



# The Great Convergence: How the Italian Far Right and COVID Deniers Tried to Seize the Momentum

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## Abstract

*This article explores how the pandemic crisis resulted in a confluence of neo-fascist groups such as Forza Nuova and CasaPound, national-populist parties such as Lega and Brothers of Italy, the Orange Vests of former General Pappalardo and COVID-19 deniers. Since March 2020, the Italian far right has consciously based its strategy on spreading conspiracy theories about COVID-19 and opposing any type of restrictive measures, from the lockdown to mask mandates and vaccination. The attempts to build a mass anti-vaccine movement permeated with neo-fascist influences may have stalled, but it would be mistaken to think that the battle has been lost: the impact of COVID deniers on the political landscape goes beyond poll results. The contemporary ideological fluidity favors mainstreaming negationist slogans, for instance through the unexpected overlap between the far right and New Age culture. The real struggle is conducted in the field of ideas and cultural hegemony, where a profound illiberal, anti-scientific, and conspiracy sentiment continues to gain support in Italy thanks to the overlap between neo-fascists, national-populists, and COVID deniers.*

Keywords: Italy, Lega, far right, COVID deniers, conspiracy theories

The pandemic has represented a dramatic turning point for the world, with medium- and long-term consequences for politics, society, and the economy that remain unpredictable. In Italy, a country hit with extreme virulence by COVID-19, the devastating effects have been manifesting themselves in various spheres. After early weeks marked by mass anxiety and fears about contagion, protests against the safety and prevention measures began, leading to the formation of unprecedented alliances between different right-wing actors. Far-right organizations immediately jumped on the criticism of the lockdown, as well as the subsequent anti-mask and then anti-vaccine protests, in an effort to gain hegemony among the discontented. They also

emulated developments in other countries, such as the United States and Germany, reusing conspiracy theories and slogans from those contexts and adapting them to the local situation.

However, it would be wrong not to identify national peculiarities in the elaboration of this strategy: the Italian far right has a century-old tradition and important connections with the circles of the national-populist parliamentary right. Here I use national-populism to refer to the Lega and Brothers of Italy, because these two parties (more the Lega than Brothers of Italy) use illiberal, populist, and xenophobic ideas and are prepared to access power in a government coalition. I reserve the term neo-fascism for Forza Nuova (New Force) and CasaPound, which remain both more radical in their ideas and more marginal politically. Of course, both the League and Brothers of Italy have deep fascist roots: the latter emerged from the post-fascist National Alliance, which was itself the heir of the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI, Italian Social Movement, existing from 1946 to 1995), while the Lega had a secessionist agenda till 2014, when Matteo Salvini began the “nationalization” of the party.

This article analyzes the pandemic campaign of the Italian far right and explores how the sanitary crisis resulted in a confluence of different movements and organizations. The neo-fascist parties were joined by the Gilet Arancioni (Orange Vests), formerly the Forconi (Pitchforks) Movement, led by former Carabinieri general Antonio Pappalardo. My analysis also extends to the two national-populist parties present in the Italian Parliament—Matteo Salvini’s League and Giorgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy—to underline their points of coincidence with and differences from neo-fascist rhetoric on COVID-19 and prevention measures. I also provide some indications of the—again unprecedented—convergence between the national-populist realm and leftist critiques of biopower. In conclusion, I advance the hypothesis that the new government, led by former European Central Bank governor Mario Draghi with ministers from the League, represents a new, decisive moment both for the national-populist right, which is divided on whether or not to support the new cabinet, and for the neo-fascist realm, which sees in it evidence of the existence of a global conspiracy.

### Denouncing the “Sanitary Dictatorship”

Italy’s measures for preventing and containing the coronavirus epidemic have had conflicting effects. In a particularly tragic context, with 126,690 deaths as of June 9, 2021, and more than 4 million infections, the refusal to adopt emergency solutions could have caused an even more serious toll. The closure of borders, isolation at home, and the de facto cessation of mobility, however, produced a significant backlash. As a country that during the first two decades of the twenty-first century had seen dramatic growth in tourism and related activities, suddenly closing off that source of income had a huge impact on the life of an important segment of the population. It is no coincidence that restaurateurs, hoteliers, and owners of public places have protested against the measures, especially since late spring 2020.

In the first three months of the pandemic in Spring 2020, the fear of contagion and sense of trauma was prevalent, and not even Salvini’s often contradictory statements<sup>1</sup> in opposition to the security measures were able to obtain consensus. The country seemed ready to accept the lockdown measures of the government led by Giuseppe Conte and composed of the Democratic Party, LeU (Free and Equals, a left electoral bloc), and the Five Star Movement. Besides Salvini, Matteo Renzi, leader of Italia

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<sup>1</sup> Giovanni Drogo, “Tutte le vergognose giravolte di Salvini sul Coronavirus,” *nextQuotidiano*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.nextquotidiano.it/giravolte-di-salvini-sul-coronavirus/>; Laura Mari, “Chiudere tutto, anzi no’. Salvini e il Covid 19, la confusione del leader leghista sulla gestione dell’epidemia,” *La Repubblica*, April 16, 2020, [https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/04/16/news/salvini\\_e\\_i\\_cambi\\_di\\_rotta\\_sulle\\_aperture\\_attivita\\_-254162048/](https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/04/16/news/salvini_e_i_cambi_di_rotta_sulle_aperture_attivita_-254162048/); Simone Cosimi, “Salvini, il leader che sul coronavirus smentisce sé stesso,” *Wired*, June 29, 2020, <https://www.wired.it/attualita/politica/2020/06/29/salvini-coronavirus-dichiarazione/>.

Viva and critic of the Conte government, was also pushing for a quick reopening,<sup>2</sup> against the recommendations of the Technical Scientific Committee, an organ of the Ministry of Health responsible for proposing sanitary options to the government.

The first conspiracy voices emerged early, at the end of March 2020. Although examples of far-right anti-lockdown narratives and actions coming from the United States had some influence, the first conspiracy hypothesis advanced in Italy had an endogenous origin. A 2015 clip of a scientific news broadcast, TGR Leonardo, shown on the Rai Tre television channel, was circulated by the far right via the Russian social network VK (VKontakte, the Russian equivalent of Facebook) and WhatsApp on March 24, 2020,<sup>3</sup> and then went viral, even being shared by Matteo Salvini on Twitter and Facebook. The TV report, which cited an article in *Nature*, discussed the spike glycoprotein SHC014, which belongs to the bat coronavirus “Rhinolophus.” The latter has no connection with SARS-COV-2019, but the similarity of the terms helped create a conspiracy narrative. Writing on Twitter on March 25, Salvini cited the video as proof for the theory that the virus had been created in a laboratory: “From Tgr Leonardo (Rai Tre) of November 16, 2015, report on a pulmonary supervirus Coronavirus created by the Chinese with bats and mice, very dangerous for humans (with related concerns). From the Lega urgent question to the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister.”<sup>4</sup> The retweets by Salvini and Brothers of Italy leader Giorgia Meloni<sup>5</sup> accelerated the spread of this fake news on social networks, sparking an international outcry.

