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Giorgia Meloni and Gray Neofascism: A Conservative Party of the Right in Power

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines Giorgia Meloni's political rise to power within the context of the neofascist *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI), the post fascist *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN) and *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI), as well as current populist politics. *Fratelli d'Italia,* I argue, embodies many of the ideas and political attitudes of what has been called a "gray neofascism": a form of populist, formally democratic authoritarianism that promotes a sanitized memory of fascism. I focus on this issue by examining Giorgia Meloni's autobiography and tracing her "roots" within the Roman neofascist and post fascist political world of Colle Oppio and her ascendance to political power. The paper concludes with an assessment of Meloni's leadership in power, her recent visit to North America, and her ambition to consolidate the political power of a new European Right.

KEYWORDS: Neofascism, Giorgia Meloni; Fratelli d'Italia; Populism; Italian Politics

Introduction:

Amnesty international (2022), in a report on politicians who used hate speech in Italy's 2022 election, placed Matteo Salvini at the top of the list. Giorgia Meloni was number two. Part of the reason for Meloni's electoral victory can be attributed to her skillful use of populist fearmongering. During her election campaign she framed political issues within a familiar rhetoric of "culture war" wherein she positions herself as the defender of the identity and security of ordinary Italians against "enemies" that threaten to destroy the values of Italian culture and undermine national interests. Meloni's campaign was run on a mix of populist, nativist, and Eurosceptic messages that were accepted as official party policy at the Trieste (FdI, 2017) party conference. These messages were framed within a clear binary of "good" vs "bad": Meloni supports the "natural" traditional family and opposes what she calls the "lgbtq+ lobby," a phrase also used by the ultra-conservative governments of Poland and Hungary to repress civil and rights. She supports "Christian values" and claims to defend the nation against the "Islamization" of Europe. She campaigned to stop non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from helping refugees reach Italian shores and she promised stronger border security to combat "illegal migration" and "ethnic substitution." She repeated the populist message that corrupt global elites are undermining the interests of the nation and reproduced the sovereigntist stereotype of soulless European technocrats wanting to cancel national identities.

Meloni's victory was helped by her construction of a moral panic around national identity as well as her social media influencer status, yet this does not mean that Italian voters have moved to the right or are duped by the viral spread of social media propaganda. The *Fratelli d'Italia* victory owes a great deal to the record abstention of 36.1% of Italian voters. *Fratelli d'Italia* received 7.3 million votes or 26%, compared to 4.3% in 2018. The FdI success came at the expense of Salvini's national populist party, the *Lega*, which fell from 37% of the vote in 2018 to 8.7% in 2022.

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The election of the *Fratelli d'Italia*, a marginal party with post fascist roots, seemed to shock the foreign press, but for those who have followed the normalization of the Italian Right for the past thirty years, it was not earthshaking news. It wasn't even the first time: a post fascist party first entered Italian government in 1994 when Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* (FI) embraced Gianfranco Fini's *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN), itself a reinvention of the neofascist party *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI), and made it part of his ruling centre right coalition. The longstanding "*cordone sanitaire*" against cooperation with the hard right began to crumble. Under Fini's leadership, and after the historic Fiuggi conference (Jan. 25-29, 1995), the MSI rejected some of its neofascist history and values, adapted to new political circumstances, and emerged, re-baptised, as the *Alleanza Nazionale* (Ignazi, 1994).

The coalition forged by Berlusconi's first government created, for the first time in the post-War period, a common political space for the various parties of the Right. When Gianfranco Fini guided the transition from the MSI to the AN, he wanted to consign Italian Fascism to the judgement of history but only after "we have extracted from it those values and intuitions that are still valid and real" (Ignazi, 1994, 77). He also defined the AN as a "post fascist party," a term which asserts its links to the past but claims to go beyond them. Berlusconi legitimised post fascism, in Italy referred to as *sdoganare*: after decades of exclusion the post fascists had "cleared through customs" and were "admitted to the political system by a powerful gatekeeper" (Orsini, 2010, 80).

The powerful gatekeeper soon found himself in trouble, however. In 2009 Silvio Berlusconi formed a new party, *Popolo della Liberta* (PdL), or the People of Liberty. The party was designed to consolidate under one new roof all the parties of the Right: *Forza Italia*, *Alleanza Nazionale*, and *Lega Nord*. The PdL, led by Berlusconi, formed a government in 2008-2011, but his leadership was severely hindered by various personal scandals and mounting criticisms. Fini objected to Berlusconi's use of the PdL as a personal fiefdom and left the party along with a group of faithful allies in 2010 and founded another short-lived party, *Futuro e Libertà* (Future and Freedom) (Turco, 2011). In 2012 yet another group, mostly from the former *AN*, founded *Fratelli d'Italia*. Giorgia Meloni was one of this group, along with Ignazio La Russa, a former MSI activist, and Guido Crosetto, previously a member of Berlusconi's *Forza Italia*. The transitions from *Movimento Sociale Italiano*, to *Alleanza Nazionale*, to the final incarnation of *Fratelli d'Italia*, were strategic adaptations to new circumstances in the democratic liberal order.

The decision to launch a new party of the Right and move in a nationalist-populist direction is discussed in Giorgia Meloni's autobiography. According to Meloni (103-107), the merger of the AN with Berlusconi's PdL was a mistake and a betrayal of the history and legacy of the Italian Right. Gianfranco Fini believed that the Right could a be part of a mainstream, centrist, law and order party. Meloni disagreed and countered that the Right needed to return to early days of nationalist ideology and identity politics. Over the next several years through various party conventions, Fiuggi in 2014, Trieste in 2017, and Milan in 2022, the FdI, with Meloni as leader, established itself as a nativist radical right party, with a people-centered, Eurosceptic, anti-establishment rhetoric typical of populism (Donà, 2022).

