisis? At the same time, Italy offers a particularly interesting case because there are a multiplicity of extreme right actors that mobilise on socioeconomic affairs taking inspiration from the tradition of Italian Fascism, and these actors vary in the degree to which they engage in the protest and in the electoral arena (Castelli Gattinara et al., 2013). Consequently, our case selection allows us to answer a third, related question: How are the key elements of direct social activism articulated in the mobilisations of different types of extreme right movements and parties? While we focus on a single case study, thus, our analysis may be generalized well beyond the case of Italy, and may prove useful to understand right-wing extremism across different European contexts, as well as organisational types.

Our point of departure is recent research investigating militant engagement and participation in extreme right movements (Bouron, 2015; Albanese et al., 2014; Di Nunzio and Toscano, 2011). Theoretically, we combine insights from social movement literature with evidence from research on the ideology of the fascist and neo-fascist right, which helps contextualising this form of contention within the broader ideological framework of the fascist doctrine and its neo-fascist legacy (Gentile, 2013; Tarchi, 1995, 2010). Since the extreme right considers ideology and action as two inseparable building blocks of political engagement, we look at how this idea informs its organisational structure and militant practices in terms of direct social activism.

In order to see whether the notion of Direct Social Action stands up to empirical scrutiny for the extreme right, we compare the mobilisation of three neo-fascist organisations in the Italian extreme right, investigating the issue focus, objectives and rationale of direct social activism by *Forza Nuova* (FN)*, Fiamma Tricolore* (FT)*,* and *CasaPound Italia* (CPI) over the last 20 years (1995-2015). We thus propose a mixed methods approach triangulating a Political Claims Analysis of mass media reports and online press releases, with a qualitative assessment based on the material about DSAs pro-

duced by the actors and made available online. Our results show that the propensity of the Italian extreme right to engage in DSAs responds to ideological, strategic and organisational incentives. Our empirical observation of extreme right DSAs in Italy also enables to draw some explorative comparisons with similar practices in the left progressive camp. From this point of view, our results indicate that the main characteristic of direct activism by the extreme right are the criteria for inclusion and exclusion of addressees and beneficiaries, so that DSAs are crucially intertwined with notions of ethnic and cultural differentialism between natives and non-natives.

The paper is articulated as follows. First, we review the literature on far right politics in light of the emerging scholarship focusing on direct social activism. Subsequently, we elaborate our framework of analysis, case selection, and present the data. We then move on to the quantitative empirical analysis of DSAs in the repertoires of mobilisation of the three actors, and the qualitative discussion of their meaning for neo-fascist activists and organisations. Finally, we summarise our comparative findings, suggesting that DSAs play a crucial role in contemporary extreme right mobilisation in Italy, albeit with very different meanings and intensity across groups.

2. The far right, mobilisation and repertoires of contention

As the number of successful electoral actors of the far right rose in the past decades, so did the scholarship on the European far right (Mudde, 2016). Previous research distinguished between macro-, meso- and micro-level explanations of far right emergence and success (Eatwell, 2016). Traditional approaches explain the breakthrough of radical right populist parties in terms of macro-structural factors, including economic and social transformations at the national, supranational and global level, which are often embraced by the umbrella concept of *crisis* (Arzheimer and Carter, 2006; Taggart, 2000; e.g. Betz, 1994). Right-wing activism is understood as a reaction to modernisation and globalisation, which restructured the crucial political cleavages of European democracies (Kriesi, 2008; Minkenberg, 2000; Kitschelt and McGann, 1997; Ignazi, 1992). Meso-level studies, instead, have focused on the link between context and individual concerns, focusing on the "local organisations to which individuals belong, or through which they gain knowledge and norms" (Eatwell, 2000, p. 350). Accordingly, far right mobilisation is primarily explained at the group level, in terms of organisational characteristics, membership, leadership and resources (Art, 2011; Norris, 2005; Van der Brug et al., 2005; e.g. Bjorgo and Witte, 1993). Finally, some researchers have ob-

served the far right from the inside, analysing radicalisation and militancy within these organisations emphasising the role of individual motivations, militant trajectories and life experiences (Albanese et al., 2014; Blee, 2003, 2007; Klandermans and Mayer, 2006).

More recently, some authors have tried to combine individual, organisational and structural factors to explain far right political mobilisation (Pirro, 2015; e.g. Mudde, 2007). This approach allowed to observe the strategies of mobilisation of far right actors, underlying the heterogeneity of their strategic choices and repertoires of actions (Caiani and Borri, 2013). At the same time, previous studies have addressed ideological factors embedded in their mobilisation, distinguishing among extreme right, radical right and populist right-wing players (Castelli Gattinara and Froio, 2014; Caiani and Borri, 2013; Mammone et al., 2013; Griffin, 2003). Building upon this research, we shall concentrate our attention on the strategic, ideological and organisational incentives for neo-fascist mobilisation in contemporary Italy.