From that moment on, the Italian far right has consciously based its strategy on spreading conspiracy theories about COVID-19 and opposing any type of restrictive measures, from the lockdown to mask mandates. Together with the far right, a particular type of Italian national-populism consolidated during the pandemic through the figure of retired general of the Carabinieri Antonio Pappalardo. From the early 1990s, Pappalardo tried in various ways to become a politician. In 1992, he was elected to parliament as a member of the PSDI (Italian Social Democratic Party), which disappeared shortly thereafter. Having entered the National Unity government led by the future president of the Republic, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, Pappalardo was forced to resign after being convicted of defamation against then-Commander General of the Carabinieri Antonio Viesti. It was then that Pappalardo began to found a succession of small parties and organizations that sought to piggyback on different protest movements. In 2013, the former general was in the Forconi movement, which protested against the government and was infiltrated by neo-fascist and national-populist forces.<sup>6</sup>

The retired carabinieri has always had a passion for proclamations and programs. As early as 2000, he was accused of attempting a coup for a document he wrote as head of the COCER, the Carabinieri Union, in which he advocated for a series of constitutional reforms putting the military at the center of power—a model inspired by Pinochet’s Chile—and limiting democracy, and was forced to resign.<sup>7</sup> Pappalardo has never abandoned the idea that the military has an active political role to play as guardians of the state and national integrity, and should therefore enjoy a position

<sup>2</sup> “L’appello di Renzi: ‘L’Italia riapra,’” *AGI*, March 28, 2020, <https://www.agi.it/politica/news/2020-03-28/coronavirus-renzi-aprire-italia-fabbriche-pasqua-7944570/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Il servizio del TGR Leonardo del 2015 non ha niente a che vedere con il nuovo coronavirus,” *Valigia Blu*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.valigiablue.it/tgr-leonardo-coronavirus/>.

<sup>4</sup> The tweet is still available at <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1242866887932948481?s=20> (last accessed April 26, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Meloni’s tweet can be found at <https://twitter.com/giorgiameloni/status/1242875894387138563> (last accessed April 26, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> For a brief description in English of the December 9 demonstrations, see Lizzy Davis, “Italy Hit by Wave of Pitchfork Protests as Austerity Unites Disparate Groups,” *The Guardian*, December 13, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/13/italy-pitchfork-protests-austerity-unites-groups>.

<sup>7</sup> “Le ‘riforme’ del colonnello Pappalardo,” *La Repubblica*, March 30, 2000, <https://www.repubblica.it/online/cronaca/cocer/documento/documento.html>.

of privilege and dominance; indeed, it has been a recurring theme in his various political initiatives. In December 2013, convening one of his initiatives in a cinema in Rome, the former general announced that:

Then with a delegation of the People, Ours and of the Federal Nation, we will hunt down the criminals who call themselves politicians by popular acclamation! We will present ourselves, in front of the palaces of power, with Carabinieri, Policemen, Finanziari, and Military, who will have to help us enforce the Constitution, the sentence of the Constitutional Court, and the Eviction Order against these delegitimized people.<sup>8</sup>

Attempts to attack parliamentarians followed in 2016-17, when, at the head of a new formation called the Italian Liberation Movement, Pappalardo first tried to arrest the former Forza Italia MP Osvaldo Napoli<sup>9</sup> and then organized a demonstration in Piazza Montecitorio, where the Chamber of Deputies is located, during which one of the main leaders of the Five Star Movement, Alessandro Di Battista, was challenged.<sup>10</sup>

The pandemic represented a new opportunity for the former general and his fledgling Gilet Arancioni Movement, an attempt to mimic the luck of the French Gilets Jaunes. On May 30, 2020, the Gilet Arancioni, Forza Nuova, CasaPound, and other small neo-fascist organizations organized protests in some Italian cities: Pappalardo and his followers occupied a square in Milan, while CasaPound and Forza Nuova did the same in Rome. Pappalardo's rally in Piazza del Duomo attracted a few hundred participants, who did not observe any of the measures imposed to counteract COVID-19. (Indeed, Pappalardo himself has repeatedly refused to wear a mask, saying he cares about his health and blaming the mask for unspecified lung infections.)<sup>11</sup> During the rally, the leader of the Gilet Arancioni explained his personal theories about the spread of the coronavirus, claiming that it was facilitated in Lombardy by 5G antennas.

The demonstration in the capital, of similar size, was characterized by the prevalence of neo-fascist groups and called itself the "March on Rome," an unequivocal reference to Benito Mussolini's seizure of power in 1922. As in Milan, the demonstration in Rome spawned conspiracy narratives of all kinds, including the claim that "Coronavirus is all a political, economic, and social design because they want to sell us to China, Di Maio [Minister of Foreign Affairs and leader of the Five Star Movement – GS] first of all by making us get the vaccine and collecting data on us. The virus does not exist, which is why we do not wear masks, and in the meantime, people are dying of hunger."<sup>12</sup>

The supposed "sanitary dictatorship" quickly became the new enemy, adding to other conspiracy theories. The logical inconsistency of conspiracy allows for the adaptation and amalgamation of voices, misinterpretations, and contradictory positions, providing a narrative suitable for consumption and use. As early as April

8 Stefania Carboni, "Antonio Pappalardo: storia di un golpe borghese piccolo piccolo," *Giornalettismo*, December 16, 2000, <https://archivio.giornalettismo.com/antonio-pappalardo-storia-di-un-golpe-borghese-piccolo-piccolo/>.

9 Francesca Schianchi, "Il blitz dei Forconi alla Camera per 'arrestare' l'ex deputato Napoli," *La Stampa*, December 15, 2016, <https://www.lastampa.it/cronaca/2016/12/15/news/il-blitz-dei-forconi-alla-camera-per-arrestare-l-ex-deputato-napoli-1.34756718>.

10 Giovanni Drogo, "Alessandro Di Battista sbaglia piazza e si prende i fischi del popolo di Pappalardo," *nextQuotidiano*, October 10, 2017, <https://www.nextquotidiano.it/alessandro-di-battista-pappalardo/>.

11 "Milano, assembramenti in piazza Duomo per la manifestazione dei gilet arancioni: in centinaia senza mascherina e distanze di sicurezza," *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, May 30, 2020, <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2020/05/30/milano-assembramenti-in-piazza-duomo-per-la-manifestazione-dei-gilet-arancioni-in-centinaia-senza-mascherina-e-distanza-di-sicurezza/5818981/>.

12 "Coronavirus, tensioni alla manifestazione 'Marcia su Roma.' 'Rimaniamo qui a oltranza.' In 70 identificati e denunciati," *Open*, May 30, 2020, <https://www.open.online/2020/05/30/coronavirus-tensioni-alla-manifestazione-marcia-su-roma/>.