In this investigation I use Giorgia Meloni's popular autobiography *Io sono Giorgia: Le mie radice, le mie idee* (2021), current critical political literature, *Fratelli d'Italia* policy statements, and news reports of Meloni's first year in government to examine the ascendency of Meloni and the Italian far Right. The article is structured in three sections and a conclusion. The first is a genealogical discussion of Italian Fascism, neofascism, post fascism and what they signify within the Italian context, and a brief review of debates about the memory of

Fascism in Italy and the ways in which the anti-fascist narrative of Liberation has been contested by the Right. The second section considers Giorgia Meloni's autobiography, examines her "roots" within the Roman neofascist and post fascist political world of Colle Oppio, and pays close attention to the rhetorical construction of the political persona "Giorgia" presented to the reader. The third section examines Meloni's relationship to what I call a "gray neofascism": a form of populist, formally democratic authoritarianism that claims to have shed its old fascist skin but continues to promote an emotional bond with the Italian fascist heritage and offers a sanitized version of fascist history as respectable and acceptable. The paper concludes with a brief assessment of Meloni's first sixteen months in power, her recent visit to North America, and her ambition to consolidate the interests of a new European Right in the European Parliamentary election.

Fascism, Neofascism, Post Fascism, and the Contested Memory of Fascism

The MSI was founded in Rome in 1946 by war veterans and former Fascists who found themselves without a party or a leader. The new party answered psychological and political necessities: to justify the Fascist past, ensure the survival of fascist values, and defend the founders' own actions (Parlato, 2006). Neofascism, immediately after the war, was characterised by feelings of loss and wounded pride missing from the original Fascist ideology. Fascism placed an emphatic stress on the nation state, a cult of violence and personality, anti-democratic elitism, and imperial expansion, but also expressed a modernist impulse to create something new, a "new fascist Man" who could conquer the present and govern the future.

Many of the leaders and associates of the neofascist MSI — Giorgio Almirante, Pino Rauti, Pino Romualdi, and the outlier Julius Evola—felt an estrangement from their society and from modernity. They felt exiled from their own nation (Ignazi, 1989; Tarchi, 1995; Germinario, 2005). To survive politically, many of the "new fascists" agreed to accept democratic processes as a formal necessity and as a means of legitimation, but few of them viewed democracy as a suitable alternative. Decadence and loss are the tropes through which they understood the modern Italian Republic: compromised, without heroes or martial values, hedonistic, and relativistic; and they continued to challenge the democratic values of solidarity and equality that were the basis of the anti-fascist republic.

Neofascists where ideologically opposed to the postwar liberation narrative of anti-fascism because in their view it was used by the left to assert their political hegemony and to exclude those who sympathised with the conservative and traditionalist ideas and values that were part of fascism. There is a sense of victimization and self-justification that continues to be part of the social psychology of neofascism and post fascism. The MSI was a prominent force in distancing Italian fascist history from its affiliation from imperial violence and genocide, promoting a "neutral" fascist past and a humanised portrait of Mussolini. When the MSI was founded, it followed, under the leadership of Augusto De Marsanich (1950-1954), an ambiguous policy of "non rinnegare e non restaurare" (don't repudiate and don't restore) and walked a fine line between reframing the fascist past and making enough concessions to pass the litmus test for entry into democratic government (Germinario, 2002).

Giorgio Almirante, one of the founders and an early party secretary, appropriated the tricolour flame used by the *Arditi*, the Italian shock troops of World War I, and made it the symbol of the new party. All three parties — MSI, AN, and FdI — use the tricolour flame in their respective logos. The same tricolour flame is on display at Benito Mussolini's mausoleum in Predappio. The three parties, for the past seven decades, have also shared the same offices at Via

della Scrofa 43 in Rome. Through all the programmatic changes that occurred as the Italian Right moved from neofascism (MSI), to post fascism (AN), to a conservative party of the Right with post fascist roots (FdI), the refusal to unambiguously repudiate their heritage remained a point of contention.

Sympathetic narratives about Fascism spread after the war because of the ability of neofascists to create persuasive myths about a lost war which downplayed the role of Fascist violence, softened the Fascist experience in Italy, and presented the military survivors of the *Republic of Salò* as victims of leftist partisan violence. Mussolini's puppet government, the *Republic of Salò,* was created at the end of 1943 after the Italian monarchy switched sides and signed an armistice with the Allies. The racial laws the Fascist regime instituted in 1938 were applied ruthlessly during *Salò* and thousands of Italian Jews and partisan political prisoners were sent to camps like Fossoli, where Primo Levi was first deported before being transported to Auschwitz. Fascist police and military linked with *Saló* carried out the initial roundups and transport of these prisoners, yet over the years this memory has been transformed and *Salò* has been portrayed by sympathisers (Pisanò, 1965) as a doomed romantic adventure led by the "boys of *Salò*," young patriots who refused to surrender.