First, we focus on ideological incentives linked to the Fascist doctrine and neo-fascist experience, which conceived politics as pure political activism, and as direct, immediate, decisive action (De Felice, 1997). On the one hand, the contemporary extreme right is inspired by the idea of community developed in the Fascist social doctrine, focusing on principles of direct participation and economic solidarity.[2] On the other, it owes much to the communitarian and social orientation of some components of the Italian neo-fascist right of the 1970s (Tarchi, 2010), which endured until today under the label of "Social Right" (Caldiron, 2009). Direct social activism thus relates to multiple ideological dimensions of the fascist and neo-fascist phenomena, such as the organic conception of the national community, the cult for action, the opposition to parliamentary democracy, and communitarianism (Tarchi, 2003). As a result, DSAs do not only express a distrust towards institutional mediation, but also a mystic duty of solidarity for the militant.

Second, we emphasize the hybrid nature of neo-fascist organisations, which have been seen to straddle the conceptual space between political parties and social move-

[2] Discussing the social doctrine of Italian Fascism goes beyond the scope of this essay. Yet, it is worth mentioning that this notion is rooted in the historical experience of the Social Republic and in the 18 points of the Verona Charter (1943), outlining the corporatist fascist economy. This was based on socialisation, which provided for the participation of employees in profits (with the exception of those "belonging to the Jewish race"), and corporatism, which involved the harmonious collaboration between social classes. The social doctrine thus envisaged a third way between market and Marxist economics (Gentile, 2013; Santomassimo, 2006; De Felice, 1997), which is why it was also used, in more recent times, by neo-fascist organisations to propose a political and social alternative to both capitalism and Marxism (Lanna and Rossi, 2003).

ments (Gunther and Diamond, 2003). We anticipate that the nature and intensity of DSAs is linked to organisational incentives, in that organisational choices are linked not only to strategic issue attention, but also to the allocation of resources and the apportioning of activists' labour. In this sense, fascist and neo-Fascist parties are more similar to social movements than to institutional organisations, in that they represent communitarian conglomerates that respond to the perceived ineffectiveness of representative politics with decisive and concrete actions (Gentile, 2011; Tarchi, 2003, p. 142). Accordingly, the configuration of groups as a party, a social movement or even a movement party (Kitschelt, 2006) is likely to have an impact on mobilisation choices, radicalisation and propensity to opt for DSAs rather than other repertoires of action.

Third, we underline how DSAs may be part of the strategic willingness of the extreme right to take advantage of social hardship and state inefficiency in order to build consensus. Strategic incentives imply that far right actors make preventive assessments not only of the material impact of the DSAs that they promote, but also of their impact in terms of the public image and respectability of the group. Beyond their impact on social situations perceived as emergencies, in fact, direct social activism may be associated with high newsworthiness in times of crisis, with direct consequences in terms of recruitment, membership, and legitimisation in the public sphere. Accordingly, we suggest to conceptualize DSAs not only as forms of social intervention and material protection, but also as part of a broader mobilisation strategy challenging a State perceived as corrupt, inefficient, and unresponsive to the demands and interests of native populations.

3. Design of the study and methods

In this study, we examine three ideologically similar and organisationally different extremist right-wing actors from Italy: *Fiamma Tricolore* (FT)*, Forza Nuova* (FN), and *CasaPound Italia* (CPI). While in earlier years FT – and to a lower extent FN – built profitable alliances with more successful right-wing populist parties, in recent times the three actors have been highly unsuccessful in electoral terms, especially when compared to more moderate political parties in this area. However, the cases were selected because, ideologically, all three actors openly claim to be linked to Italian Fascism,

with a particular emphasis on its social doctrine.[3]As we shall see, this implies a considerable continuity with the interwar experience, not only in terms of identity of fascism, but also in terms of strategies and repertoires of contention. In sum, within the political milieu that emerged after the dissolution of the *Movimento Sociale Italiano*, these three groups represent today the most visible extreme right organisations.

Focusing on their history and organisation, we tentatively categorise them according to their institutionalisation and investment in the electoral arena (Kitschelt, 2006). In this respect, FT represents a prototypical example of an extreme right political party, in terms of self-definition and participation in elections (FT, 2014, 2016), as it was founded in 1995 to oppose the moderate turn imposed by the leadership of the main actor of this area, the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (Rao, 2014). In contrast, CPI is a social movement composed of a set of political and cultural associations who claim their origins in Italian Fascism (Di Nunzio and Toscano, 2011). While the group initially joined the youth section of FT (2006-2008), and while it still occasionally ran in elections, CPI generally privileges the organisation, rhetoric and practice of social movements (CPI, 2016a; Rao, 2014). FN is instead located in between. On the one hand, it is significantly more institutionalized than CPI, it deploys an organisational infrastructure more similar to political parties than grassroots movements (FN, 2011a), and it regularly participates in elections. On the other, FN originates from an earlier splinter in the youth component of FT, justified by the desire for a more organic collaboration with political and subcultural groups of the neo-fascist right (including skinhead organisations, cf. Veneto Fronte Skinhead, 2016),[4] and by the propensity of FN leadership for more confrontational forms of political contention (FN, 2016a). Hence, the groups that gave birth to FN first and CPI later share the experience of having been – at least temporarily – an integral component of the party structure of FT, most notably the youth wing. Similarly, both groups have subsequently opted for splinters mainly due to disagreements with the leadership and the rigidity of the party apparatus, which constrained their ambition towards more spontaneous forms of political activism. Yet, while both actors originally emphasised the organisation and practice of social movements, FN has arguably expe-

[3] We purposely excluded other groups from the same area, such as *Alleanza Nazionale, La Destra* and more recently *Fratelli d'Italia-Alleanza Nazionale.* In so doing, we followed the groups that emerged after the dissolution of the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI) in 1995 (Ignazi, 2003; Tarchi, 1995).