9, 2020, in a tweet against Giuseppe Conte and the Eurogroup, which had decided to activate the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), Matteo Salvini used the term “dictatorship in the name of the virus”:

ESM approved extra-legal dictatorship in the name of the virus. There are no Eurobonds like Conte wanted, but there is the ESM, a dramatic mortgage on the future, on work, and the savings of our children. From 1989 to today, Italy has paid 140 billion to Europe; now to borrow 35 we put ourselves in the hands of a legalized loan-sharking system. Moreover, without any passage in Parliament, as requested several times by the League. We are out of the law; we are in a dictatorship in the name of the virus.<sup>13</sup>

Giorgia Meloni avoided the term “dictatorship,” opting instead to accuse the Conte government of “high treason” against the interests of the Italian people.<sup>14</sup> Gianni Alemanno, a mainstay of the MSI who was once a young leader in the mold of Pino Rauti,<sup>15</sup> Minister of Agriculture, and Mayor of Rome, used the “sanitary dictatorship” reference in commenting on the eviction threats against CasaPound, which has occupied a ministerial building since 2003: “More and more often there is talk of the dictatorship of the ‘Big Brother healthcare’ which in the name of the emergency compresses civil and democratic liberties. The possible evacuation of CasaPound appears the most evident concrete manifestation of this dangerous drift.”<sup>16</sup> Another important representative of the MSI and then of Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance, the post-MSI party), Francesco Storace, a former minister and former president of the Lazio Region, thundered several times against the “dictators of the virus.”<sup>17</sup>

The circulation of the term “sanitary dictatorship,” alternating with “virus dictatorship,” in the circles of the parliamentary national-populist right has effectively legitimized the conspiracy narrative of the far right and has given vigor to neo-fascist groups. On Salvini’s part, his engagement with anti-government conspiracy theories was motivated by the need not to lose the media spotlight during the crisis period, which saw the popularity of the League and its leader decline in the polls (from 34.6 percent during the 2019 European elections to 26 percent on April 7, 2020).<sup>18</sup> But Salvini also needed to distract public attention from the disastrous

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13 See Matteo Salvini’s Twitter account, <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1248356300343435269> (last accessed April 26, 2021).

14 “Mes, Meloni e Salvini all’attacco: ‘Alto tradimento’, ‘dittatura in nome del virus,’” *Libero Quotidiano*, April 10, 2020, [https://www.liberoquotidiano.it/news/politica/21925700/mes\\_accordo\\_eurogruppo\\_meloni\\_alto\\_tradimento\\_salvini\\_dittatura\\_nome\\_virus.html](https://www.liberoquotidiano.it/news/politica/21925700/mes_accordo_eurogruppo_meloni_alto_tradimento_salvini_dittatura_nome_virus.html).

15 Pino Rauti (1926–2012) was one of the main leaders of Italian Neo-Fascism. A very young soldier in the Italian Social Republic, he was among the first followers of Julius Evola after the war. After leaving the MSI in 1953 because it was not considered fascist enough, he founded Ordine Nuovo (New Order), a far-right organization that integrated practices and ideas from the experience of German Nazism into Neo-Fascism. Ordine Nuovo was involved in the strategy of tension of the 1960s and 1970s, and Rauti himself collaborated with coup circles within the Armed Forces. Returning to the MSI in 1969, Rauti was elected deputy, and in 1990 he was party secretary for a year. He did not accept the turn of Fiuggi, with which the party changed its name to Alleanza Nazionale. Instead, he, with a group of followers, founded the Social Movement—Fiamma Tricolore. For a history of the organization and Rauti, see A. Giannuli and E. Rosati, *Storia di Ordine Nuovo* (Milan: Mimesis, 2017).

16 Gianni Alemanno, “Sgombero di CasaPound: primo esperimento di dittatura sanitaria e/o strategia della tensione?,” *Qelsi quotidiano sovranista*, June 5, 2020, <https://www.qelsi.it/2020/05/08/news/covid-dittatura-governo-giuseppe-conte-pd-5stelle-se-l-avesse-fatto-la-destra-matteo-salvini-lockdown-24820948/>.

17 Francesco Storace, “I dittatori del virus. Ma se tutto questo l’avesse fatto il centrodestra?,” *Il Tempo*, October 8, 2020, <https://www.iltempo.it/politica/2020/10/08/news/covid-dittatura-governo-giuseppe-conte-pd-5stelle-se-l-avesse-fatto-la-destra-matteo-salvini-lockdown-24820948/>.

18 Monica Rubino, “Sondaggi politici: Lega sempre più giù, sale il M5s. Pd stabile,” *La Repubblica*, April 8, 2020, [https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/04/08/news/sondaggi\\_politici\\_8\\_aprile\\_lega\\_giu\\_-253441550/](https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/04/08/news/sondaggi_politici_8_aprile_lega_giu_-253441550/).

management of the epidemic in the Lombardy region, the president of which, Attilio Fontana, is one of his right-hand men.<sup>19</sup> The pandemic threw the League leader's strategy into crisis, and the choice to resort to conspiracy narratives should be seen as a calculated decision to keep the momentum and forge a new common language with dissatisfied citizens.

Criticism of emergency management also came from voices far from the national-populist right and far right. The philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who has always been considered one of the main intellectuals of the Italian Left, in an article in *Il Manifesto* of February 26, 2020, prior to the national lockdown, condemned the "state of emergency," denouncing the way in which "once terrorism has been exhausted as the cause of exceptional measures, the invention of an epidemic can offer the ideal pretext for expanding them beyond all limits."<sup>20</sup> Agamben has repeatedly alluded to the artificiality of the epidemic, writing that "one of the most inhuman consequences of the panic that is tried by all means to spread in Italy on the occasion of the so-called coronavirus epidemic is in the same idea of contagion, which is based on the exceptional emergency measures adopted by the government."<sup>21</sup> The philosopher has never denied his skepticism about the existence of the epidemic, even making bold comparisons that are widespread in the world of conspiracy theorists:

I know that there will inevitably be someone who will answer that the serious sacrifice was made in the name of moral principles. I would like to remind them that Eichmann, apparently in good faith, never tired of repeating that he had done what he had done according to his conscience, to obey what he believed to be the precepts of Kantian morality. A norm which states that one must renounce the good to save the good is just as false and contradictory as that which, to protect freedom, requires renouncing freedom.<sup>22</sup>

The philosopher's theses were promoted by the national-populist right, which gave him ample space in their publications, with interviews<sup>23</sup> and enthusiastic reviews of the book *A che punto siamo? L'epidemia come politica*, a collection of Agamben's texts on the topic that was published in the summer of 2020.<sup>24</sup> The critique of

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19 Alessandro De Angelis, "Salvini fermo al Papeete all'epoca del Covid," *Huffington Post*, April 26, 2020, [https://www.huffingtonpost.it/entry/salvini-fermo-al-papeete-al-lepoca-del-covid-it\\_5ea57953c5b6e27aec11d494](https://www.huffingtonpost.it/entry/salvini-fermo-al-papeete-al-lepoca-del-covid-it_5ea57953c5b6e27aec11d494).

20 Giorgio Agamben, "Lo stato d'eccezione provocato da un'emergenza immotivata," *Il Manifesto*, February 26, 2020, <https://ilmanifesto.it/lo-stato-deccezione-provocato-da-un'emergenza-immotivata/>.

21 Giorgio Agamben, "Contagio," *Quodlibet*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-contagio>.

22 Giorgio Agamben, "Una domanda," *Quodlibet*, April 13, 2020, <https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-una-domanda>.