A new historical interpretation of Fascism, inspired by the work of historian Renzo de Felice (1974;1975), began to gain traction in the mid 1970s. This interpretation cast Mussolini as authoritarian rather than totalitarian and emphasised the regime's role in the modernization of the country and its ability to create broad public consensus. The "rebranding" of the regime as authoritarian softened the image of Mussolini and was complemented with a new popular narrative emphasis on the violence that left-wing partisans inflicted on the surviving Fascists. The work of journalist Giampaolo Pansa, *Il sangue dei Vinti,* (2003) (the blood of the Vanquished) is a notable text that blends narrative fiction and historical journalism to present a bleak picture of the Italian resistance. Characterised by British historian Philip Cooke (2011) as "the Dan Brown of Italian history" (181), Pansa painted a portrait of the violence and abuse the partisans inflicted on the vanquished Fascists during the *resa de conti* (the settling of accounts) which followed 25 April, the date subsequently celebrated as the day of liberation. Meanwhile other journalists, such as Roberto Gervaso, Giordano Bruno Guerri, and in particular Indro Montanelli, described by Filippo Focardi (2016) as "talk show historians," wrote popular works that sought to humanize Mussolini as the embodiment of both the moral virtues and vices of Italians: Mussolini was the image and likeness of a country characterized by bursts of rhetoric, love interests, but minimal violence and repression.

One of Renzo de Felice's students and critics, Emilio Gentile (2002; 2023), called the popularizing trend a "retrospective defascistization of the regime" which ignores the reality that Fascism was from its inception committed to the destruction of the liberal democratic system and oriented towards war. Filippo Focardi (2013) is one of the critical historians who have examined the evasions of popularised historical narratives where Mussolini and the Fascists are relieved of the accountability for the atrocities of the war, including colonial genocide in Africa and collaboration and participation in the Shoah. The blame for suffering is assigned to the "bad German" while the "good Italian" is cleared of responsibility. The Italian historiography of fascism is impressively extensive and critical but tends to be overly academic and inaccessible to most citizens, while the narratives of popularizers lack the critical tradition of the professional historians and the universities but are widely read and quickly circulated on social media. More recently, as Italians reflected on the 100 anniversary of the Fascist March on Rome (1922-2022) in a social media environment of post-truth and misinformation, a more critical discussion and awareness of

Fascism has been encouraged. Led by a group of academic historians (see in particular, Bidussa, 1994; Del Boca, 2005; Focardi, 2013; 2016; Filippi 2019; 2020; Gobetti, 2020; Colombini, 2022; Gentile, 2023), they, often at great personal risk, have been challenging the cliches and stereotypes found in the right-wing narratives of historical memory.

The three parties — the defunct MSI, and AN, and now *Fratelli d'italia* — were and continue to be active participants in "the war on memory," which often involves an attack on how Italian educational institutions teach history and represent historical events. One of Giorgia Meloni's early actions as a member of the AN youth group involved a fight to "correct" the history of the communist victims of the Foibe. The Foibe are sinkholes caves found in the mountains at the border between Italy and Yugoslavia where many—the figures are deeply disputed and can range from 500 to 100,000— Italian soldiers and civilians were thrown into the caves and killed by Yugoslav communist partisans. The issue had been seized for years by the MSI and later the AN as an example of Italian "ethnic cleansing" by Marshal Tito's communists and is often compared in the literature of the Right in highly exaggerated terms as an Italian holocaust (see Gobetti 2020) which the Italian Left is accused of keeping out of official history.

As a young activist, Meloni was involved in a campaign to remove from Italian schools literature that did enthusiastically proclaim the Right nationalist narrative of Italian victimhood at the hands of the Left and received one her first public recognitions during one these actions. "It was a great political victory," she wrote in *Io sono Giorgia*. "We went into a bookstore and stamped the pages of the more partisan textbooks with the words "Fake, don't buy it." Then, not wanting to harm the bookseller, we asked the few Deputies of the AN to buy all the stamped copies. Someone still says that we set fire to those books, but it's false. We bought them from first to last. I'm not surprised by this mystification; our world has always been light years away from the story told about it" (49-50).

The strategy amounts to, on the one hand, an attack on the public memory of anti-fascism by equating it with left totalitarianism, and on the other, spreading a narrative of Italian neofascists as underdogs who heroically fought against every political and social marginalization and persecution. In this endeavour the Right has been supported by Silvio Berlusconi. For many years the Right has been seeking to abolish 25 of April as Liberation Day, and to equate the fighters of *Saló* with the partisans. Silvio Berlusconi at first supported these views and initially refused to participate in the April 25 celebrations. He celebrated the holiday for the first time in 2009, but he continued to use a sly public rhetoric (Pietrucci, 2012) designed to create ideological ambiguity, and to make friendly public statements about historical fascism. In 2003 he was quoted in the press as saying: "Mussolini did not murder anyone. Mussolini used to send people on vacation in internal exile," and in 2013, "Mussolini did many good things aside from instituting racial laws and siding with Hitler" (Focardi, 2013, 263).

The MSI, the post fascist AN, and the FdI have all worked independently to white-wash the history of Italian Fascism. They also have given financial and organizational support to candidates who share their political perspectives. Political scientists (Baldini, Tronconi, Angellucci, 2023) have characterized *Fratelli d'Italia* as a "rooted newcomer" party. Unlike genuinely new parties such as Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* or Beppe Grillo's *M5S* (Movimento Cinque Stelle—Five Star Movement) FdI is considered a party that can build its appeal on a symbolic language already recognised by former MSI and AN voters and can also rely on existing organizational resources for support as was the case with the rise of Giorgia Meloni.

