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The Italian Far-Right in the Digital Age: Media,
Consumption and Imagery

Introduction

It was autumn 2009 and in the streets of Rome numerous propaganda posters with the face of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara and the *CasaPound* logo had appeared (Fig. 1)[1]. On the face of the revolutionary Argentinian were emblazoned the words *'Aprendimos a quererte'*. The event did not go unnoticed, like other similar experiments (Fig. 2), as CasaPound in Europe was known as the first and most important community of the so-called *Destra Non Conforme*[2] (now known as the DNC), a major component of the polymorphous galaxy of 'continental right-wing extremism.' The aim of this paper is to analyse the implicit transformation of the symbolic short circuit that we have briefly mentioned, starting with the identity between the immediate object of our research, extremism, and practices through which it is expressed, the Internet (Benjamin, Agamben 2001). The study presented here, dealing with the aesthetic aspects and the cultural and communication process es of the DNC, moves within the disciplinary field of mediological and cultural studies[3]. What arises, like a horizon of reflection, is the reciprocal relationship of influence between media

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[1] Source of all images: <www.casapounditalia.org> (last access 31.03.2017).
[2] With the designation 'Destra Non Conforme' we refer to the neo-fascist movement commonly known as 'CasaPound Italia'. The type of definition proposed relates to the same protagonists of this movement.
[3] A collection of studies that deals with: the relationship between forms and cultural change (Simmel, Benjamin, Abruzzese); the relationship between the media, cognitive forms, and expressive forms (McLuhan); the distinction between strategies of social power and tactics of everyday life (De Certeau, Hebdige); and finally to a positive and not a negative definition of the imagery products of the cultural industry (Morin).

and societal and political forms. Figuring out how much and in what way this form of right-wing political extremism will conform to the general characteristics of the network society (Castells, 1996) is therefore the main focus of this paper.
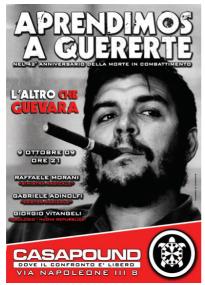

Fig. 1 – *CasaPound Poster: Ernesto 'Che' Guevara*

Fig. 2 – *CasaPound Poster: Corto Maltese*

The imagery of the media and consumption in the identity processes of political extremism

«I hope you realize what you're doing».
«Not exactly. We sat at opposite ends of the table, undistracted by Julia's presence. You're going to tell me».
«I am» Sangster examined his swollen hands, and picked a splinter from his thumb. «In a way it's quite an achievement. Back in the nineteen-thirties it needed a lot of twisted minds working together, but you've done it by yourself».
«Is my mind twisted?».
«Definitely not. That's the disturbing thing. You're sane, kindly, with all the genuine sincerity of an advertising man».
«So what have I done?».
«You've created a fascist state».

«"Fascist?" I let the word hover overhead, then dissipate like an empty cloud. In the ... dinner party sense?».
«No. It's the real thing. There's no doubt about it. I've been watching it grow for the past year. It's been stirring in its mother's belly, but you knelt down in the straw and delivered the beast».
«Fascist? It's like "new" or "improved". It can mean anything. Where are the jackboots, the goose-stepping Brownshirts, the ranting Führer? I don't see them around».
«They don't need to be» Sangster watched me with a quirky smile that never completely formed, as if I were a destructive pupil he disliked but was unaccountably drawn to. «This is a soft fascism, like the consumer landscape. No goose-stepping, no jackboots, but the same emotions and the same aggression. As you say, there's a strong sense of community, but it isn't based on civic rights. Forget reason. Emotion drives everything. You see it every weekend outside the Metro-Centre». (Ballard, 2006: 319-320)

This conversation allows us to introduce the fundamental meaning that consumption practices have taken on for the DNS. Especially if you look at how it currently creates its own collective identity. The scenario above by Ballard in his famous novel 'Kingdom Come' highlights a type of fascism fuelled by the significance that the experiences of consumption were having on provincial England at the dawn of the third millennium. In this novel it is easy to find a number of typologies in which the author recognises the fulfilment of this new fascism: the football fan, the Christian nationalist, and fanatical shopper.

The process, well described by Ballard, between consumer practices and the construction of collective identities or typologies, is what characterises the profound nature of the DNC. Somehow, what creates aggregation and social bond within this group is the common adherence to a lifestyle, a way of eating, dressing, or spending one's free time. The definition of extremism is therefore the result of a way to use every day objects[4]. It is clear that this transition from the concrete dimension of consumption to that of an abstract of collective identity can verify itself only in the presence of a reference of imagery. On the other hand, as we remember Colin Campbell, the symbolic potential of the consumer lies in:

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[4] In this sense, it is interesting to note that the imaginary fantasy of Tolkien's *'The Lord of the Rings'* was used in the sixties and seventies as a representative element of their identity in Europe by far-right movements, and the United States against the Californian culture.