23 Francesco Boronovo, "Qui sta nascendo un nuovo dispotismo e sarà peggiore di quelli del passato": intervista a Giorgio Agamben," *La Verità*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.laverita.info/qui-sta-nascendo-un-nuovo-dispotismo-e-sara-peggiore-di-quelli-del-passato-2645789167.html>.

24 Francesco Boronovo, "Manuale di resistenza al regime sanitario," *La Verità*, July 9, 2020, <https://www.quodlibet.it/recensione/4210>.

biopower and of health as an apparatus, a theme dear to Agamben's heart,<sup>25</sup> proved useful to justify on a theoretical level the rejection of preventive measures, the anti-vaccine battle, and the conspiracy theories advanced by the far right.<sup>26</sup>

### Anti-Vaxxers and Ethnic Substitution: The Merging of Conspiracy Theories

After their so-called "March on Rome," far-right groups launched on June 6, 2020 the meeting Ragazzi d'Italia (The Folks from Italy) which was supposed to unite football Ultras with far-right groups. Authorization for the demonstration was requested by Forza Nuova. The meeting immediately degenerated into clashes between neo-fascist militants and the police.<sup>27</sup> A few days earlier, on June 2 (Italian Republic Day), the Lega, Brothers of Italy, and Forza Italia marched through the center of Rome without regard for safety regulations.<sup>28</sup> On that occasion, divergences of strategy between the different actors became visible, with Salvini participating in person while Meloni appealed to her supporters to respect the lockdown and follow the event via social media.<sup>29</sup>

The sanitary restrictions were relaxed during the summer of 2020, but the resurgence of infections from the end of August and the debate over the re-introduction of containment measures reopened polemics. Galvanized by the demonstrations in Berlin on August 1 and 29,<sup>30</sup> which saw 15,000 and 18,000 people, respectively, take to the streets, the Italian far right tried to replicate the experiment in Rome. They were convinced that they could bring together the same heterogeneous coalition of anti-vaxxers, anti-maskers, neo-Nazis, supporters of the New Age and a healthy way of life, and worried parents.

But the Italian alliance—directed by Forza Nuova together with impromptu groupings such as the Popolo delle Mamme (The People of the Mothers) and with the participation of emblematic figures of national-populism, such as the philosopher

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<sup>25</sup> Agamben uses the term *dispositivo*, translated in English as *apparatus*. The philosopher defines the term as follows: "Further expanding the already large class of Foucauldian apparatuses, I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings. Not only, therefore, prisons, mad houses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, juridical measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident), but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and—why not—language itself, which is perhaps the most ancient of apparatuses—one in which thousands and thousands of years ago a primate inadvertently let himself be captured, probably without realizing the consequences that he was about to face." Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 14. On Agamben, biopower, and his positions on coronavirus, see Stefano G. Azzarà's observations in his latest book, *Il virus dell'Occidente. Universalismo astratto e sovranismo particolarista di fronte allo stato d'eccezione* (Milan: Mimesis, 2020).

<sup>26</sup> An interesting reflection on this point was developed in Rocco Ronchi, "Biopolitica del virus," *Doppiozero*, December 17, 2020, <https://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/biopolitica-del-virus>.

<sup>27</sup> Camilla Mozzetti and Marco Pasqua, "Ultras e Forza Nuova, follia a Roma: guerriglia al Circo Massimo, 14 fermi e un arresto. Aggrediti poliziotti e giornalisti," *Il Messaggero*, June 7, 2020, [https://www.ilmessaggero.it/roma/news/ultra\\_forza\\_nuova\\_diretta\\_manifestazione\\_circo\\_massimo\\_roma\\_6\\_giugno\\_2020-527264.html](https://www.ilmessaggero.it/roma/news/ultra_forza_nuova_diretta_manifestazione_circo_massimo_roma_6_giugno_2020-527264.html).

<sup>28</sup> "2 Giugno, centrodestra in piazza senza regole: saltano i distanziamenti, il flash mob degenera in rissa," *La Repubblica*, June 2, 2020, [https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/06/02/news/2\\_giugno\\_manifestazione\\_centrodestra-258244031/](https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/06/02/news/2_giugno_manifestazione_centrodestra-258244031/).

<sup>29</sup> Carmelo Lopapa, "Meloni: 'Nulla a che fare con i gilet arancioni. Ma il disagio è reale,'" *La Repubblica*, June 1, 2020, [https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/06/01/news/meloni\\_nulla\\_a\\_che\\_fare\\_con\\_i\\_gilet\\_arancioni\\_ma\\_il\\_disagio\\_e\\_reale-301032425/](https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/06/01/news/meloni_nulla_a_che_fare_con_i_gilet_arancioni_ma_il_disagio_e_reale-301032425/).

<sup>30</sup> Marco Assab, "No-vax, cospirazionisti, estremisti di destra: a Berlino la protesta dei negazionisti del Coronavirus," *Open*, August 1, 2020, <https://www.open.online/2020/08/01/coronavirus-negazionisti-in-strada-a-berlino-contro-mascherine/>; "Protesta anti-restrizioni a Berlino," *RSI - Radiotelevisione svizzera*, August 29, 2020, <https://www.rsi.ch/news/mondo/Protesta-anti-restrizioni-a-Berlino-13360791.html>.

Diego Fusaro—did not enjoy the same success as the Berlin demonstrators. Only 1,500 people gathered in Rome’s Bocca della Verità square on September 5. Giuliano Castellino, vice president of Forza Nuova, already in trouble with the law for drug dealing and public health fraud, spoke at the event, during which photos of Pope Francis and Beppe Grillo, the leader of the Five Star Movement, were burned. Castellino summarized the main points of the conspiracy narrative: “Why am I in the square? Because I am a father of three children and because I am a worker. Because lockdowns and nefarious policies have starved us. Shame on you, scammers. I’m a free man like all those who are here today. I don’t wear a muzzle.”<sup>31</sup>

Another event took place simultaneously in Padua, promoted by the 3V Movement (Vogliamo la verità sui vaccini—We want the Truth about Vaccines),<sup>32</sup> an association of anti-vaxxers, with the participation of MP Sara Cunial. Expelled from the Five Star Movement for her anti-vaccine positions, Sara Cunial became one of the main denialists in the Italian Parliament. In a speech to the Chamber of Deputies during the session of May 14, she played on some of the classic themes of denial:

The right to school will then be granted only with a bracelet to accustom them to probation, slave TSOs (Mandatory Outpatient Treatment), and virtual concentration camps, in exchange for a scooter and a tablet. All to satisfy the appetites of financial capitalism whose engine is the conflict of interest, well represented by the WHO, whose first financier is the well-known philanthropist and savior of the world Bill Gates. We all know by now: Bill Gates prophesied a pandemic as early as 2018, then simulated one last October in Event 201, in agreement with friends from Davos, and for decades he has been working hard to develop plans for depopulation and dictatorial control over global politics, aiming to achieve primacy over agriculture, technology, and energy; and he says—exact words, taken from a statement of his—if we do a good job with new vaccines, health, and reproductive health, we can decrease the world population by 10-15 percent and continues—open quotes—“only genocide can save the world.”<sup>33</sup>

The theme of genocide immediately entered the narrative of denial. The virus, allegedly invented in laboratories, has been seen as part of a plan by the forces of the globalist left and neoliberalism to proceed with the destruction of the European population. *Il Primato Nazionale*, a CasaPound newspaper, devoted ample space to this theory, explaining:

The reasoning is this: many Italians have died and the population has fallen due to COVID-19, as has the workforce. Then there is the risk of a further collapse in births due to the fear of the future connected with the economic crisis. And so

31 Luca Monaco, “No mask e ultradestra, solo 1500 in piazza a Roma, Bruciate foto di Grillo e papa Francesco,” *La Repubblica*, September 5, 2020, [https://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/09/05/news/no\\_mask\\_e\\_ultradestra\\_ritornano\\_in\\_piazza\\_schiaffo\\_alle\\_vittime\\_-266303527/](https://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/09/05/news/no_mask_e_ultradestra_ritornano_in_piazza_schiaffo_alle_vittime_-266303527/).