[4] While an exhaustive discussion of the Italian skinhead movement would require much more space than allotted herein, it is important to underline the increasing propensity to direct social engagement by organisations belonging to this area. These include relatively established associations such as *Cuore Nero* and *Lealtà-Azione,* as well as no-profit organisations focusing exclusively on direct activism, including *Bran.co, Memento, Una voce nel silenzio, Wolf of the ring,* among others (Osservatorio Repressione, 2016).

rienced a more pronounced process of institutionalisation over the past years, as exemplified by a more stable structure and more regular participation to party competition.

The empirical analysis is based on a Political Claims Analysis (PCA) of newspaper articles reporting on far right mobilisation. Data were extracted from the daily broadsheet *Il Corriere della Sera,* retrieved from the *Factiva* digital archive (1996-2015).[5] Newspaper articles were selected using a capacious search string intended to capture all articles that contain implicit or explicit reference to CPI, FT and FN. This led to the identification of 1029 claims. Each claim contains different elements: the location of the claim in time (when) and space (where), the claimant/actor making the claim (who), the form of the claim (including a category identifying DSAs), and the substantive issue it addressed (what).[6] While critics of PCA underline that not all forms of political action are publicly visible, researchers have relied on this method to systematically assess the amount and features of collective action (Koopmans and Statham, 1999). By looking at visible patterns, one can gain a first overview of the mobilisation of a given political actor, in a given context, overtime (Hutter, 2014). Hence, press-based analyses are considered a useful (even if partial) instrument to build up systematic, long-term databases on protest (Berkhout et al., 2015; Caiani et al., 2012).

Nonetheless, we took up the challenge of addressing the shortcomings of PCA in two ways. First, we look at mobilisation based on one additional source of data: the online press releases produced by the groups under observation. While this strategy enabled applying PCA beyond media biases (Hänggli and Kriesi, 2010), online archives were available only for CPI (2009-2015). Second, we integrated the quantitative analysis with a qualitative assessment of the nature and content of DSAs. To this end, we retraced the DSAs on the online platforms, Facebook and Twitter pages of the three actors, analysing qualitatively the material made available to promote these campaigns. With precaution and many interpretative caveats, we are convinced that this mixed methods approach provides sufficient leverage to discuss the relationship between far right actors and direct social activism in terms of ideological, organisational and strategic incentives, in a comparative perspective.

[5] To address potential newspaper and ideological biases, we controlled for news coverage in a newspaper with slightly different ideological leaning: *La Repubblica*. The results showed no relevant cross-newspaper differences.

[6] The full codebook is available upon request.

4. Direct Social Actions and the Italian far right: a quantitative overview

In line with the above discussion, our empirical analysis will first look at DSAs using mass media data. Subsequently, we will address this type of actions using protest events retrieved from the online press releases of CPI. Finally, we will focus on the content of the retrieved material and offer a qualitative comparative assessment of direct social activism for each of the three organisations.

The visibility of DSAs in the mass media

Mass media data will be used to highlight three aspects of direct social activism: the relevance of this practice of contention relative to overall mobilisation of extreme right actors in Italy; the substantive content of the identified DSAs in terms of issue focus; and the geographic distribution of DSAs in the Italian territory. Accordingly, Table 1 displays the number of DSAs over the total amount of actions retrieved for FT, FN and CPI. As it appears, all three organisations have resorted DSAs over the past years. Yet, this form of activism does not represent a substantial portion of their repertoire of action. In media coverage, only 6% of extreme right actions correspond to forms of direct social intervention.

Table 1. Direct Social Actions by neo-fascist organisations in Italy (1996-2015)

Organisation	**Share of Direct Actions (%)**	**Direct actions by group (%)**
Forza Nuova	17/ 498 = 3,2%	27,4%
Fiamma Tricolore	15/ 228 = 6,6%	24,2%
CasaPound Italia	30/ 303 = 9,9%	48,4%
Tot.	62/1029 = 6.1%	100%

Source: Il Corriere della Sera

Bearing in mind the abovementioned media biases in terms of selectivity and newsworthiness, our empirical analysis of media material provides valuable information concerning the relative weight of direct activism within the broader repertoires of contention of the Italian extreme right. First, direct activism appears to be considerably more relevant for younger actors such as CPI, as opposed to FT and FN who are more

attached to the organisational structures and strategies of mobilisation of traditional political parties. On a total of 303 protest events promoted by CPI, 30 (10%) correspond to our definition of DSAs, whereas only 15 actions were promoted by FT (7% of their total actions), and 17 by FN (3%). Put differently, CPI alone accounts for about half of the total DSAs identified in the observed period. These findings are even more striking if one takes into account that FT and FN are considerably more long-lived than CPI, as they started their political activity respectively 8 and 5 years earlier.