After *Fratelli d'italia* was formed in 2012 it inherited a financially well-endowed "Foundation." Set up to manage the real estate and financial assets of the MSI/AN and reportedly

worth "between 150-200 million euro (Turco, 2022, 77), the foundation uses its funds to sustain their newspaper, *Secolo d'Italia,* and to fund conservative think tanks, speaking series, youth forums and sports clubs, publication houses, and book prizes, including the Caravella Tricolore book prize given yearly to new books about politics and culture. In 2021 the Caravella prize was given to Giorgia Meloni for her autobiography *Io sono Giorgia*. Meloni was forging a new party but was being supported by well-established organizational structures. These rooted links are not inconsequential, and no doubt have contributed to her political rise. Her success can also be attributed to her ability to cultivate a memory of neofascism as an emotional heritage—proudly patriotic, defiant, excluded—that moved younger generations like herself towards political activism.

Post fascism represents the political normalization of neofascism and is enabled by an evasive political rhetoric (Griffin, 1996; Petrucci, 2012) which Meloni has learned to master. Part of what defines the discourse of post fascism is rhetorical ambiguity. Politicians like Meloni have learned to use an equivocal political language that tip toes around issues so as not to alienate their traditional voters and simultaneously appeal to a wider electoral base. Critics (Petrucci 2009) have called this rhetorical manoeuvring "strategic ambiguity." Such rhetorical contortions are not unusual in political speech, and they were recently used by Meloni (2023) in a letter sent to the Italian newspaper Il *Corriere della Sera,* during the latest celebration of Liberation Day. She credits Berlusconi's Liberation Day speech in 2009—where he both celebrates anti-fascists and praised Mussolini' followers at the same time—as an inspiration and precedes to tepidly support Liberation Day and reassure the neofascist nostalgics by making reference to their exclusion from the parliamentary system and victimization at the hands of partisans and the Left.

The Political Formation of Giorgia Meloni: From Colle Oppio to Political Power

Meloni's autobiography was a remarkable popular success and sold more than 100,000 copies. She claims to tell her story truthfully and "without filters" (9). Political biographies, however, are generally unreliable and offer favourable messages about their authors and so we should be wary of marketing claims that profess that the author will "tell all" in an authentic and truthful voice. *Io Sono Giorgia* constructs a political personality, the "Giorgia" of the book title, and the autobiography is entertaining and easy to read but full of gaps which are beginning to be filled by more critical investigative journalists such as Susanna Turco in her recent book *Re: Giorgia: Controstoria della donna che si é preso l'Italia* (a counter story of a women who has captured Italy) (2022). For all its flaws and omissions, however, *Io Sono Giorgia* allows for detailed examination of Meloni's rhetorical style, offers insight into the imaginary of the Italian far Right, especially their use of fantasy fiction to promote ideas of heroism and threat, and reveals the emotional and ideological bonds that unite a younger generation of neofascists and post fascists.

Meloni, though historically one of the youngest Italian political leaders, is an experienced "insider" of the Italian political system who has been active in party politics and government for the last 30 years of her life. She joined the youth wing of the MSI *Fronte della Gioventù* in 1992 as a fifteen-year-old. Within a few years of her entry, the MSI was transformed into the AN and Meloni quickly rose through the ranks to become, in 2004 at the age of 27, the president of *Azione Giovani*, the youth wing of *Alleanza Nazionale*. In her autobiography she reports that when she was elected president, she moved to her new office in Via della Scrofa and was overtaken with emotions. "I arrived at the office and closed the door." This office had "belonged to Gianfranco Fini, and before him to Pino Rauti and Giorgio Almirante. . . . I have on my shoulders the dreams

and the hopes of a people that found themselves without a party and without a leader. It was as if they were watching me in silence and asking: 'will you be up to it?'" (162). Meloni explicitly measures herself against the historic leaders of the MSI and signals connections to a past that she both wants to preserve and, in some respects, change.

Raised in what was then the working-class neighborhood of Garbatella, the teenaged Meloni joined the MSI local office at Colle Oppio, a rugged historic building without bathrooms located on a hill opposite the Roman Colosseum, and was pulled into the swirl of neofascist politics. Meloni's political education, her "baptism of fire" as she calls it in one of the chapters in her autobiography, was with the Roman Colle Oppio group where the ideas of Pino Rauti and other proponents of the new Right dominated. Rauti is an extremely controversial and divisive figure. He was one of the main exponents of the ideas of Julius Evola and after the war continued to promote the idea of a national politics that goes beyond the traditional right and left (Ferraresi, 1978).

At the age of 17 Rauti volunteered to join Mussolini's *Republic of Saló*. After 8 months in the Italian north fighting the Allies and anti-fascist partisans, Rauti was captured by the British and interned in a French POW camp in Algeria. He escaped and joined the Spanish Foreign legion in Morocco where he was captured again, this time by the French, and sent to a new prison camp in Algeria (Tarchi, 2016). He made his way back to Italy in April of 1946 and became part of what the historian Giuseppe Parlato (2006) called "Fascists without Mussolini": leaderless groups looking to continue the fight both for their beliefs and to justify their actions. He joined the newly founded MSI in 1946 as well as the clandestine group FAR (Fasci di Azione Revoluzionaria) and continued to agitate against the emerging anti-fascist Republic. One of the last post-war provocations by the FAR involved inciting a mutiny in a naval school in Taranto in 1951. The plan was to blow up the Italian battleship Colombo which was to be transferred to the Soviet Union as part of a war-reparations deal (Ignazi, 1989). The list of arrested provocateurs included Pino Rauti and Julius Evola, the latter whom during the trial described himself as a "superfascist." Both were later cleared of the charges for insufficient evidence.