32 Ivan Grozny Compasso, “Il Movimento 3V e i nemici pubblici: cronaca di una domenica particolare,” *Padova Oggi*, September 6, 2020, <https://www.padovaoggi.it/politica/movimento-3v-nemici-pubblici-cronaca-una-domenica-particolare-padova-7-settembre-2020.html>.

33 “Intervento dell’On.le Sara Cunial, Resoconto stenografico dell’Assemblea. Seduta n. 340 di giovedì 14 maggio 2020,” XVIII Legislatura, Camera dei deputati, May 14, 2020, <https://www.camera.it/leg18/410?idSeduta=0340&tipo=stenografico#sed0340.stenografico.tito0040.sub00020.int00520> (last accessed April 29, 2021).



to face this crisis, it will be necessary for the Left to naturalize and give citizenship to fresh foreign forces, to keep the balance sheet or the state budget even in surplus between the dead and the population.<sup>34</sup>

The national-populist newspaper *Libero* took up these arguments: its headline on May 6, 2020, read: “An advantageous exchange: in Italy, 30,000 deaths replaced by 600,000 immigrants.”<sup>35</sup> But one of the main media of Italian conspiracy has been ByoBlu, a site first present on YouTube, then closed due to repeated infringements of YouTube policy, and now active as an autonomous website. The site is the Italian version of Alex Jones’ well-known InfoWars. Its creator, Claudio Messori, was formerly a communications manager for the Five Star Movement before being expelled from the party. ByoBlu offers videos dedicated to treatments “prohibited” by the authorities that allegedly cure the coronavirus,<sup>36</sup> as well as anti-vaccination reports.<sup>37</sup> Specious interpretations of the effectiveness of vaccines are presented as positions taken by authoritative scientific journals,<sup>38</sup> while data on the number of victims are contested,<sup>39</sup> allowing the site to present the epidemic as a “global coup.”<sup>40</sup> These positions enjoy consensus among anti-maskers and anti-vaxxers, and were immediately taken up by the Gilet Arancioni, who during their national conference declared that they had “discovered that a patent made by Bill Gates can control our bodies [and], employing 5G technology and a quantum tattoo or a microchip, can shut us down or kill us.”<sup>41</sup>

### From the Fall 2020 Riots to the Draghi Government

In the second half of October 2020, regional measures to contain the new wave of the virus began. In Campania, a populous region where the unemployment rate is 18 percent, regional president Vincenzo De Luca announced a curfew from 11pm to 5am starting on October 23.<sup>42</sup> An appeal launched on social networks by some owners of cafes and restaurants managed to bring several thousand people to the streets that same evening for an initially peaceful demonstration that subsequently

34 Emanuele Fusi, “La sinistra e il Covid-19: un’occasione per accelerare la sostituzione etnica degli italiani?,” *Il Primato Nazionale*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.ilprimatonazionale.it/cronaca/sinistra-coronavirus-sostituzione-etnica-153175/>.

35 Enzo Boldi, “Libero dice che l’Italia vuole scambiare 130mila morti covid con 600mila migranti,” *Giornalettismo*, May 6, 2020, <https://www.giornalettismo.com/libero-sostituzione-etnica-6-maggio/>.

36 Massimo Mazzucco, “Covid—le cure proibite,” ByoBlu, May 14, 2021, <https://www.byoblu.com/2021/05/14/covid-le-cure-proibite-massimo-mazzucco/> (last accessed May 20, 2021).

37 Loretta Bolgan, “Tutto quello che c’è da sapere sulla campagna vaccinale in corso,” ByoBlu, June 9, 2021, URL: <https://www.byoblu.com/2021/06/09/tutto-quello-che-ce-da-sapere-sulla-campagna-vaccinale> (last accessed June 10, 2021).

38 Francesco Capo, “La reale efficacia dei vaccini: dallo 0,84 al 3% se si tiene conto del rischio assoluto di contrarre il Covid—Lo studio su The Lancet,” ByoBlu, May 19, 2021, <https://www.byoblu.com/2021/05/19/la-reale-efficacia-dei-vaccini-dallo-084-al-3-se-si-tiene-conto-del-rischio-assoluto-di-contrarre-il-covid-lo-studio-su-the-lancet/> (last accessed May 20, 2021).

39 Michele Crudelini, “Becchi e Zibordi, bomba sui giornali: ‘i dati sui morti Covid sono falsi!’” ByoBlu, May 19, 2021, <https://www.byoblu.com/2021/03/29/becchi-e-zibordi-bomba-sui-giornali-i-dati-sui-morti-covid-sono-falsi/> (last accessed May 20, 2021).

40 Michele Crudelini, “Operazione Corona: un ‘colpo di stato globale’? La tesi di Nicola Bizzi,” ByoBlu, January 23, 2021, <https://www.byoblu.com/2021/01/23/operazione-corona-colpo-di-stato-globale-nicola-bizzi/> (last accessed April 29, 2021).

41 “Tatuaggi quantici, microchip nella pelle e complotto Covid: il convegno nazionale dei Gilet Arancioni,” *Il Secolo XIX*, June 28, 2020, <https://video.ilsecoloxix.it/italia/tatuaggi-quantici-microchip-nella-pelle-e-complotto-covid-il-convegno-nazionale-dei-gilet-arancioni/61972/61953> (last accessed April 29, 2021).

42 Ciro Pellegrino, “Ordinanza coprifuoco Campania: operativa da venerdì 23 ottobre. È la numero 83,” *fanpage.it*, October 22, 2020, <https://www.fanpage.it/napoli/ordinanza-coprifuoco-campania-83/> (last accessed May 5, 2021).

degenerated into clashes between a subset of protesters and the police.<sup>43</sup> Although there have been allegations that the violence was perpetrated by a coordinated group of Camorra clans, neo-fascists, and soccer fans, investigations have thus far failed to identify the ringleaders.

