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Terraces & Peripheries: Left Snobbery & the Radical Right

By Emilio Quadrelli

The following is a ruthlessly insightful introduction to tendential 'far right' cultural hegemony in an Italian 'sub'proletariat whose existence is barely acknowledged by a 'demoradical' left in the process of disappearing up its own smug cognitarian arse.

The insistence on specific local factors – the continuing centrality of fascist tradition, the politicised football crowd and working class gym culture – is obviously necessary, just as it's obvious that the argument is also relevant to other places where particular differences in class/race composition mean the same consciousness is not necessarily expressed in terms of traditional fascist symbolism. The text appears in German translation in issue 77 of 'Wildcat' (<http://www.wildcat-www.de/>), although it's not online yet as it's still the current issue. It was written by Emilio Quadrelli, a Genova-based researcher who has spent years insisting (from first-hand experience on many levels) on the inseparability of developments in the class structure of work, prison, 'crime' and political insurrection. (The original Italian text doesn't seem to be online anywhere; if anyone wants it please contact the English translator at <infuriantATautistici.org>)

...translator's afterthought: it's perhaps worth noting that 'periferie' is a fraught term to translate. The literal reference is to proletarian/'subproletarian' neighborhoods, which are often (especially in terms of radical right recruitment in parts of Italy) though not always, geographically peripheral. The brutal class geography of Paris, where the municipal centre is physically encircled by those expelled from it, is probably the emblematic case. However someone on the aut-op-sy list pointed out that 'peripheries' might be misleading, and suggested 'suburbs' as an alternative. For now, though, 'peripheries' is maintained, partially because 'suburbs' may have an even more confusing class connotation for some anglo-american readers, and most importantly because the way Quadrelli opposes 'periphery' to 'centre' is clearly more social than geographical

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If anyone still had any doubts much has happened to dispel them. Many of the terraces of the Italian football stadiums are controlled to an increasing degree by the radical right. This is a fact. And it is necessary to start from here to attack, politically and not morally, a phenomenon which has been spreading for some time in metropolitan peripheries and which only becomes worthy of attention when it gains heavy media visibility. Only in the presence of swastikas, celtic crosses or explicit holocaust references dominating stadiums are many people stupefied, as if they were in a remake of Invasion of the Bodysnatchers, and they forget at least a thing or two.

First, they [i.e. the fans associated with the radical right] don't come from the moon, they also have a social life outside the stadiums, lived quite coherently with the 'values' expressed on the terraces. In other words, adherence to the nazi 'lifestyle' is not something purely symbolic and extemporaneous, adopted in a framework where carnival prevails, but a total and in many cases totalising 'lifestyle', with effects on everyday life. The second thing is the consent and legitimation which – without any kind of forcing, it should be noted – they can claim across areas which cannot necessarily be reductively described as belonging to the world of the radical right.

To speak only of the Roman situation, it is worth recalling the 'dead boy' derby match. This spurious story was circulated by some hardcore fringe fans, regarded by the 'experts' as marginal, isolated from the rest of the crowd, but it immediately became the unquestionable truth for the whole stadium.

Essentially the story accused the security forces of killing a young boy during the baton charge that preceded the match. The denial by senior officers and by the highest municipal authorities met with a long deafening, chorus of 'shame, shame' (from Lazio and Roma fans alike), which left little room for interpretation and showed that, when it came to choosing between the institutional truth and the illegitimate truth of 'small groups' of 'unruly fans' the whole stadium showed little doubt about which side it was on. And this is only one of many episodes which could be cited. Posing a few questions, then, seems legitimate to say the least.

As they are not aliens, the 'stadium extremists' do not come from outer space, they inhabit urban areas which are not particularly hard to identify: the peripheries. For the left, this should pose a problem. Why have the traditional urban environments of the left suddenly become the ideal breeding grounds for the radical right? Why are the 'culture' and the 'lifestyle' of 'fascist subversion' able to become hegemonic to a large extent in the stadiums and, to a lesser extent, in the peripheries? Perhaps there are 'deep' explanations that require particularly acute insight, but, even when restricted to the 'surface', it is possible to say something. Passing through any periphery, we enter into a desolate panorama which, to put it bluntly, confirms the lack of interest and the unattractiveness of these territories which, a bit hurriedly in the wake of the latest sociologisms, have been assigned to the world of non-places. The prosaic fact that millions of people live there is regarded at best as a mere nuisance, a simple residue or the undesired collateral effect of the postmodern era. But what is so unrepresentable about the inhabitants of the peripheries? What faults mark them like the indelible mark of original sin? Plenty to tell the truth. If they work they do low-status manual jobs; 'productive' or 'unproductive' is not a difference that matters very much. For the most part, moreover, when they don't work, instead of contributing to the oh-so-fashionable world of 'post-work' they plunge into the prosaic condition of the unemployed, revealing once more, if that were necessary, the '20th century' residue they always carry with them. But they don't stop there, dated and unrepresentable though these conditions already are. In more than a few cases they devote themselves to illegal activities. And once again in this case they show little sign of participating in the contemporary world. Instead of dedicating themselves to illegal practices which are at least respectable as trends, such as computer piracy, they steal, rob, deal drugs, etc. In a word, they don't manage to be cognitive or immaterial in anything, not even in crime. And when, as often happens, together with a few other million individuals they put on a 'blue collar' and every day confront Capital on the terrain of the 'working day', perhaps imagining themselves still to have, if not an historic role then at least a social one, the latest new philosopher rushes to tell them they should stop worrying because, although maybe they haven't noticed, in reality they no longer exist. Not only that: it's often explained that the search for a strong identity is historically obsolete and, objectively speaking, a reactionary operation, because it inhibits the subversive element which, perhaps in spite of itself, the global capitalist era has put into circulation: the age of the individual. But playing as an individual requires the possibility of being one. A dimension which to large swathes of the population can only be denied.