Rauti's neofascist political philosophy, like that of his mentor Evola, drew from wider European sources than the Italian Fascist tradition and helped to shape the ideology of the Italian New Right (Revelli, 1984). During the late 1970s and through the 1980s, Rauti, along with Alain de Benoit of the French New Right, pursued a strategy based on Antonio Gramsci's ideas of hegemony and of using cultural power as a slow way to achieve political power. Fabio Rampelli, along with Gianni Alemanno and Umberto Croppi, were leaders of Roman right-wing youth activist movements in the 1990s and were deeply engaged with the New Right (Rosati, 2018, 28-29). Rampelli built a political community at Colle Oppio different from the "neofascist nostalgics" and flamboyant extremist rightist groups. In a country where the soccer stadium can influence politics, he kept a guarded distance from the Roman *ultras*, the working-class soccer fan clubs whose unruly subjectivity, links to violent neofascism, drugs, and criminality were notorious and well reported (Jones, 2018; 2019). Rampelli, an athlete who trained to join the Italian Olympic swimming team but who was sidelined by injuries, focussed on creating a clean and respectable image of neofascism at Colle Oppio. Group visits to Mussolini's mausoleum in the village of Predappio were discouraged, and drugs were out of the question.

There were, however, plenty of "Celtic crosses" (Lanna and Rossi, 2003, 439), an import from the French New Right; group-building exercises such as the "solstice ceremonies" where young members celebrated the rising sun; and one ritual recalled fondly in Meloni's autobiography, the "call of the horn." A reference to the horn of Boromir from *Lord of the Rings*,

the call of the horn was a weekly gathering where members met to discuss articles, books, journals, daily papers, and international issues. The meetings began with each member clasping their hands behind their back and reciting a relevant quote or aphorism to be discussed. The idea of Europe and its future were intensely debated. At the close of each meeting, participants would sing "The future belongs to us," adapted from the song "Tomorrow belongs to me" from the 1966 musical *Cabaret.* In the play the song was sung by a waiter, but the 1972 film offers a chilling critique of the idealistic submission of Nazi youth to a conformist future by having the song sung by a Hitler Youth. Ironically, given the anti-fascist roots of the song, in more recent years it has become a neofascist hymn. The song was re-written and adapted into Italian by the "traditionalist" musical group *La Compagnia dell'Anello* (the Fellowship of the Ring), a rightist band formed during the three hobbit camps that occurred between 1978-1980.

At Colle Oppio Meloni was part of a hobbit camp revival that occurred in Rome in the early 1990s. Like the first hobbit camps (see Apiú Mani,1982; Tarchi, 2010), the revival had among its aims a strategy to occupy culture and make it, to use Alain de Benoit's phrase, "metapolitical." Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* has been used by the right to validate order and hierarchy, and to celebrate an invented heroic ethic claimed to have been destroyed by modernity and globalization (Cappellini, 2021; Horowitz, 2022).

Fantasy culture and Nordic mythology have been important resources for promoting myths of "fatherland" and "tradition," "heroism" and "national identity." Meloni uses fantasy fiction to construct her self-image and communicate the moral and practical qualities that a leader needs to change the world. She has a favourite hobbit, Sam Gamgee, with whom she identifies. Sam Gamgee does not have, she writes, "the regal stature of Aragon. The magic of Gandalf, the strength of Gimli or the speed of Logolas. He is only a hobbit; he is a gardener in real life. But without him, Frodo would never have accomplished his mission." It is the "small hands that change the world," writes Meloni, channelling Tolkien (39).

Meloni is not only a humble hobbit and a gardener, however; she can quickly morph into a mighty pre-modern warrior: a Joan of Arc, a woman who can lead men into battle and rule nations with the aid of her faith. She makes the point that she was born on Jan 16, the same day as Joan of Arc, and feels an affinity with the Maid of Orleans. Her faith is manifested in her obsessive need to collect statues of angels, and she has a personal private angel in whom she confides and believes guides her. The semantic links Meloni makes between fantasy fiction, religion, and politics are the rhetorical strategies of association used throughout her autobiographical narrative to create the "Giorgia" personality and build a favourable rapport with the reader.

One of Meloni's successful projects as a youth activist was the organization of the yearly Antreju youth festival which had started in 1998 in Meloni's political home base, Colle Oppio. The Antreju festival grew out of local community-organized events: the young Giorgia, as part of a youth group, dressed as a hobbit, visited schools, and presented *tableaux vivant* representing episodes from *The Lord of the Rings* to young children. Antreju is the child-hero character from the novel *The Neverending Story* (1979) by the German children's fantasy writer Michael Ende, who made Italy his home in the last 20 years of his life. Antreju is tasked with stopping the dark force, The Nothing, from engulfing the wonderland world of Fantasia. The Nothing, can of course be many things, but is used by Meloni has a sign contemporary Nihilism, the invisible hand of the global economy and the faceless elites and globalists that have shriveled religious authority and emptied the world of values.

Neither J.R.R. Tolkien or Michael Ende consciously wrote their fantasy epics as white-nationalist propaganda, but the texts do hark back to an imaginary Eurocentric realm in which

heroes are white-skinned, and enemies are characterised as a dark menace. Symbols are frequently appropriated for purposes for which they were never intended and it's useful to study these transformations and how the cultural landscape is politicised accordingly. Over the years Antreju has changed from a youth festival channelling the spirit of the early hobbit camps and anti-nihilist worldviews, into important annual political events hosting politicians and intellectuals from other parties and abroad, including Steve Bannon in 2018, Viktor Orbán in 2019, and recently Rishi Sunak (2023), of which more later.