Clashes in Turin and Milan followed on October 26.<sup>44</sup> Neo-fascist movements tried to convene demonstrations in Rome—CasaPound under a new name that has since disappeared, *Mascherine tricolori* (Tricolor Masks), and *Forza Nuova* alone—but neither met with success: their demonstrations drew only a few dozen militants and ended in scuffles with the police.<sup>45</sup> Overall, attempts by the alliance of neo-fascists and various conspiracist groups to create street events capable of replicating Berlin or leading to clashes like those in Naples, Turin, and Milan proved unsuccessful, with very low participation. An October 10 demonstration in Rome, called by the *Bocca della Verità* Committee and animated by *Forza Nuova* and the *Gilet Arancioni*, which pompously proclaimed a new “Government of National Liberation,” with Castellino and Roberto Fiore as its “ministers,” was for instance attended by only a hundred people.<sup>46</sup> The so-called *March of Liberation*, which brought together the *3V* Movement, Sara Cunial, and various local organizations oriented toward alternative lifestyles, gathered about 1,500 participants.<sup>47</sup> The latest attempt by *Forza Nuova* and the *Gilet Arancioni* to exploit discontent with the Conte government’s policies dates back to November 7, 2020, when yet another “*March on Rome*” produced a crowd of less than 50 people in the square.<sup>48</sup>

However, the failures of the autumn did not undermine the unity of the front made up of *Forza Nuova*, the *Gilet Arancioni*, and other figures from the COVID-denialist world. In an interview with the *Adnkronos* news agency on December 14, 2020, Roberto Fiore announced the dissolution of *Forza Nuova* and its incorporation into a new movement, *Italia Libera* (Free Italy). The longtime leader of the neo-fascist organization has not abjured his program—and *Forza Nuova*, as we will see, has not been dissolved—but has indicated that he and his acolytes will now become

part of a single large team together with the *Gilet Arancioni* and the no-mask universe. A new force is the movement of the revolution—today it leaves room for the largest and most varied *Italia Libera* because it understands that it cannot overcome the obstacle of the sanitary dictatorship alone: it is necessary to

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43 Lucia Licciardi, “Coprifuoco e forse lockdown, a Napoli esplode la rivolta,” *AGI*, October 24, 2020, <https://www.agi.it/cronaca/news/2020-10-23/covid-copri fuoco-e-forse-lockdown-napoli-esplode-10053798/>.

44 Viola Giannoli, “La protesta infiamma le piazze: incidenti a Milano, Torino, Napoli e Trieste,” *La Repubblica*, October 26, 2020, [https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/10/26/news/da\\_catania\\_a\\_torino\\_la\\_protesta\\_nelle\\_piazze\\_cosi\\_sale\\_la\\_tensione-271884675/](https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/10/26/news/da_catania_a_torino_la_protesta_nelle_piazze_cosi_sale_la_tensione-271884675/).

45 “*Forza Nuova* protesta contro il coprifuoco a Roma: motorini a fuoco, bombe carta e lancio di bottiglie contro la polizia,” *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, October 25, 2020, <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2020/10/25/forza-nuova-protesta-contro-il-copri fuoco-a-roma-motorini-a-fuoco-bombe-carta-e-lancio-di-bottiglie-contro-la-polizia-il-video/5979056/>;

“Covid, tensione e scontri a Roma alla manifestazione ‘No lockdown’ e Dpcm,” *La Stampa*, October 31, 2020, <https://www.lastampa.it/cronaca/2020/10/31/news/covid-tensione-e-scontri-a-roma-alla-manifestazione-no-lockdown-e-dpcm-1.39485518> (last accessed May 5, 2021).

46 “‘*Governo di Liberazione Nazionale*’ contro norme anticovid, tra ‘ministri’ Fiore e Taormina,” *Adnkronos*, October 10, 2020, [https://www.adnkronos.com/nuovo-governo-liberazione-contro-norme-anticovid-tra-ministri-fiore-e-taormina\\_1J65MIDZ4QtlS3U7TNvjih](https://www.adnkronos.com/nuovo-governo-liberazione-contro-norme-anticovid-tra-ministri-fiore-e-taormina_1J65MIDZ4QtlS3U7TNvjih).

47 Paolo Tripaldi, “La ‘marcia della liberazione’, a Roma sfilano i ‘negazionisti,’” *AGI*, October 10, 2020, <https://www.agi.it/cronaca/news/2020-10-10/roma-marcia-liberazione-negazionisti-9915339/>.

48 Natascia Grbic, “La manifestazione di negazionisti, gilet arancioni ed estrema destra è un flop: neanche 50 persone,” *fanpage.it*, November 7, 2020, <https://www.fanpage.it/roma/la-manifestazione-di-gilet-arancioni-e-forza-nuova-e-un-flop-in-piazza-nemmeno-50-persone/>.

ally with all forces to defend concrete freedoms. Our program continues, but reasons of pragmatism want us at the head of a larger movement capable of achieving the objectives set.<sup>49</sup>

The activities of the Forza Nuova leaders—especially Castellino’s organization of the demonstrations of late October 2020 in Rome, which caused clashes with the police—did not go unnoticed by the Ministry of Justice.<sup>50</sup> Fiore’s deputy was placed under special surveillance for two years on January 29, 2021, by decision of the Rome prosecutor’s office. Despite the proclamations of Italia Libera, there have been no further developments, nor is there a capacity for mobilization, but it would be a mistake not to see and understand the effects of these slogans and narratives.

The start of vaccination has provided another opportunity for the global far right to spread fake news and conspiracy theories, and Italy has been no exception. Opposition to vaccines began in the 1990s with the spread of Andrew Wakefield’s unfamous paper on their dangers,<sup>51</sup> and with the rise of the internet and the growth of social media, such anti-vax positions have been able to gain visibility. The Five Star Movement itself at first contained anti-vaxxers (although these individuals, including Sara Cunial, were subsequently expelled), while M3V was born as an anti-vax political organization and has participated in local elections ever since.<sup>52</sup>

As of the spring of 2021, M3V is active in the campaign against coronavirus vaccinations and aims to support healthcare workers’ right to refuse vaccination.<sup>53</sup> Forza Nuova has not been far behind, declaring that it is necessary to defend those doctors and nurses who oppose vaccines and saying that “this minority must organize and resist the violation of their freedom of choice, avoiding being lab rats.” The neo-fascist party has reiterated that vaccination is a “social experiment where everyone is at the service of the dictatorship of multinationals to carry out, through the unconditional acceptance of an experimental mandatory drug treatment, the establishment of a new dehumanized society.”<sup>54</sup>

The national-populist realm has not shied away from the debate on vaccines either, taking positions that often contradict each other. Matteo Salvini first appealed for a rapid vaccine rollout,<sup>55</sup> then supported the government in blocking the export of an AstraZeneca consignment to Australia,<sup>56</sup> and finally took a stand against

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49 Silvia Mancinelli, “Forza Nuova addio, Fiore: ‘Confluiamo in Italia Libera, no mask con noi,’” *Adnkronos*, December 14, 2020, [https://www.adnkronos.com/addio-forza-nuova-fiore-confluiamo-in-italia-libera-no-mask-con-noi\\_6Txdt8tWxdSCqpq7B6CAEq](https://www.adnkronos.com/addio-forza-nuova-fiore-confluiamo-in-italia-libera-no-mask-con-noi_6Txdt8tWxdSCqpq7B6CAEq).

