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Introduction

On the Extreme Right and Transnational History

Even though he was referring to the study of interwar right-wing extremism, Robert Paxton, in his famous *The Five Stages of Fascism*, had highlighted the importance of a non–nation-centered framework for analysis:

> Comparison works revealingly with fascisms, since every Western society has contained at least some marginal example. Their different fates across time and space in neighboring settings should help us to identify the principal factors in the varying success of specific cases, and even to isolate the constants.[1]

However, even the term "comparison" does not fully account for the scope of my book, including the convergence between French and Italian extremists in political attitudes and strategies and tracing the dynamics of what I perceive to be a genuine transnational actor. In essence, I also assume the existence of a common historical ground between the extreme right in these two neighboring countries – two nations that, as highlighted previously, shared a long and fruitful history of exchanges. The political and cultural phenomenon of right-wing extremism is hence taken and analyzed as a whole, focusing on patterns of commonality and ideological transfer. In such a perspective, the following pages do not focus simply on the history of the French and Italian neofascisms per se, but on what unifies them – in other words, on their transnational history.[2]

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[1] Robert Paxton, "The Five Stages of Fascism," *Journal of Modern History*, 70(1), 1998, p. 10.

[2] For nation-based studies in the English language, see instead, for France, the informative work by James G. Shields, *The Extreme Right in France: From Pétain to Le Pen* (London: Routledge, 2007).

The natural outcome of this approach is, first, a rejection of the use of any narrow national label to classify parties and party-families. As we shall see, an example of this issue is the belief that a party like the FN is stemming from a local, French-based, national-populist tradition. To be fair, this is not a very uncommon reading of histories of the various forms of nationalisms. The historiography of nationalism

> still remains for the most part embedded within the overwhelming predominance of national (or regional) case-studies, while being increasingly well anchored in a theoretical perspective and often inspired by an (implicitly or explicitly) comparative perspective. The problem is not only that the nation(-state) continues to encapsulate most research on nationalism and the nation. National inferences also tend to impregnate research monographs with a comparative perspective.[3]

All this is here even aggravated, because the classic ultra-rightist doctrine has been often perceived to be indissolubly related with the concepts of nation and race. Parties and political cultures belonging to the right of the mainstream right might be consequently better analyzed only in given national contexts, as they are tied with some deep virtues of the fatherland and should be mainly seen as genuine products of single nation-states. Hence, these prominent features led some scholars to consider the extreme right as an exclusive national tradition, and profoundly different from similar foreign movements, regimes, and doctrines.[4]

For fascism in France and Italy, this has been evident in relation to the academic schools associated with famous historians such as René Rémond and Renzo De Felice. These scholars promoted an image of the extreme right linked with a domestic historical pathway and were followed in such efforts by a good number of historians. In 1954, Rémond published his famed *La Droite en France de 1815 à nos jours* (The French Right in France since 1815 to the Present), where he developed the well-known theory of *les trois droites* (basically, the three

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[3] Xosé-Manoel Núñez, “Nations and Territorial Identities in Europe: Transnational Reflections,” *European History Quarterly*, 40(4), 2010, pp. 675–76.

[4] Setting aside the recent Finchelstein, *Transatlantic Fascism*, for the interwar years, one of the exceptions to this trend is probably represented – at least partially – by Alexander De Grand’s book on Germany and Italy, where he also tried to demonstrate the copious similarities between fascism and National Socialism. For the contemporary era, Jeffrey Kaplan and Leonard Weinberg have instead highlighted the common identity of a Euro-American radical right. See Alexander J. De Grand, *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: The ‘Fascist’ Style of Rule* (New York: Routledge, 1996); and Jeffrey Kaplan and Leonard Weinberg, *The Emergence of a Euro-American Radical Right* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