By looking at the two primary issues upon which DSAs were promoted, we can have a first glance of the substantive content of this form of mobilisation, which will be further discussed in the qualitative part of the analysis. A vast majority of DSA have a direct focus on socio-economic affairs, with a special emphasis on unemployment, housing and poverty (46%). These include actions such as the squatting of abandoned buildings in response to the housing emergency (CPI), the distribution of food to impoverished Italian families (CPI, FN), and the promotion of solidarity purchasing groups (FT). Next to socio-economic interventions, however, other issues also play a significant role, including immigration (23%) and law and order issues (14,5%). In this respect, the three organisations promoted direct interventions to ensure security at the neighbourhood level, the squatting of buildings predisposed to the sheltering of families, and street blockades to prevent the settlement of migrants and Roma people. Finally, a third category of DSAs (10%) includes a number of emergency actions relating to natural disasters (civil protection) and international cooperation.

Table 2. Direct social actions by issue (1996-2015)

Issue	**N**	**%**
Socio-economic affairs	28	45.1
Immigration	14	22.6
Law and order	9	14.5
Civil protection & cooperation	6	9.7
Environment	1	1.6
Other	4	6.4
Tot.	*62*	*100%*

Source: Il Corriere della Sera

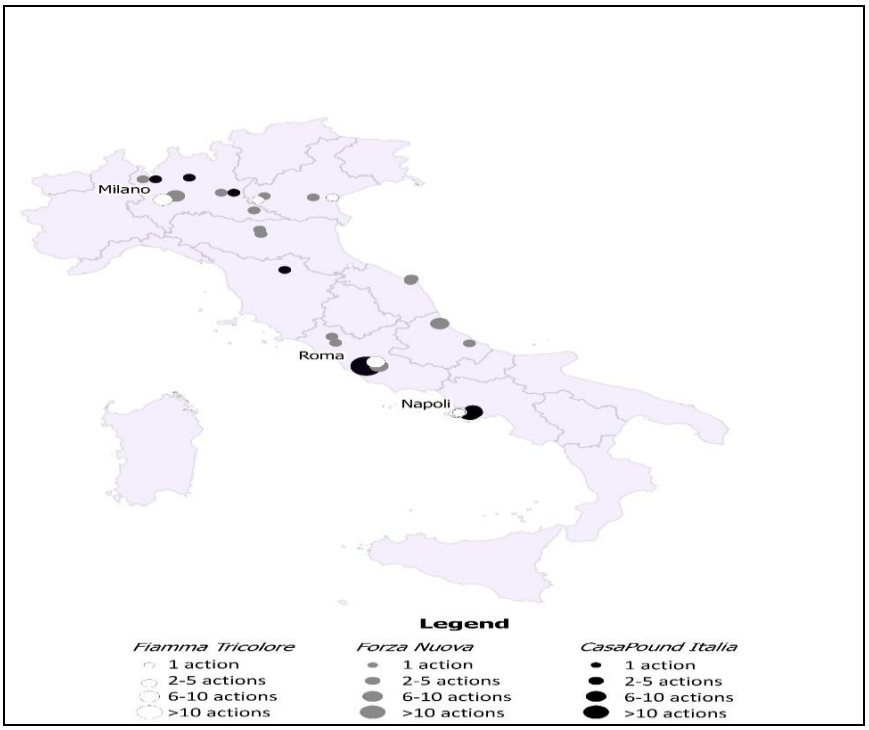
Finally, Figure 1 shows that the geographic distribution of DSAs is far from homogeneous. Large metropolitan areas host the vast majority of DSAs. While political actions taking place in regional capitals might enjoy higher media visibility, this figure also illustrates how the Italian extreme right has been integrating into local territories, so that it can now count on a relatively structured network of activists and communities in charge of direct social interventions. As a result, all three observed actors concentrate most of their direct activism in cities such as Rome, Milan and Naples. A second characteristic emerging from the geographical distribution of far right DSAs is the imbalance between the frequency by which these occur in northern and central Italy compared to the south, with the exception of the city of Naples. Most actions by CPI and FN take place in Lombardy, although both actors are also active in Lazio. FN and FT also appear to engage in DSAs in the northeast, in particular Veneto.[7]

DSAs in CPI's online press releases

In order to integrate the comparative figures discussed above, we now look at the relevance of DSAs in the online press releases produced by the extreme right. This part of the analysis will only focus on CPI. While this choice has to do with the unavailability of online press release data for either FN and FT, we consider that an exclusive focus on CPI is justifiable considering the importance that DSAs play in the repertoire of contention of this organisation. What is more, since online press releases do not exclusively address the mass media, but are also used for internal communication with militants and sympathisers, this part of the analysis enables us to assess the internal supply side factors explaining direct social activism, at least for the case of CPI. The archive of online press releases is in fact available on the website of the organisation, which is used by CPI's leadership to interact with the media as well as to inform about the activities, mobilisations and official statements promoted by the group.