In the global era, as in any other great transformation, if someone wins, someone else can only lose. If many, though still a minority, are enabled by the opportunities global capitalism offers to free themselves from all restrictions (although as Carosone would say, this opportunity almost always depends on mummy's purse) and to assume the light identity of the free individual in the free market, for most life's expectations look quite different. Their destiny can only be that of the perpetually marginal. And that is the only plaintive 'identity' permitted to them.

What does the right offer these masses without history and without future? Not much, to tell the truth. It offers them a collective glue, which, unfashionable as it may be, is still something. Above all it offers them an enemy. The elites, who can regard with cynical and ironic detachment the hold which the conceptual pairing 'friend/enemy' has on the world, are the sole exception: for the majority, those excluded from the gilded world of individuals, the enemy continues to be the indispensable element

able to define the 'strong' borders of friendship. To put it simply, the radical right directs the hate of the peripheries towards something 'concrete'. It offers an identity and a hope. In essence, they say: if we are reduced to this today, it is their fault, the inhabitants of the 'centre', who have the money, the means and the power and use it against us. But we will not submit any more. We exist and they will have to take notice soon.

History is always moved by an 'us' which is counterposed to a 'them'; it never escapes from this dimension. The radical right, on the peripheries, concocts a tailor-made 'us' which in some way is able to turn hate into an identity and a project. Certainly it can be objected that all this is laughable and grotesque, but it must always be borne in mind that choices are made on the basis of what is concretely available. And on the peripheries there do not seem to be any alternatives. Through no merit of its own, simply because it has no rivals, the radical right unexpectedly finds itself in a monopoly on the peripheries. It is well known that, for a long time, the left has abandoned friend/enemy rhetoric, opting for 'visions of the world' where the philosophy of 'benevolence' prevails. Moreover, having without qualms adopted the cause of individuals, the left cannot help but show itself to be distant from the anonymous masses of the peripheries. A snobbish attitude which, however confusedly, the anonymous masses perceive. These worlds receive very little attention, aside from small realities where political militants have been unafraid of contamination with the 'base instincts of the people', as in the case of the Livorno football fans, who are regarded by the left as pure folklore. And what is true of the terraces is even more true of the gyms, another instance where the nazi 'lifestyle' has easily achieved a kind of hegemony. In this case too, an ill-concealed intellectualism has consigned these worlds to the realm of 'bare life', which everyone knows there is no reason to take any notice of. A space which the radical right has not done much to occupy, and on which it would be worth the effort to work, even just to investigate.

In its renunciation of everything, the left has ended up regarding it as inappropriate to maintain any kind of organic link with the 'people', who by definition are not (and never have been) very presentable in sophisticated settings, whether economic or intellectual. The result, as everyone who takes the trouble to do the least work on the ground will easily find out, is quite depressing. In the peripheries, the left is perceived, without too many fine distinctions, as one of the various faces of the 'centre', people who come from outside, who live a gilded life out there (or so it seems) in the world of inclusion, of individuals, of post-work and post-something, but who have nothing to do with those for whom every day is a struggle.

This impression is not far from the truth if, for example, we take a look at the isolation in which the revolt in the French peripheries was left last autumn. The biggest and most powerful insurgency from below of the age of global capitalism, at least in the West, was instantly liquidated by the left, when it wasn't stigmatised as a pure cry of pain and desperation from the beggars of the République. That said, despite the far from idyllic situation, a lot of people are taking notice of the urgency and the need to return to occupy the proper spaces of the left and of antifascism. If from this point of view the Livorno fans can be regarded as the reality which has best been able to guarantee a militant and antifascist presence within the stadiums (and not just there), other realities, though objectively smaller, nonetheless exist, and in the present climate this is by no means insignificant. At the end of this summary, perhaps what it makes sense to propose is that experiences like these be socialised across a wider network, so that they become the common property of all those realities (in a minority but still present in a large part of the world discussed here) for whose existence antifascism and class struggle for socialism continues to be an indispensable reference point.