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right-wing variants). To summarize, according to this approach, historically, France had not experienced a unique right-leaning momentum but three different rightist permutations: *légitimiste*, *orléaniste*, and *bonapartiste*. In such a classification there was space neither for fascism nor for the influence of non-French paradigms.[5] On the other hand, De Felice produced a monumental range of scholarly material, which was translated into different languages and included many volumes on Benito Mussolini. Just like Rémond, his approach tended to depict fascism as a purely local phenomenon, which could be understood only within a certain geographical context and alongside the role of Mussolini. All this, in De Felice's estimation, made, for instance, any comparison with Hitler's Nazism untenable.[6]

However, all this failed to acknowledge any fascist connections and exchanges across the whole of Western Europe and not merely the links between Germany and Italy. This similarly looks a bit paradoxical: trans-, supra-, and pan-national are, in fact, not obscure concepts in fascist history, nor, as I shall show, were they uncommon in the post-1945 period. They were certainly favored by the inner "universalist" tendencies of some fascist currents. This originally developed in interwar Italy (and in France with intellectuals such as Robert Brasillach) and gathered around the periodical *Antieuropa*; however, even the mainstream fascist journals *Critica Fascista* and *Gerarchia* contributed to a *fascismo universale* (universal fascism).[7] People such as Eugenio Coselschi, Alvero Gravelli, Herman De Vries de Heekelingen, and James Strachey Barnes

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[5] For a challenge to this approach, and among the various contributions on French fascism, see Brian Jenkins, ed., *France in the Era of Fascism: Essays on the French Authoritarian Right* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005); Michel Dobry, ed., *Le mythe de l'allergie française au fascisme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2003); Robert Soucy, *French Fascism: The Second Wave, 1933–1939* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995); Robert Soucy, *French Fascism: The First Wave* 1924–33 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986); and Robert Soucy, *Fascism in France: The Case of Maurice Barrès* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

[6] Some recent research in this field is instead suggesting the use of a more flexible approach for the study of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. One should, in fact, look at the "fascist entanglement" between the two nations: This would not be simply a history of transfer, but also of interconnectedness and mutual influences. See Christian Goeschel, "*Italia docet?* The Relationship between Italian Fascism and Nazism Revisited," *European History Quarterly*, 42(3), 2012, pp. 480–92.

[7] For example, *Gerarchia*, in October 1932 (no. 10), devoted a special issue to "Fascismo Idea Universale" (Fascism: A Universal Idea) that hosted articles by foreign fascists, including British fascist Oswald Mosley, and a good number of other analyses of foreign permutations of the fascist idea.

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and organizations such as the Fasci Italiani all'Estero (fasci abroad), the International Center of Fascist Studies (also simply known as CINEF), and the Comitati d'Azione per l'Universalità di Roma (Action Committees for the Universality of Rome, the CAUR) played a significant role.[8] This also led to visits and transfer and a fascist conference that in 1934 that gathered some of the future representatives of European fascism. According to historian Marco Cuzzi, "The originality of universalism and of its practical application, namely, fascist internationalism, was grounded in the perception of a corporatist, hierarchical, totalitarian, antidemocratic, and deeply racist Europe."[9] This corporative Europe, along with the German pan-Europeanism and its mythology, were also all to be reformulated in the postwar years.

In line with this, this introductory section will specifically attempt to advocate (again) the importance of more rounded historical and cross-national analyses for the study of political phenomena, introduce readers to some of the relevant scholarship in this field, and, starting from the following section, discuss the use of some approaches, histories, and labels to classify and grasp the nature of extreme-right movements.

A CASE OF NATIONAL POPULISM?