The ideal Europe to which the adherents at Colle Oppio aspired was radically different, writes Meloni, from the present "European Union, an undefined entity in the hands of obscure bureaucrats that leave out of consideration national identities or cancels them altogether" (p. 41-42). "They say that we are anti-Europeanist, but this is totally false," claims Meloni. We have "a precise idea of Europe that we defend and want to construct" (41) and she provides a vision of this Europe by making a reference to the *La Compagnia dell'Anello* song "Sulla strada" (On the road). In that song Europe is presented as free from modernity with its complexities and discontents: Europe as a fictional Middle Earth where "liberty" and "tradition" are valorised as part of an imagined ethno-nationalist past filled with ancient people, burial grounds, and misty forests.

Meloni describes the Colle Oppio as a community full of "intellectual curiosity," "open mentally to new trends," free "to read whatever book they wanted," part of a movement that was allied to peace, and willing "to fight and resist in the name of liberty" (32-53). Those familiar with Colle Oppio speak of it as a shrine to dead comrades and leaders, and a closed organization with a bunker mentality that demanded strict allegiance from its "camerati," a term of address used in the fascist and neofascist youth movement (Turco, 2022). Each of the new recruits was baptised with a new name and Meloni's was "Calimora." The street battles the "camerati" fought were against the left, which in Meloni's telling has always been "fanatical and provocative" and willing to use violence "as a legitimate instrument against right wing organization" (45). The irresponsible, violent left is a foundational narrative of the MSI, and Meloni employs the trope relentlessly to justify her anti-leftist beliefs as well as to explain some of the difficulties of her personal life.

Meloni's mother, Anna Paratore, was a romance writer and under the pen name Josie Bell and other pseudonyms, wrote "around to 140 romance novels" (Meloni, 24). Although a prolific writer of romantic fantasies she lived a precarious existence and relied on Meloni's maternal grandparent for help. She would later enter the Roman real estate market and find considerable financial success there under conditions which have attracted media scrutiny (Palladino, 2023). Her mother's decision not to have an abortion but to give birth to Giorgia at a time when her marriage was collapsing, writes Meloni, informs all her own subsequent life choices and strengthened her Christian faith and conservative family values. The psychological hurt she feels for her family breakdown is transformed into a defence of what she calls the "natural family" (Caravale, 2022) and the promotion of pro-natalist ideology to combat an Italian demographic decline and "ethnic substitution."

Meloni's father, Francesco, is described as "a man of the left" who ran off to the Canary Islands, a Spanish archipelago off the coast of western Africa, on a sailboat called Crazy Horse in 1979 when Meloni was one year old. The absent father is represented as the emotional wound that unsettled her life. The family is constructed as divided between the virtuous, religious, hard-working conservative mother who is supportive of the MSI, and the father who stands for egoism, abandonment, and leftist infantilized dreams.

There is more to this story than Meloni is willing to disclose, however. Francesco Meloni was the son of the Italian character actress Zoe Incrocci (1917-2003) who worked extensively in

theatre, radio, and television as a voice actress. She worked in films with the famous Italian comedian Totó and with the popular actor Alberto Sordi. Giorgia Meloni bears a remarkable physical resemblance to her grandmother and has the same theatrical flair and expressive use of voice. When Giorgia Meloni uses her stern and threatening "Voce Grossa" (big voice) to assert an authoritative position, she is channelling her grandmother acting and voice skills.

Francesco Meloni opened a discotheque, the Fin Fan, and a successful Italian restaurant called La Gomera, in San Sebastian, one of the smaller of the Canary Islands. Giorgia and her sister Adrianna visited Francesco for several years. During these visits she learned Spanish, a language she uses and knows very well. She terminated the relationship with her father after one of these early visits because he had shown no emotional interest or involvement with either her or her sister's lives. Journalists have dug into the story and found that Francesco Meloni was arrested when police found 1,500 kilos (1.5 tons) of hashish hidden on his boat. He was sentenced to nine years in a Spanish jail (Turco, 2022, 37; Palladino, 2023, 85). This omission from the narrative is perhaps understandable but given the promise she made to "tell all" without filters or distortions, Meloni appears as a dissimulator who obscures hard and uncomfortable truths about her life with evasive narratives.

At the same time there something in Meloni's story that makes the reader sympathetic to the struggles of an independent and a self-conscious 15-year-old with a loving mother and an absent, hated father, who finds refuge in a neofascist organization such as the MSI, *Fronte della Gioventù*. Colle Oppio became "my second family. A family decidedly more numerous than my original one," she writes. Within this family, politics became a "totalizing experience" and soon Meloni became part of a group called the *Gabbiani* or Seagulls (the name came from American author Richard Bach's popular 1970 novel, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*). The Gabbiani became her faithful crew and she found in this community a fellowship that developed into deep friendships, love interests, and marriages: her sister, Arianna Meloni, would marry a fellow Gabbiani, Francesco Lollobrigida, now minister of Agriculture in Meloni's government.