Figure 1. Geographic distribution of Direct Social Actions in Italy

[7] With the data at hand, however, it is not possible to assess whether these findings are related to a real difference in engagement across northern and southern regions, or rather to a media bias associated to the use of a Milan-based newspaper.



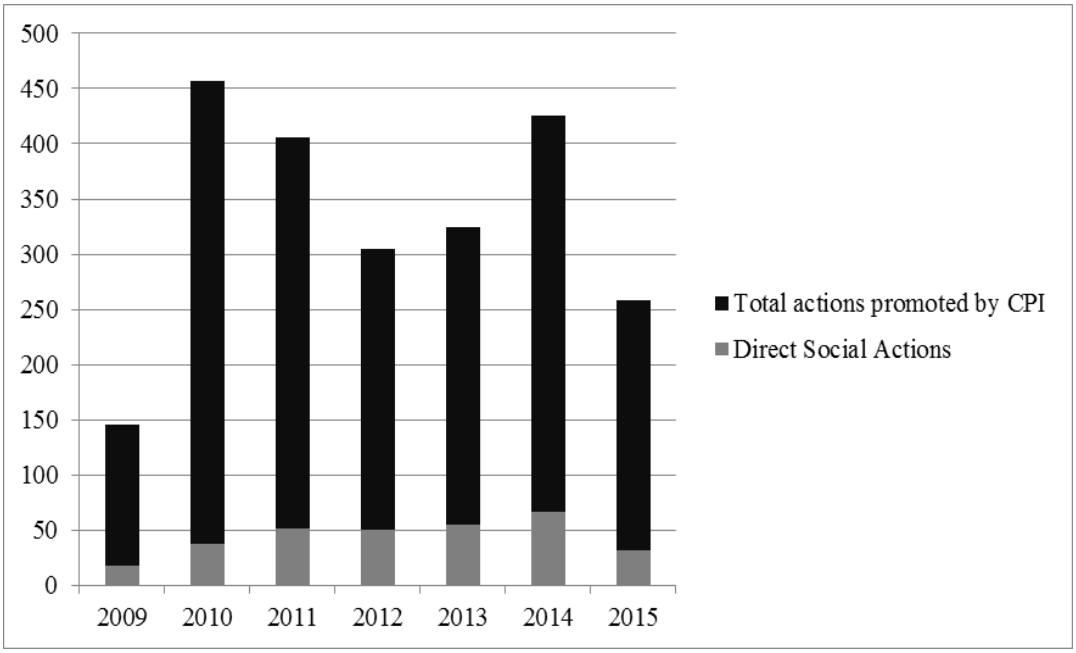
In total, we identified 2,010 actions promoted by CPI over the period 2009-2015, out of which 311 correspond to our definition of DSAs (15%). While unsurprisingly this source of data provided information on a considerably higher number of public events compared to media data (six times more), the share of DSAs over the total actions identified in the media and press releases is comparable, accounting for 10% and 15% of the overall mobilisation, respectively. Put differently, while ostensibly CPI's online press releases put a certain emphasis on direct social interventions compared to media coverage, our data does not show the presence of a particularly sizable media selection bias, at least in relative terms. Figure 2 below shows the total amount of actions promoted by CPI on a yearly basis, emphasising (in grey) the share of DSAs over the total.

Looking at the substantive content of the online press releases we can also draw some comparisons concerning the issue focus of CPI's direct social interventions. Similar to what was discussed at the aggregate level in the previous section, DSAs concentrate primarily on socio-economic issues (36%). These may take the form of confrontational actions and occupations primarily focusing on housing, but also a range of care

programmes addressing the elderly, the unemployed and disabled people. Volunteering activities include medical and paramedical assistance, job counselling and a number of trade union services. Interventions on themes related to immigration and law order only account for 15% of the DSAs and are largely concentrated in 2014 and 2015, in concomitance with the refugee crises. In these years, CPI promoted neighbourhood committees with the goal of banishing migrants and to prevent their settlement in specific city quadrants. More sizable, instead, are emergency solidarity activities and international cooperation interventions (18%). These actions generally occur in the aftermaths of natural disasters, such as earthquakes and floods, in Italy and abroad. In these occasions, CPI coordinates with its affiliated NGOs to promote fundraising and militant volunteers to provide assistance to the affected populations. Finally, a number of direct actions address environmental issues (9%), like environmental regeneration projects to reclaim degraded and polluted areas, whereas a few others offer free services such as summer camps and after-school facilities to families and children (8%).