Some of the interpretations of interwar history had an impact on the scholarship, the academic classifications, and the understanding of modern right-wing extremism (and probably influenced the public opinion and some of the media). One should wonder if this is, essentially, also a sort of *ars oblivionalis* (art of forgetfulness). There is, in fact, at times, a small and direct link between memorial and intellectual interpretations of the past and legitimization of the present and of contemporary ideologies and political movements.[10] In some intellectual circles in France, this

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[8] One of the few sources in English on fascist universalism is Michael A. Ledeen, *Universal Fascism: The Theory and Practice of the Fascist International* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1972). In Italian see Marco Cuzzi, *L'Internazionale delle Camicie nere. I CAUR, Comitati d'azione per l'universalità di Roma 1933–1939* (Milan: Mursia, 2005), and Marco Cuzzi, *Antieuropa. Il fascismo universale di Mussolini* (Milan: M & B Publishing, 2007). On the fasci abroad see Luca De Caprariis, "'Fascism for Export'? The Rise and Eclipse of the Fasci Italiani all'Estero," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35(2), 2000, pp. 151–83.

[9] Cuzzi, *Antieuropa*, p. 8.

[10] On this relationship see also John Coakley, "Mobilizing the Past: Nationalist Images of History," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 10(4), 2004, pp. 531–60, and Andrea Mammone, "A Daily Revision of the Past: Fascism, Anti-Fascism, and Memory in Contemporary Italy," *Modern Italy*, 11(2), 2006, pp. 211–26. This is not an isolated

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contributed to the adoption of the category of the *national populisme* (national populism) to classify parties such as the FN.[11] In some cases, even the label "extreme right" disappeared because it was regarded as vague for modern movements.[12] In other cases, the FN was considered in the context of other French populisms (the *populismes à la française*) such as *boulangisme* and *racisme fin-de-siècle*.[13] The common denominator of these works was the (intended or unintended) building of a scholarship that insisted on the exceptionality of the FN.

Paradoxically enough, a party such as the FN came to be analyzed in the terms provided by its own leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, as a "popular, social, and national right,"[14] a definition that in some academic circles was perceived as the most accurate because Le Pen's movement would be a typical case of national populism.[15] According to this view, ideologically, this latter would endorse the contemporaneous presence of a protest dimension and, more notably, of a nationalist one

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case. By way of example, the debates "about the Nazi past have created very different environments for right-wing political parties and movements in Germany and Austria." In particular, the culture of victimization in Austria have provided a very fertile ground for the resurgence and recent success of the indigenous extreme right: see David Art, *The Politics of the Nazi Past in Germany and Austria* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. x.

[11] See, among others, Pierre-André Taguieff, "La rhétorique du national-populisme (I)," *Cahiers Bernard Lazare*, 109, 1984, pp. 19–38; Pierre-André Taguieff, "La rhétorique du national-populisme (II)," *Mots*, 9, 1984, pp. 113–39; Pierre-André Taguieff, "La doctrine du national-populisme en France," *Études*, 364, 1986, pp. 27–46.

[12] See Pierre-André Taguieff, "Un programme révolutionnaire?" in N. Mayer and P. Perrineau, eds., *Le Front National à découvert* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1996), p. 196; and Michel Winock, *Nationalisme, antisémitisme et fascisme en France* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), p. 39.

[13] See, among many others, Michel Winock, "Populismes Français," *Vingtième "Siècle*, 56, 1997, pp. 77–91. For a critique of this approach see Annie Collovald, *Le "Populisme du FN." Un dangereux contresens* (Broissieux: Éditions du Croquant," 2004); Annie Collovald, "Le 'national-populisme' ou le fascisme disparu," in M. Dobry, ed., *Le mythe de l'allergie française au fascisme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2003); and, in general, Andrea Mammone, "The Eternal Return? Faux Populism and Contemporarization of Neo-Fascism across Britain, France and Italy," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 17(2), 2009, pp. 171–92.

[14] From a transnational standpoint, this statement became a very popular slogan for other parties. Benito Mussolini's granddaughter, Alessandra, a contemporary politician to be mentioned later in the book, said that "we are the new popular, social and national right." Alessandra Mussolini, "Elezioni politiche. Alternativa Sociale ci sarà," *Azione*, February 10, 2006, p. 1.

[15] Winock, *Nationalisme*, p. 39.