The Shadow of a Gray Fascism: Deep Roots Don't Freeze

The history of the MSI, AN and FdI demonstrates the gradual ideological changes and the rhetorical strategies used to bring an excluded political movement into the constitutional mainstream. Their problem has been how to appear respectable and competent within the democratic political framework while shifting and holding on to their ideological identity and political imaginary. The cultural and political pessimism expressed by MSI early leaders was synthesised into the ideas of a new Right who claimed it wanted to escape the nostalgic ghettos of their fathers. But the historical past continues to haunt the present. Meloni is found of using a quote from J.R.R Tolkien: "deep roots don't freeze." Her youthful militancy at Colle Oppio was both part of the youth movement's break with the nostalgic past and an emotional affirmation of its legacy. The creation of the AN was a way of finally entering the government, gaining legitimacy, and looking towards the future. Meloni's biography indicates, however, that this "future" is more a longing backward-facing mythical conservatism precariously founded on Fascist memory obfuscated by evasions and popular fiction.

The founding of MSI in 1946 did not represent the return of fascism. For one thing, an historical phenomenon does not return in the same way. And in this instance, we cannot talk of a "return" of something that has never gone away, even with an epochal break such as 1945. As Enzo Traverso (2019; 2022) and Argentinian historian Federico Finchelstein (2017) remind us, Fascism was never fully exhausted after the war: it regenerated, adapted to the great political and

social transformations of the age, found new faces, recoded old mythologies with the tropes of fantasy fiction, and used strategic rhetoric to defend its heritage. The result in Italy has been a mixture of the old and the new, not a transcendence but a "minestrone" of conflicting ideas, a confluence of both populist sentiments and extreme right self-interested sanitizations of fascist history.

Few believe Italy will return to an old fashioned black shirted fascism with the election of Meloni. The liberal internationalist historian, Timothy Garton Ash (2022) noted the peculiarities of Italy's relationship to fascism which he calls "relaxed and indulgent especially in many sectors of the Italian Right." Garthon Ash believes that the real fascists in today's Europe are to be found in Putin's Russia. Italy has strong constitutional checks and balances, and Ash argues that Italy's democracy is less threatened by Right wing politics "than that of the United States."

The chief concern others have, however, is that this relaxed and indulgent relationship of both the Italian Right and the mainstream media towards Mussolini and Fascism encourages what historian Claudio Vercelli (2022) calls "gray neofascism": a populist authoritarianism that promotes a sanitized memory of fascism and a disregard for individual rights. I prefer to use gray neofascism rather than post fascism because the latter is used by the said parties (the AN and FdI) to connote a transformative break with the past. Gray neofascism, while not widely shared in public discourse, is a colour and a concept more attuned to the continuities that a political party has with its fascist heritage, and more aware of the dangers it poses to democracy.

In the middle of the second world war, Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce (1943) wrote an article in *The New York Times* in which he called fascism a "germ" found in many nations. He warned readers to be on guard against this contagion as the war wound down to its inevitable end. Today, in the time of Covid, the metaphor of a virus to describe the contagious diffusion of authoritarian, anti-establishment, and anti-intellectual discourses through social media, has returned in force (Confora, 2023; Pietrucci 2023). These discourses comply with many of Umberto Eco's (1995) fourteen tests for fascism, which include contempt for the weak, fear of difference, and appeals to social frustration and group identity, and they are used to produce hate speech. It's no wonder that Amnesty International ranked Meloni's electioneering speeches as hateful even if only second to Salvini's rantings.

Twenty-three years of Fascist rule in Italy (1922-1945) left a deep emotional legacy that has been difficult to uproot or reconcile. A well noted fact about many of the Italian parties of the extreme right is that they are family affairs where the continuity with the past is both asserted and legitimated. Alessandra Mussolini, the granddaughter of Benito Mussolini, first entered public politics as a member of the AN. The family album includes the sons, daughters and grandchildren of Fascists who become neofascists, then post fascists, and now claim to be hard right conservatives with "post fascist roots." The genealogy of Fascism has been recently documented in David Broder's *Mussolini's grandchildren* (2023). A quick look at the leadership of *Fratelli d'Italia* makes clear the enduring influence of family links with the past. Ignazio La Russa is the son of a neofascist MSI senator. The younger La Russa was one the founders of the *Fratelli d'Italia* and is the current the president of the Senate of the Republic. He is well known for his right-wing ideas, collection of Fascist memorabilia, and extreme criticism of anti-fascist history in Italy. Isabella Rauti is currently undersecretary of defence in Georgia Meloni's government. She is the daughter of Pino Rauti, the so-called "Black Gramsci" and former secretary of MSI who earlier in his career founded *Ordine Nuovo*, a group inspired by the teachings of the self-proclaimed "superfascist" Julius Evola and associated with the fascist terrorist violence during Italy's *anni di*

piombo (years of lead, 1970-1982) a period of bombing, assassinations and kidnapping by both the right and left (see Drake, 2021).

Isabella Rauti was married to Gianni Alemanno who was a minister in Berlusconi's government; he later became mayor of Rome and was briefly in *Fratelli d'Italia*. Alemanno was arrested, along with Fabio Ravelli (now in the inner circle of Meloni's government), in 1989 for protesting President George Bush's visit to the American military cemetery in the town of Nettuno close to Anzio beach near Rome, because the visit was deemed an offence to the Italian Fascist soldiers in Mussolini's Republic of *Saló* who died fighting against the Allies.