In short, the findings of the quantitative content analysis of online press releases by and large confirm the ones outlined in the previous section. Tough we cannot draw substantial conclusions concerning FN and FT, the evidence of a limited media bias for CPI corroborates our previous results on the weigh, scope and focus of DSAs for the Italian extreme right in general. Nonetheless, the analysis of online press releases provided us with further empirical evidence supporting our argument that DSAs represent a crucial feature of the repertoire of contention of CPI. While the observed time-span is relatively short, our data indicates that the weight of this form of action is not subject to drastic fluctuations over time (either in absolute and relative terms). On the one hand, in fact, the data reported in Figure 2 suggests that DSAs represent a solid option in the menu of alternative forms of actions from which CPI activists can choose. On the other, it also suggests that, irrespective of the propaganda of the organisation, DSAs are not prevailing over more traditional forms of contention, even when one considers communication material produced directly by CPI activists.

Figure 2. Direct Social Actions promoted by CasaPound online (2009-2014)



Source: Online archive of press releases by CasaPound.

The meaning of DSAs in the extreme right: A comparative qualitative discussion

In order to investigate the meaning attributed by the extreme right to DSAs, we made a qualitative analysis of direct social actions performed by FN, FT and CPI and promoted through their online platforms by means of comment pieces, press releases, pamphlets and calls for action. In particular, we investigate the diffusion of such practices in function of ideological, strategic and organisational incentives.

As observed earlier, DSAs find a primary justification in the idea that Fascism is action and it is thought at the same time. According to Gentile (2013), Fascism understood itself as action with an immanent doctrine, and doctrine arising from action. In the narratives of Italian extreme right militants, activism is primarily understood in terms of direct activism that corrects existing political and economic contradictions by means of a material, immediate intervention on social reality. From this point of view, all three actors have a certain tendency towards direct social activism, if not in their actual everyday practices, at least in their collective narratives of engagement. CPI frequently describes its political mission by stressing the "social commitment" of its mili-

tants and supporters (CPI, 2016b). Similarly, FT connects with the fascist and neo-fascist idea of pure activism by calling on militants to become living witnesses, and actors, of an alternative way of life and of a truly honourable behaviour (FT, 2016). The organicist understanding of the national community promoted by FN, finally, also relates to direct social activism based on similar justifications. Nonetheless, due to a considerable inclination towards Catholic values, DSAs are also justified in light of the religious moral of the "gift of the self" to the community (FN, 2016b). The ways in which these ideological understandings of direct social activism are implemented in political practices, however, can vary substantially across actors, depending on organisational and strategic incentives.

DSAs are crucial in the repertoire of protest of CPI, which ostensibly combines forms of mobilisation typical of party organisations of the neo-fascist right, with activities that are considerably less conventional, at least for this political area. The most known form of direct activism by CPI is occupations of public and private properties and in particular houses, which are justified by the need to provide immediate answers to urgent problems. The emergency frame is associated to the *need to act* and redress social injustices: in the shadow of the housing crisis[8], CPI calls on DSAs to provide material help to families in distress, challenging the immobility of the political representatives and of traditional political parties of the far right. While this type of direct activism combines anti-establishment narratives with practices of contention that are somewhat unconventional in the realm of far right politics, other DSAs are more resonant with the tradition of the neo-fascist right, including confrontational actions such as the organisation of lock-on against the settlement of Roma camps, and solidarity initiatives such as the distribution of free food to Italian families.

The heterogeneous action repertoire represents one of the hallmarks of CPI, which uses it to underline its diversity from other organisations of this area. By looking at the targets, repertoires and objectives of direct activism in CPI, we could identify five different categories of DSAs associated to core issues in CPI's discourse (CPI, 2016a). First, conflictual actions managed by the leadership in Rome, like the abovementioned housing occupations and the anti-Roma lock-on, but also the unauthorised patrolling services to ensure security against crime. Second, voluntary actions providing services such as social health care and workers' unionism. Third, civil protection actions promoted in response to emergencies connected to natural disasters. The latter two may also include environmental actions and activities of international cooperation, man-

[8] For an overview of housing conditions in Italy and Europe see http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained [Accessed: 23 November 2016].

aged by CPI's environmentalist association and by a network of NGOs. While these associations allow preserving the image of CPI as open to decentralised grassroots initiatives, they also allow the group to act strategically on issues on which it does not enjoy reputation or credibility, and often pave the way to CPI's access to public financing and sponsoring.

Before discussing the role of DSAs in the action repertoire of FT, it is useful to recall FT's location on the movement-party continuum. As we observed earlier, FT is the most long-lived actor under observation, and it displays an organisational structure and behaviour more in line with traditional political parties, in terms of internal processes and external mobilisation (cf. Kitschelt 2006). Accordingly, we could find very little empirical evidence of engagement in DSAs, especially in recent years. The ambition towards direct social interventions is more pronounced in FT's ideology than in its actual organisational and strategic practices. The few DSAs that could be identified are also embedded in the traditional repertoires of contention of the neo-fascist right, and focus on topics such as the protection of Italian citizens' security and the preservation of public morality. In 1996 FT promoted the initiative *Operazione Fiamme nella Notte* (Operation flames in the night), described as a spontaneous initiative of neighbourhood committees intended to put a halt on drug dealing in Milan. More broadly, vigilante activities are arguably the principal way in which FT understands direct activism by its militants: on the one hand, because community watches offer an immediate response to perceived insecurity by Italian citizens (FT, 2011); on the other, because they integrate the function of police authorities, delivering services that Italian political elites and institutions would be incapable to provide (FT, 2009). Similarly, FT also promoted "green patrols" with the purpose of alerting competent authorities about environmental threats reported by citizens (FT, 2012). Besides these, in 1997, and more recently in 2013, FT organised a street distribution of food to Italian families, claiming in this way to offering a "concrete" answer to economic and social hardship, addressing "the proletariat, students, the unemployed and pensioners" (FT, 2013).