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(*demos plus ethnos*).[16] It is precisely this element referring to the nation, national citizens, and identity that would allow some scholars to classify the FN, and other fellow parties, as national-populist, and France would represent the ideal-type of this party family. In this perspective, the FN should be analyzed as a mixture of Bonapartism or national-popular Caesarism (for example, Peron), reactionary-xenophobic populism (belonging to Enoch Powell among others), and the "populism of politicians." All this also led to the identification of five major (alleged) features characterizing Le Pen's national-populism: (1) the political appeal to the people, (2) the appeal to the whole population (in theory with no class distinction), (3) the direct call to the "authentic" and "honest" people, (4) the call for a purifying "change" (represented by the savior, namely, the party leader), and (5) ethnic discrimination.[17]

Yet these distinctive characteristics of national populism are not a peculiarity of French history. On the contrary, they are shared by much of the extreme-right party family. It is therefore debatable whether one should choose the FN as the perfect type. Moreover, even fascism encompassed many (if not all) of the previous traits. In a similar vein, "national populism" is not even a novel academic concept. In the late 1970s, sociologist Gino Germani, for example, had distinguished different Latin American populisms, the liberal and the national, and this latter "occurred mostly after 1930 in the epoch of mass-mobilization."[18]

In reality, in France, national populism allows the extreme right to appear reasonably different from the controversial Vichy regime and Charles Maurras's Action Française.[19] This national historical interpretation considers the FN mostly as the heir to anti-Dreyfus nationalism, Boulangism, and/or Poujadism (some of which are also retrospectively labeled like national populist). The overriding impression is that the use of this term to describe the extreme right is, first of all, related to the belief that democracy is deeply and irreversibly rooted in postwar France (and Europe) and that the resurgence of fascism is henceforth impossible.[20] Moreover, if France was pure and immune during the turbulent interwar years, "immunity" as such was taken for granted in the post-fascist era. In this way, classifications provide a sort of political

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[16] Pierre-André Taguieff, *L'illusione populista. Dall'arcaico al mediatico* (Milan: Mondadori, 2003), p. 136.

[17] Ibid., pp. 141–52.

[18] Gino Germani, *Authoritarianism, Fascism, and National Populism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1978), p. 96.

[19] Collovald, *Le Populisme du FN*, p. 35.

[20] Ibid., p. 58.

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and democratic legitimization of right-wing extremism.[21] In summary, by playing down the importance and presence of a French fascism and by failing to consider fascism as a wider European and transnational phenomenon, the terms populism and national populism replace fascism/neofascism as the used terminology.

This alleged populism generally became – also in many international studies – the synthesis, the recent label for the extreme right. Remarkably enough, but not surprisingly, it is usually well accepted by the parties it wishes to describe (because it is “une injurie polie,” to use Annie Collovald’s words). However, as I mentioned previously, populism does not represent a latecomer in the history of political phenomena, and it is not a new historical concept. It is recognized to have deep roots in the “various agrarian movements that arose throughout North America, Russia, and parts of Western Europe in the late nineteenth century. Indeed, American journalists coined the term ‘populism’ in 1896 to describe the People’s party that contested the American election that year.”[22] Populist movements also had a great importance in Latin America, where they adopted a more urban nature. This was due to the fact that local populism “was a reaction against the authoritarian nature of the late nineteenth century metropolitan revolution.”[23]

The main threat of some of these intellectual abstractions is, paradoxically again, an over-simplification of party philosophy. Populism passes over the authentic strategies adopted by the FN (not to mention all the small parties in Italy that still look at the “positive features” of Mussolini’s regime). It does not similarly offer a comprehensive observation of the extreme right as realpolitik. Many of the contemporary populist themes are not also really novel. For example, it is argued that the recent (extreme/

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[21] Collovald, “Le national-populisme,” pp. 279–80. As suggested, this might in fact lead (1) to the bypassing of the (uncomfortable) burden of the (fascist) past and (2) to different perceptions of some parties which thereby seem less dangerous in people’s eyes. In this sense, “national populism” erases from public memory the discredit that comes from being labeled or perceived as fascist or even belonging to the extreme right. Moreover, the national populist category really became a rather “polite insult,” although one which then serves to make the extremist ideology even more respectable or acceptable into the political system (and, I wonder, if possibly gives it the opportunity to be placed in a more moderate and genuinely French rightist tradition). See Collovald, *Le Populisme du FN*, p. 53.