Giorgia Meloni has vehemently rejected criticisms that *Fratelli d'Italia* is connected to historical Fascism or to nostalgic neofascism. Some political scientists agree and call *Fratelli d'Italia* an "afascist" party (Vassali and Regnati, 2023): agnostic about fascism. This is not an opinion I or many others (see Galli, 2024; Urbinati and Pedullà, 2024) share, largely because Meloni has been silent about the embarrassing pro-fascist sentiments expressed by her party's supporters. The most egregious example was in Rome during a memorial, attended by Fabio Rampelli and other member of the FdI, commemorating the deaths in 1978 of three members of the MSI youth wing *Fronte della Gioventù* during Italy's *anni di piombo* (Roberts, 2024). The ceremony ended in a mass fascist salute that would not been out of place in Mussolini's Rome or in Hitler's Nuremburg rallies. The ghost of fascism within *Fratelli d'Italia* is present and evident in the party's attacks on individual rights, and in the rhetorical ambiguity used by politicians like Meloni and La Russa who on one hand claim to abjure fascism and on the other seek to minimise its violent anti-democratic past. The overwhelming majority Meloni's inner circle started their political activities as members of the MSI, AN, or the youth wings of these parties, and political scientists (Baldini, Tronconi, Angelucci (2023) have noted that "the continuity with neofascist and post fascist-parties, at least in the profile of its 'inner circle' could not be clearer." How this continuity is shaping Meloni's policies in power is more difficult to gage but after more than a year in government and with the European Parliamentary election looming, there are signs of what to expect.

Conclusion

As of this writing (March 20224), Giorgia Meloni has visited the U.S.A. and Canada and met with President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Her leadership so far has been a mix of increased international pragmatism abroad and conservative reaction at home. In the past, Meloni had sought a close relationship with former president Donald Trump and his advisor Steve Bannon, both of whom hailed her election as a major victory for the political Right. President Biden initially regarded Meloni's hard-line political philosophy like that of Donald Trump—a form of "semi-fascism"—and commented that her election was a retreat from democracy. When Meloni visited the White House for the first time in July 2023, Biden praised her, and whatever doubts he may have had about her were strategically put aside.

Biden does not want the Italian Right to be troublesome about NATO and the war in the Ukraine. Silvio Berlusconi and Matteo Salvini had been allied with pro-Putin interests in the past. With the death of Berlusconi—he died in June 2023 at the age of 86—Meloni has positioned herself as a faithful American ally who will support Ukraine, be critical of China, work within the NATO alliance, and toe the line on US support of Israel in the Gaza war. Italy has consequently withdrawn its participation from China's Belt and Roads Initiative (BRI) and was among several European nations that froze funds to the UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for

Palestine Refugees in the Near East) after several of its staff were accused by Israel of involvement in the Oct. 7 Hamas attack.

Meloni has led her government for the past sixteen months and polls suggest that her party has the support of 28% of voters. But cracks are beginning to show in the political consensus. Her first domestic setback was in the recent Sardinian regional election (Feb. 2024) where the FdI candidate lost to one supported by both the M5S and the PD. Meloni's right-wing politics are being called into question by a young progressive, Elly Schlein (2022), unexpectedly elected (Feb. 2023) as the first woman to lead Italy's centre left *Democratic Party* (PD). The popular chant Meloni used during the election campaign and which became a widely circulated social media meme—"I'm Giorgia, I'm a woman, I'm a mother. I'm a Christian!"—was met head on by Elly Schlein's response: "I am a woman. I love another woman. I am not a mother, but I am not less of a woman for this."

In her pre-election rabble-rousing speeches Meloni affirmed that a child should be raised by heterosexual parents and spoke out against gender ideology and the LGBT+ "lobbies." In government, Meloni has grown closer to the movements whose principal aim is to promote "traditional family values" and to reverse progressive legislation won in the last decades by both the LGBTQ+ and feminist movements. These polices prompted Justin Trudeau to express his concern with her government. One of the Meloni government's pieces of legislation, for example, criminalizes people who go abroad to have children via surrogacy. While statistically most people who seek surrogacy identify as heterosexual, the legislation is particularly harsh on same sex parents and pressure has been put on local governments not to register children born to same-sex parents through surrogacy.

In June 2024, 400 million people across the European Union are eligible to vote in the European Parliamentary election and send 720 representatives to Brussels, and all eyes are on the center-right for they are predicted to make new gains. The leadership of key EU positions is today in the hands of Ursula von der Leyen (president of the European Commission, 2019), Christine Lagarde (president of the European Central Bank, 2019), and Roberta Metsola (president of the European Parliament, 2022). European parliamentarian Elisabetta Gualmini speaks of this shift in leadership as the beginning of a *Mamma Europa* (2023), a more empathetic Europe where women's rights, health, civil rights, migration, and respect for international law are protected and defended. Gualmini's views are aspirational but point to the important role that women are playing in political leadership.

Since her activist days in Colle Oppio, Meloni has held her own political aspiration to build a new European ethnonationalist Right. She is the current president of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and has forged alliances with far-right authoritarian groups trying to make the New Right the center of European power and influence EU policy on climate change and migrants. At the same time, Meloni is wooing traditional mainstream conservative support, and they, in turn, are courting her. She invited Rishi Sunak to the Atreju festival in December of 2023 and supported him over a shared hardline approach over immigration. The UK government has attempted to ship asylum seekers to Rwanda while Italy has struck a deal with the Albanian government to process up to 30,000 asylum seekers: legally questionable solutions that would change little but would play well to the base. We shall see how Meloni navigates these political waters: whether she will side with Visegard, the ultranationalist authoritarian group guided by Hungarian leader Viktor Orbán, or, move towards the moderate centre right European People's Party (EPP) of Ursula von der Leyen and Roberta Metsola. The U.S.A. and Canada (CBC, 2024)

are more interested in keeping Meloni as an ally; they, at least, seem to believe this hobbit is for turning.

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