50 Giansandro Merli, “Sorveglianza speciale per Giuliano Castellino,” *Il Manifesto*, January 31, 2021, <https://ilmanifesto.it/sorveglianza-speciale-per-giuliano-castellino/>.

51 Andrew Wakefield is a former doctor who was struck from the UK medical register for his antivaccine positions. His paper, published in *The Lancet* and then retracted, is considered one of the main “scientific” bases of the antivaccination movement. See Brian Deer, *The Doctor Who Fooled the World: Science, Deception, and the War on Vaccines* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2020).

52 “Chi Siamo,” Movimento 3V, <https://www.movimento3v.it/chi-siamo/> (last accessed May 25, 2021).

53 “Lavoratori Consapevoli 3V,” Movimento 3V, April 8, 2021, <https://www.movimento3v.it/lavoratori-consapevoli-3v/> (last accessed May 25, 2021).

54 “Forza Nuova: ‘No all’obbligo vaccinale: limita la libertà di scelta,’” *Lucca in diretta*, April 20, 2021, <https://www.luccaindiretta.it/politica/2021/04/20/forza-nuova-no-allobligo-vaccinale-limita-la-liberta-di-scelta/232643/>.

55 “Bisogna correre con i vaccini” dice Salvini,” *AGI*, March 7, 2021, <https://www.agi.it/politica/news/2021-03-07/covid-salvini-correre-vaccini-11678519/>.

56 “Vaccino Astrazeneca, Draghi blocca l’export e Matteo Salvini esulta: ‘Prima l’Italia,’” *Il Tempo*, March 5, 2021, <https://www.iltempo.it/politica/2021/03/05/news/matteo-salvini-mario-draghi-vaccini-astrazeneca-australia-governo-26428789/>.

the administration of vaccines to young people,<sup>57</sup> in a continuous thirst for media visibility. The Lega finds itself in an ambivalent position, as it is currently a governing party, with three ministers in Draghi's government, including the powerful Giancarlo Giorgetti, considered Salvini's second-in-command. It therefore seeks to maintain its hegemony in the national-populist world while simultaneously upholding its government commitments. This dual strategy seems to be failing, as Brothers of Italy's Giorgia Meloni is growing in the polls and surpassed the Lega in the first half of June 2021 (20.5 percent to 20.1 percent).<sup>58</sup>

The Draghi government, in which participate almost all the parties represented in the Italian Chamber of Deputies and the Senate (563 of the 629 deputies and 279 of the 321 senators have voted confidence to the government), is, in fact, a cabinet of National Unity. Even Pappalardo tried to approach the former ECB governor to ask for a meeting—a request which seems to have gone unanswered.<sup>59</sup> Forza Nuova, on the other hand, immediately took a stand against the government, denouncing Draghi as a “bloodsucker” and reiterating that Forza Nuova was “on the front line against the sanitary, economic and judicial dictatorship, against globalism and technocracy, to revive a new national-popular united front.”<sup>60</sup> Giuliano Castellino summarized the position of his party on the new government, condensing the constant refrains of conspiracy theorists into a few lines:

Italy, occupied by NATO for over half a century, crushed by the EU for decades and now suffocated by the WHO, masks, and the criminal and terrorist narrative of COVID, will be accompanied by Draghi toward the Great Reset: a phase 2 of Wild Globalization where sustainable slavery and poverty will be the masters in the absence of parliamentary opposition, given that all the parties in power, from Salvini to the Communists, are ready to serve Draghi and the Dragon.<sup>61</sup>

### **Conclusion: On the Convergence between Neo-Fascism, National Populism, and COVID Denialism**

In Spring 2021, polls do not seem to be in favor of the neo-fascist and COVID-denialist opposition to the Prime Minister: 66 percent of Italians approve of Draghi's policies, while Forza Nuova and CasaPound receive very low support, at 0.2 to 0.7 percent.<sup>62</sup> Draghi has adopted an uncompromising line against anti-vax health workers, resulting in the promulgation of a decree on compulsory vaccination for

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57 “Vaccini: Salvini, bimbi e ragazzi non sono cavie laboratorio. Bisogna fermare questa corsa,” *Ansa*, June 11, 2021, [https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/topnews/2021/06/11/vaccini-salvini-bimbi-e-ragazzi-non-sono-cavie-laboratorio\\_246c930e-b480-4b31-8f2c-01e868ec1853.html](https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/topnews/2021/06/11/vaccini-salvini-bimbi-e-ragazzi-non-sono-cavie-laboratorio_246c930e-b480-4b31-8f2c-01e868ec1853.html).

58 Valerio Valentini, “Pd primo partito, e la Meloni supera Salvini. I sondaggi Ipsos,” *Il Foglio*, June 11, 2021, <https://www.ilfoglio.it/politica/2021/06/11/news/pd-primo-partito-e-la-meloni-supera-salvini-i-sondaggi-ipsos-2508581/>.

59 “Governo, Pappalardo: ‘Draghi riceve i gilet arancioni,’” *Adnkronos*, February 6, 2021, [https://www.adnkronos.com/governo-pappalardo-draghi-riceva-i-gilet-arancioni\\_6usvUMbyGoCYCdyOyZhsAT](https://www.adnkronos.com/governo-pappalardo-draghi-riceva-i-gilet-arancioni_6usvUMbyGoCYCdyOyZhsAT).

60 A.V., “Forza Nuova sarà in piazza a Milano contro la dittatura sanitaria e il ‘succhiasangue’ Draghi,” *Milano Today*, March 25, 2021, <https://www.milanotoday.it/attualita/manifestazione-forza-nuova-sabato.html>.

61 Giuliano Castellino, “Castellino (FN - Italia libera): ‘Mai con Draghi né con i suoi estimatori,’” *L'Italia mensile. Blog di liberazione nazionale*, February 6, 2021, <https://www.litaliamensile.it/post/castellino-fn-italia-libera-mai-con-draghi-n%C3%A9-con-i-suoi-estimatori>.

62 “Il sondaggio: Fratelli d'Italia (19,4%) raggiunge il Pd. Per Draghi balzo nel gradimento (+8%),” *Corriere della Sera*, May 29, 2021, [https://www.corriere.it/politica/21\\_maggio\\_29/sondaggio-balzo-gradimento-draghi-8percento-fratelli-d-italia-194percento-raggiunge-pd-fd5b0b3a-bfe2-11eb-b7a1-7e76296b457a.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/politica/21_maggio_29/sondaggio-balzo-gradimento-draghi-8percento-fratelli-d-italia-194percento-raggiunge-pd-fd5b0b3a-bfe2-11eb-b7a1-7e76296b457a.shtml).

those categories.<sup>63</sup> On the national-populist right, Brothers of Italy stands out for its opposition to the Draghi government, though it remains soft on its anti-vaccine rhetoric. Giorgia Meloni criticized the tracking projects and the Green Pass (the EU Digital Covid Certificate, under discussion in recent months)<sup>64</sup> on the same occasion as she announced that she had scheduled her own vaccination appointment.<sup>65</sup>