[22] Trevor Harrison, T. *Of Passionate Intensity: Right-Wing Populism and the Reform Party of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), p. 6.

[23] Michael L. Conniff, “Introduction: Toward a Comparative Definition of Populism,” in M. L. Conniff, ed., *Latin American Populism in Comparative Perspective* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), p. 13.

radical right) populism supports moralization against the allegedly corrupted and inefficient political system. This is not an innovative discourse: According to historian Paul Corner, from the start, the same Italian fascism "proclaimed its aim of . . . moralising Italian politics. During the regime the cult of the ethical state was the most obvious and continuing expression of this ambition."[24] In the postwar years, the moralization of politics quickly became a tool of the neofascist MSI against mainstream parties. Among the many examples, this was succinctly exposed by a propagandist electoral banner that was published by the party newspaper on July 7, 1983: "A new republic: a promise of renewal, sociality, moralization."

In such a context, national populism was acceptable as only one of the FN's features, not as the prominent or the overarching trait. Moreover, populism may convincingly be simply regarded as a form of political argumentation (and/or action), with parties adopting a very simple and direct communication style. It cannot be considered as a proper ideology; neither can it be particularly applied to all the postwar and recent extreme right nor to the movements, activists, and thinkers described here, as it is an episodic phenomenon, often stemming from the crisis of representative politics and political legitimization, and excessively variegated and eclectic for the purposes of my book.

Some scholars have, in fact, rightly introduced the image of a populism lacking universal key beliefs.[25] This is "invariably remedied with values of other ideologies."[26] We cannot, consequently, stretch this container concept too far. There is a considerable lack of homogeneity in the so-called political group characterized by populist attitudes.[27] It would, in fact, be very complicated to include the FN, the MSI, Silvio Berlusconi, or even leaders such as Tony Blair and George W. Bush, Margaret

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[24] Paul Corner, "Everyday Fascism in the 1930s: Centre and Periphery in the Decline of Mussolini's Dictatorship," *Contemporary European History*, 15(2), 2006, pp. 195–96.

[25] Paul Taggart, *Populism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000), pp. 3–4.

[26] Ibid., 2000, p. 115.

[27] Christopher Husbands highlights the fact that "it is not merely that the populist attribution gives to these movements a homogeneity that they do not have but rather it may give them the wrong sort of homogeneity. If some of these movements really are defined ideologically in terms of neoliberalism or libertarianism and others in terms of xenophobia and racism, then it should be recognized that they are different types." Christopher. T. Husbands "How to Tame the Dragon, or What Goes Around Comes Around: A Critical Review of Some Major Contemporary Attempts to Account for Extreme-Right Racist Politics in Western Europe," in M. Schain et al., eds., *Shadows over Europe: The Development and Impact of the Extreme Right in Western Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2002), p. 51.

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Thatcher, and José Bové, and then Pierre Poujade, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, Ronald Reagan, Pat Buchanan, and Boris Yeltsin, in the same distinctive populist galaxy. Where is the full rationale behind this?