While DSAs may focus on different issues, they share the common objective of setting an example for the nation. FT aims to lead the way, showing the substantial difference existing between neo-fascist activism oriented at constructing a tangible alternative for the society, and the inefficiency of political elites and state institutions. While ideologically DSAs represent an important mobilisation option, they do not stand out as either a recurring feature of its strategy of contention, or as a defining feature of its organisational structure. Unlike what we have observed for CPI, DSAs for FT are just one of the possible options for contention, within a broader set of alternatives. The

choice to opt for DSAs is therefore arguably linked to the perception of a demand for this form of action in the group's constituency, and the anticipation that direct activism might help widening the resonance and potential audience of FT.

As regards FN, the analysis of mass media reports indicates a scarce relevance of DSAs in the group's mobilisation strategy. Still, a more in-depth qualitative analysis of its political trajectory shows that direct repertoires of contention are all but irrelevant. As the group was first formed as a grassroots branch within the youth wing of FT, social movement practices were considerably more visible in FN's activism in the 1990s and early 2000s. It is in this period that FN first promoted the "Evita Peron" summer camps for children from low income families. With these, the group aimed at showing that its activism is "side by side with the needs of the people", whilst "serving as an example of the services that the state should provide" (FN, 2011b). In addition, FN promoted programmes to mobilise citizens as "politically concerned consumers", emulating the activities of sustainable community movement organisations (Forno and Graziano, 2014, p. 142). This is the case of FN's campaigns for the purchase of Italian products (*Gruppi d'Acquisto Compra Italiano*) or the one envisaging the introduction of a complementary currency to address public debt at the regional level (*Moneta di Popolo*). These DSAs promoted disintermediation in the supply chain, allowing "Italian manufacturers to deal directly with Italian consumers […] so that the currency circulates from Italian to Italian, from worker to worker" (FN, 2011c, 2013). Threatened by the appearance of CPI, moreover, in the mid 2000s FN launched a series of DSAs focusing on housing issues (*Nuclei Azione Casa*, NAC). On the one hand, the NAC were described as "solidarity associations ready to act wherever it is needed, offering a militant response to the housing emergency" (FN, 2004). On the other, they also represented an attempt to compete with the emergent CPI on the political repertoire of squatting as an alternative housing strategy. Competition also emerged in later years, with respect to other highly resonant DSAs. In particular, FN responded to the free distribution of food to impoverished Italian families by CPI by promoting "non-demagogical" initiatives for price control, such as selling bread at minimum price (FN, 2008).

Despite a certain attention to issues such as housing and purchasing power, however, the bulk of FN's direct social activism has to do with security. Similar to what was observed for FT, DSAs entail the organisation of community watches and vigilante services, in response to the state's dysfunctional system of collective security. Put differently, since the state lacks the resources (and interest) to finance territorial police forces, FN's 'patriots' are called upon to fill in its functions on the territory. While the data at hand does not allow to assess the effectiveness of these actions, examples of this type of DSAs abound also in recent years. In 2007 and in 2011, in concomitance with

the so called "Roma emergency" in Italy, FN promoted vigilante groups for the removal of Roma camps and the deportation of illegal Roma residents in Italy (Sigona, 2011). Similarly, in the following years the group promoted multiple voluntary associations offering services on problems allegedly neglected by law-enforcement authorities, such as community watches (FN, 2014, 2016d, 2016c), the safety of bus passengers (FN, 2016e), abusive parking (FN, 2016f), and anti-Italian racism (FN, 2016g), alongside numerous other initiatives at the local level.

In sum, the qualitative comparative analysis shows that the three most visible organisations of the Italian neo-fascist right differ in terms of the frequency by which DSAs are displayed, the emphasis placed on this form of contention, and the main themes of the actions. The analysis undeniably indicates that FT is less prone to direct social interventions than either FN and CPI, and that CPI puts considerably more emphasis on this form of political engagement than FN, especially from the point of view of its internal organisation and external propaganda. Yet, DSAs turn out to be all but irrelevant for FN, especially in its early years and in terms of anti-immigration politics.

Notwithstanding these differences, the analysis also identified three main similarities. First, there is considerable continuity in the use of DSAs. While targets and objectives change over time, DSAs have recognisable antecedents in the communitarian experiences of the neo-fascist social right, and find their justification in the Fascist social doctrine and its propensity for direct activism. Thus, DSAs ought not be regarded as a simple reaction to periods of economic distress. On the contrary, they represent one of the multiple options by which the extreme right challenges the state and political elites who are accused of not fulfilling their social contract obligations (Halikiopoulou and Vasilopoulou, 2016).