Yet the impact of COVID deniers on the Italian political landscape goes beyond poll results. One of the first, tragic conspiracy theories of the twentieth century, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, first developed by Russian Black Centuries, became a mainstream argument for the Nazis' genocidal policies. As early as 1979, the Italian scholar of myth Furio Jesi, writing in *Cultura di Destra*, began to explore how the far right based its legitimacy on "ideas without words." Developing this aspect of Jesi's reflection, another Italian researcher of the history of ideas, Enrico Manera, underlined:

Right-wing propaganda offers a typical example of how propaganda can mechanically propagate artificial and fraudulent mythology capable of replacing violence with consensus and consolidating a regime. In any ideological construct, what is important is not its degree of truth, but the level of integration and homogeneity it achieves. Its performance and efficiency derive from the immediacy of the symbol and its ability to simplify reality.<sup>66</sup>

Roger Griffin has rightly identified the *siege mentality* of neo-fascist and right-wing extremism as one of the privileged grounds that allows conspiracy theories to flourish. A "siege mentality" could become the norm, externalizing itself in the politics of identity resentment, in conspiracy theories, in intolerance of otherness, and in openly ethnocentric and xenophobic or more subtle and insidious differentialist racism, often in collusion with conservative attitudes to religion and to changing social mores.<sup>67</sup> What makes the difference is the ability of theories rightly considered marginal until a few years ago to enter the mainstream thanks to the use made of them by national-populist parties. The continuous circulation of ideas and narratives between national-populist circles and neo-fascist groups is central to explaining the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories during the pandemic.

In the case of vaccines, it is no coincidence that the far right's main argument has been the protection of the integrity of children, who would be threatened by the pharmaceutical multinationals as part of a plan aimed at the realization of the "Great Reset," the slogan launched by the Davos World Economic Forum in May 2020. For the far right, the Great Reset confirms Renaud Camus' theory of "Great Replacement," i.e., cosmopolitan elites' supposed coordinated strategy to replace White European

63 Kevin Carboni, "Quali sono le regole del nuovo decreto per l'emergenza Covid-19," *Wired*, March 31, 2021, <https://www.wired.it/attualita/politica/2021/03/31/nuovo-decreto-draghi-covid-7-aprile-scuola-vaccini-zona-gialla/>.

64 On the Green Pass, see "EU Digital COVID Certificate," European Commission, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/safe-covid-19-vaccines-europeans/eu-digital-covid-certificate\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/safe-covid-19-vaccines-europeans/eu-digital-covid-certificate_en) (last accessed June 11, 2021).

65 "Covid, Meloni: 'Ho prenotato il vaccino,'" *Adnkronos*, June 10, 2021, [https://www.adnkronos.com/covid-meloni-ho-prenotato-il-vaccino\\_7B6tidVLHbdKYtWqyBmFuS](https://www.adnkronos.com/covid-meloni-ho-prenotato-il-vaccino_7B6tidVLHbdKYtWqyBmFuS).

66 Enrico Manera, "Myth and Right-Wing Culture in Furio Jesi," *Theory & Event* 22, no. 4 (October 2019): 1069-1081.

67 Roger Griffin, "Mussolini Predicted a Fascist Century: How Wrong Was He?," *Fascism* 8, no. 1 (2019): 1-8, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22116257-00801001>.

natives with immigrants. Having begun in France with the documentary “Hold-Up” and spread to the United States, where it became part of QAnon, opposition to the Great Reset soon reached Italy.<sup>68</sup> It must be underlined that QAnon, which uses a rhetoric largely focused on children, is still very marginal among the Italian far right, but has an important presence on Telegram.<sup>69</sup> There are some objections to QAnon among Italian neo-fascists: writing in *Il Primato Nazionale*, for example, CasaPound exponent Carlomanno Adinolfi denounced the American QAnon as a menace to the “real” ethics of the far right, a theory in which “European spirituality gives way to the buffalo-headed shaman.”<sup>70</sup>

As early as 1961, Julius Evola, the well-known fascist thinker who introduced German Nazism into Italian neo-fascism, writing in *Ride the Tiger: A Survival Manual for the Aristocrats of the Soul*, invited the far right to make full use of the “multiple forms of chaos” to ensure that “a new free space is created, which could be the premise for a subsequent formative action.”<sup>71</sup> The pandemic has presented an unprecedented opportunity to the global far right. As Claudio Vercelli explains, neo-fascist activists

adapt like chameleons to the changed conditions while nevertheless defending a deep core, an ideological mold lived and presented as a “tradition,” as a set of “unquestionable values”; they also continue to regenerate themselves, their image, the contents of their proposals, following a path that declares the extinction of politics as a collective commitment and synthesis of pluralism—by definition a place of moral corruption—together with the need to restore something that they declare lost in the waves of modernity: identity, ethics, hierarchy, order, and so on.<sup>72</sup>

What makes the difference compared to the past is the contemporary ideological fluidity that favors mainstreaming negationist slogans, for instance through the unexpected overlap between the far right and New Age culture. The year 2020 saw “the explosion of the New Age philosophy and the completion of the process of its fertilization with Extreme Right ideas,” according to Luigi Corvaglia, who works on the New Age phenomenon for the Center for Psychological Abuse.<sup>73</sup> The attempts to build a mass anti-vaccine movement permeated with neo-fascist influences may have stalled, but it would be mistaken to think that the battle has been lost: the real struggle is conducted in the field of ideas and cultural hegemony, where a profound illiberal, anti-scientific, and conspiracy sentiment continues to gain support in Italy thanks to the overlap between neo-fascists, national-populists, and COVID deniers.

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68 “Il Grande Reset: la teoria del complotto sul mondo post Covid e i poteri forti,” *Facta News*, December 9, 2020, <https://facta.news/storie/2020/12/09/il-grande-reset-la-teoria-del-complotto-sul-mondo-post-covid-e-i-poteri-forti/>.

69 Nicolò Carradori, “Dentro i gruppi Telegram degli italiani che credono a QAnon,” *Rolling Stone Italia*, January 9, 2021, <https://www.rollingstone.it/politica/dentro-i-gruppi-telegram-degli-italiani-che-credono-a-qanon/546342/>.

70 Carlomanno Adinolfi, “Armi, QAnon e proprietà privata: il neo americanismo da cui dobbiamo salvarci,” *Il Primato Nazionale*, May 9, 2021, <https://www.ilprimatonazionale.it/cultura/armi-qanon-proprietari-privata-neo-americanismo-dobbiamo-salvarci-192501/>.

71 Julius Evola, *Cavalcare la tigre. Orientamenti essenziali per un'epoca della dissoluzione* (Rome: Edizioni Mediterranee, 2009), 23.

72 Claudio Vercelli, *Neofascismo in grigio. La destra radicale tra l'Italia e l'Europa* (Turin: Einaudi, 2021), 31.

73 Giulia Ferri, “Sangue, patria e ambiente: l'ecofascismo è il nuovo volto delle sette,” *L'Espresso*, March 24, 2021, [https://espresso.repubblica.it/inchieste/2021/03/24/news/ecofascismo\\_e\\_il\\_nuovo\\_volto\\_delle\\_sette-293573179/](https://espresso.repubblica.it/inchieste/2021/03/24/news/ecofascismo_e_il_nuovo_volto_delle_sette-293573179/).