CONTINUITY AND TERMINOLOGY

This "exceptionality" is, however, not confined to the studies on this nebulous national populism. Other, less narrow and nationally focused analyses have excluded the possibility of comparing two of the political movements described here, the FN with the MSI.[28] The main divergences are apparently found in three domains: (1) the different history of parties, (2) their relationship with the political system, and (3) their ideological patterns and cultural references. I will deal shortly with some of these points, but according to these studies, it would be exactly this last point that is most crucial "since the MSI is largely inspired by the fascist tradition and the FN is not."[29] Le Pen's party would be allegedly "more concerned with present day political issues than with a glorious fascist past, which it repudiates even in its French version (Ligues of the 1930s, the Vichy regime)."[30] If, at the beginning of the 1990s, the MSI certainly seemed to be rather different from the FN, this approach ignores the real evolution of the parties, their previous links, the different national socio-political contexts of the 1980s (which allowed the rise of the FN and which are discussed in Chapter 6), the genuine ideological references of the FN, its historical revisionism and heritage, the importance on FN life of other genuinely fascist-like leaders and party officials, the background of some of its members, the foreign influences, and, possibly, the relevance of the mythology of Vichy to that party.

As suggested in the Preface, *Transantional Neofascism* is generally different from many works on the contemporary extreme right in another way too. It also assumes a pattern of "continuity" within the history of right-wing extremism in some European countries. This distances my approach from other existing academic (and disciplinary) tendencies.[31]

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[28] Piero Ignazi and Colette Ysmal, "New and Old Extreme Right Parties: The French Front National and the Italian Movimento Sociale," *European Journal of Political Research*, 2 (1), 1992, pp. 101–21. This study is based on an analysis of survey data from middle-level party elites collected at the 1990 FN and MSI national conferences.

[29] Ibid., p. 101. [30] Ibid., p. 110.

[31] In general, classic fascism and the recent extreme right became two very distinct fields of analysis, and "students of contemporary manifestations of right-wing extremism have 'pushed on the accelerator' to escape earlier debates centred on, for example, the fascist

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Although it is true that the book essentially devotes only some of its pages to the very recent extreme right, and basically none to "classic" interwar fascism, I still insist on these patterns of historical continuity and on the importance of a long-term historical analysis for a better understanding of recent political processes.[32] This is not really common, as the overall belief is that a new form of extremism, different from its ancestors, developed in recent times. This fundamentally contributed to the ahistorical reading that the extreme-right saga started only in the final stages of the past century when everything seemed a novel story and an unexpected event (and I shall mention how this caused additional problems from a definitional standpoint). Paradoxically, many questions were – and still are in some cases – then left unanswered on the table: May these processes be observed in other times and places? Are modern movements really new? What about the biographies and beliefs of their founders, leaders, and activists? What do we really know about the history of these extreme-right parties and their precursors? How many studies have been based on primary sources and archival documents? What could we also learn from these rightist movements' interconnected histories? What about the extreme-rightist perceptions of interwar (fascist) movements, ideals, and cultures, and some early Cold War thinkers? Would our understanding of the extreme right improve if some analyses were also based on in-depth knowledge of national languages and cultures and political histories of parties, rather than focusing solely on large quantitative data and secondary sources?

In addition, as we have seen, some authors suggest that the ideological and structural differences between "new" radical/extreme right/populism and "old" neo-fascist parties are more important than the similarities. As in the case highlighted earlier, by following this logic, we should not even compare the MSI and the FN, because these parties respectively belonged

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credentials of the *Front National* or *Vlaams Belang*." Matthew J. Goodwin, "Grandpa's Fascism and the New Kids on the Block: Contemporary Approaches to the Dark Side of Europe," *Ethnopolitics*, 6(1), 2007, p. 146. Moreover, as I also mentioned, historians have hardly focused on the postwar right-wing extremism.

[32] This is what I named the "historical line" that unifies old extremism with its recent permutations ("C'è una linea storica che unisce la destra di oggi e quella di ieri. Si è cercato il nuovo nemico in Islam e immigrazione, adattandosi a un mondo diverso. Caratteristiche principali sono l'odio verso il diverso, il "noi contro loro," la purezza, le tradizioni, la religione, il favorire il cittadino indigeno"). See Andrea Mammone interviewed in Stefano Giantin, "L'Europa ha trascurato la rete estremista interna," *Il Piccolo*, July 27, 2011, p. 7.