«the desire to experience in reality the pleasurable dramas which they have already enjoyed in imagination, and each "new" product is seen as offering a possibility to realising this ambition. However, since reality can never provide the perfected pleasures encountered in day-dreams (or, if at all, only in part, and very occasionally), each purchase leads to literal disillusionment, something which explains how wanting is extinguished so quickly, and why people disacquire goods as rapidly as they acquire them». (Campbell, 1987: 90)

In the early nineteen sixties Edgar Morin stated that imagery, especially that which was produced by the culture industry and consumption, could be considered the 'concrete' basis on which to place the life of the individual and the community (Morin, 2001). In this thesis, essential to our research, we can approach in terms of political phenomena the studies of Benedict Anderson on imagined communities (Anderson, 1991). The idea, namely, that every political community achieves its own story through both real and imaginary data, where the latter often has a greater unifying power compared to the former. Therefore, the role of the imaginary is determined with absolute evidence for the DNC, especially in its way of approaching the world of consumption and the media. Like in Kingdom, as the reader 'reads' about the birth of a new fascism on the bodies of the characters described by Ballard which were adorned by polo shirts with the cross of Saint George, as well in the public spaces in the city of Rome and in the medial spaces of social networks, the symbolism and the identity of the DNC can be recognised on a range of clothing, gadgets, cultural products, memes, gifs, and especially images. To analyse the DNC therefore means being able to understand the manner in which this movement makes itself readable to society. The opinion of De Certeau (1984) is exemplary on this transition when he says that historically the normative discourse:

«Only works if it has already become a story, an essay on a reality that speaks in its own name, or a law distorted, historicized, and then told by the bodies. Its result in the story is the precondition to produce other stories making them believe. And the instrument accurately guarantees the transition from speech to story». (De Certeau, 1984: 97)

The twentieth-century sense of extremism can only feed the 'political' relationship between writing and reading, as it has been described by De Certeau.

The centrality of extremism

On the basis of the read-write relationship De Certeau offered generations of researchers a perfect theoretical interpretation with which to analyse the symbolic power of productive consumption practices, especially within collective aggregations like fun, subcultures, and extremists (Jenkins, 2003; Boyd, 2015). However, today we witness a technological event that forces us to question the 'pace' at which the relationship between the imagery of the media and consumption and the daily lives of people manifests itself. Different types of digital media, particularly social networks, overlap the temporal levels of consumption, utilisation, and reprocessing. Recollection and introspection allowed by the Gutembergian media and mass media (McLuhan, 1962; 1964) are now almost impassable in social networks, since in the whole of the latter the user constantly observes and yet is perpetually being observed. This is of course, in McLuhanian terms, a consequence of the nature of the medium, and not immediately of the content that it is transiting (McLuhan, 1967).

In this way, examining the many blogs, social pages and profiles close to the DNC one easily notices the 'structural' similarity to other web pages dedicated to various topics. The uploaded content is organised according to types and forms – text, images, audio-video, links – established by the technological device used. The extreme consequence of this precondition is observable in any video produced by this political movement and uploaded to the Internet through YouTube. Inside the frame runs the video recording of a CasaPound rally ahead of the local elections in Rome, at the bottom an ad banner suddenly appears that reminds us about the impending registration deadline of a Master's course at a well-known private communications and design institute. This shows us how in the realm of the Internet a bizarre and very significant cohabitation between extremism and some mundane element of the main stream is now possible (Figg. 3-4).

Even more interesting is to note how the well-established habits of YouTube users to this kind of advertising insertion by no means

Fig. 3 – *CasaPound Poster: Fundraising Campaign*

Fig. 4 – *CasaPound Poster: Acknowledge for Facebook Likes*

prevents the viewing of the video, nor hinders the political message it conveys. The juxtaposition, this term seems fitting, of the banner on the video of CasaPound, however, shows a clear complex entanglement between political phenomena, political categories, and media processes, especially if one takes into account the good fortune and the meaning that the concept of extremism has enjoyed and continues to enjoy in global scenarios. Is it therefore still possible to evoke the concept of extremism when describing political phenomena of this kind? That's hard to say. Certainly, the Internet's modes of communication, and in particular those of social networks which shape the language of extremism, produce major changes between the latter and the rest of society. This does not mean that the subversive potential and anti-democratic policies of these formations has failed. It simply must be observed, especially for the purpose of a theoretical advance in media studies and the phenomena related to them, as the historical evolution of a concept (extremism) is unaffected by the changing medium through which it is expressed.

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