Second, our analysis shows that direct social activism is not only mobilised in function of its immediate impact on social reality, but also in order to advance nativist political frames and an ethnocentric economic model in which state services are an exclusive prerogative of the native population. This is most evident when the far right organises food markets: if the slogan of CPI's campaigns against the high cost of living is "some Italians don't surrender", FN specifies that food is exclusively intended "for Italian citizens holding a valid ID card", and FT very clearly states that "Italian bread, Italian salami and Italian wine will be distributed to Italians only". Third, immigration and security stood out as a crucial theme for extreme right's *nativist* direct social activism, ultimately setting apart this practices from similar ones taking place in the left-progressive camp. Next to including economically marginalised Italians, far right DSAs

thus also aim at marginalising non-native ethnic groups, such as migrants, Roma people, and – more recently – refugees and asylum seekers.

5. Concluding remarks

The paper aimed at shedding light on the usage and meaning of direct social actions within the extreme right. Our research was informed by an attempt to apply interpretive categories developed for the study of left-progressive social movements, to the study of extreme right politics. For this, we focused on the most visible actors of the Italian neo-fascist right, i.e. FT, FN and CPI, and provided at least some initial empirical evidence to support the argument that DSAs represent a crucial feature of extreme right repertoire of contention.

First, we contextualised direct social activism in the ideological background of the Italian extreme right, looking at the heritage of interwar ideas and at the experience of Italian neo-fascism. This allows to challenge the idea according to which DSAs would represent a prerogative of extra-parliamentarian left movements. While the extreme right irreconcilably differs from these actors in terms of the groups targeted for inclusion and exclusion, it similarly relies on the idea of a self-changing society which avoids the mediation of the state for the solution of public problems. Our findings indicate that the use of DSAs by Italian neo-fascist organisations is associated with the need to offer and to stage concrete answers to problems perceived as urgent, especially but not necessarily in times of crisis. The logic of public emergencies (related to the economy, security or natural disasters) is thus crucial to legitimise direct social mobilisation. At the same time, DSAs are connected to an increasing distrust of political authorities and the liberal democratic state. In this sense, social interventions address dysfunctional public services to serve as an example of how the state ought to intervene.

The mapping of claims-making in the media, further corroborated by data from extreme right online press releases and in-depth qualitative comparisons, indicates three patterns of variation in direct social activism by the Italian extreme right. First, variation has to do, at least to a certain extent, with the actors promoting the mobilisation. While direct social engagement is recurrent across all the actors under observation, the quantitative and qualitative enquiry equally indicated that CPI is the actor emphasising this form of politics the most. As it appears, direct social activism is deeply intertwined with the group's internal organisation and external propaganda. Yet, our analyses also indicate that DSAs represent a viable strategic option for FT, and a frequent one for FN, which share at least part of CPI's approach to militant practices. In line with our over-

arching expectations, thus, a main conclusion of this research is that DSAs are more frequent among social movement groups like CPI and, to a lesser extent, FN, than among institutionalised political parties like FT. A second pattern of variation pertains to the issue focus of far right DSAs. While we could identify some overlaps in terms of issue attention, we found that the three groups address relatively divergent themes when they engage in direct forms of political contention. Notwithstanding these differences, a common feature of extreme right DSAs is their *nativist* nature, in that they intend to include economically marginalised natives while simultaneously excluding ethnic minorities and migrants. The third pattern of variation has to do with overtime change. Our data suggests that solidarity and mutualistic direct actions are by no means a novelty in the political repertoire of the extreme right, and that their frequency did not increase significantly with the outbreak of the 2008 financial crisis. Instead, there is considerable continuity in the occurrence of extreme right DSAs over time, and a direct link between contemporary practices and the memory of similar forms of contention by antecedent parties and movements.

Comparisons broadening the number of actors under observation, as well as the type of empirical data at hand, are needed in order to see whether the behaviour of the Italian neo-fascist right represents an exception, or rather a rule, in how the extreme right engages in direct social activism. In this respect, the activists of the identitarian movements in France have been promoting a number of campaigns that resonate with the ones reviewed in this paper. Most notably, since 2003 the *Bloc Identitaire* promotes a weekly distribution of soups made of pork, to denounce the impoverishment of French families and the 'anti-French' racism of mainstream charity associations. Furthermore, our findings have implications for future research, because they show that DSAs are not only related to the socio-economic context, but also to ideological, organisational and strategic incentives pertaining to the extreme right itself. Going beyond the focus of the present study, future research should investigate to what extent these mechanisms find resonance in the society at large, looking at aspects that could not be addressed here due to limitations in the available data, such as the actual size of the participants and of the beneficiaries of far right DSAs. Similarly, the framework outlined in this study would benefit from further empirical evidence, offering more systematic comparisons of DSAs in extra-parliamentarian left and right-wing movements. These might include analyses of cross-fertilisation of movement practices, tracing the diffusion of DSAs not only in time and space, but also across different political camps and ideological paradigms.

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