

INTRODUCTION

## On Italy's populism(s)

Marzia Maccaferri<sup>1</sup>  and Andrea Mammone<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Politics and International Relations, Queen Mary University of London and <sup>2</sup>Department of History, Anthropology, Religions, Sapienza University of Rome  
Email: [m.maccaferri@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:m.maccaferri@qmul.ac.uk)

(Received 16 December 2021; accepted 18 December 2021)

In March 2018, Italian voters sent a shockwave through the European Union. One in two Italians voted for parties ranging from the anti-establishment Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S), which accrued the most votes in the election, to the neo-fascist Fratelli d'Italia (FdI). A small number of votes went still further right, to the openly fascist groups CasaPound and Forza Nuova. For the first time since the 1990s, the far-right Lega surpassed Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia in their (allegedly) 'moderate' centre-right alliance. Nor was this political trend confined to Italy. Protest and anti-system voting throughout traditional Western democracies, and especially in Europe, is actually a much more complex phenomenon that has exposed a new homogeneous and anti-establishment electorate. EU-led austerity measures, along with the refugee emergency, clearly played a role in the concerns of many Italians and Europeans in general, and trust in EU institutions dropped dramatically (Baldini and Giglioli 2020). The new cabinet that resulted from this election was pitched by international media as the first quintessential populist government in a European country with a well-established democratic tradition. The new Italian leadership embarked on a xenophobic mission, mounting an extremist agenda while claiming to follow the 'will of the people' and represent 'millions of unemployed people' (Maglione 2021).

Was Italy (again) becoming a global source of inspiration for xenophobic right-wing extremists? Or, echoing Marco Tarchi's razor-sharp definition, was Italy displaying the latest chapter in its role as the 'promised land of populism' (2015)? Were these 'forces' new in Italian (and global) history? Where do anti-system and anti-establishment movements come from? Is populism a sort of epistemic no-man's-land, caught between analytical consideration and normative judgements (Tarragoni, 2021) or, on the contrary, do we need to go back to socio-historical and politico-cultural analysis to avoid handling populism and neo-fascism 'intuitively'?

This was the political context when, in November 2019, we organised the ASMI Annual Conference at the Istituto Italiano di Cultura in London entitled 'Italy: promised land of populism?', on which this journal issue is based, and these were some of the research questions we posed to conference participants. The essays collected in this special issue stem from a number of the papers presented in London, and thus should not be considered to represent the current state of research on the topic in Italian history and theory, politics and studies on populism, or in Italian studies. The quality of the papers presented during the two-day symposium and the extensive range of themes and interdisciplinary approaches proposed demonstrate how lively and stimulating the scholarly debate on

Italian populism is. Many of the papers deserved publication, but it was impossible to include them all in a single journal issue. Our aim in this special issue is therefore to offer a series of snapshots of unusual and innovative perspectives on the theoretical and historical aporias of contemporary approaches to Italian populism (Marzia Maccaferri's article), its relationship with historical fascism (Laura Cerasi's intervention and Ernesto Serventi Longhi's article), and its representation in popular culture (Gianluca Fantoni, Marco Paoli and Armando Rotundi). The issue concludes with a far-reaching and thought-provoking interview with the historian Federico Finchelstein (New School for Social Research, New York), who gave one of the two keynote addresses at the conference (along with Nadia Urbinati, Columbia University). We believe the interdisciplinary nature of this special issue represents a cutting-edge approach, and we are glad that *Modern Italy* has accepted the challenge.

Populism is a controversial and complex concept that is fast becoming a fashionable buzzword. It can even be used to 'legitimise' far-right forces in the political arena (Mammone 2009). Moreover, it is not simply an obscure academic category. The media and the public debate in general often point towards populist leaders or even the 'rise of (a new) populism', especially when referring to demagogic leaders such as Donald Trump or Viktor Orbán. Appeals to the 'pure people' as opposed to the 'corrupt' national and supranational elites have gained greater traction in political debate throughout Europe and in the USA. In this publication, which we hope will be the first in a series of further reflections, we hope to examine the role Italy has played in this 'story'. Since 1994, no fewer than five 'populist' governments have been elected in the country. The first government of the post-*Tangentopoli* era, led by Berlusconi, was, in fact, both right-wing and populist. The latest formation of the ideologically ambiguous M5S-Lega coalition government in 2018 appears to have cemented populism's image as the dominant (right-wing?) presence in Italian politics over recent decades. Such developments raise a number of questions regarding the existence of a 'concealed' or alleged populism, the relationship between populism and democracy and populism and culture, the nature and durability of the phenomenon, and the potential challenges it poses to national and supranational institutions.

In order to understand the multifaced and variegated (and often 'hidden') forms of populism, we have selected a series of essays that do not necessarily focus on the 'usual' clear permutations of this phenomenon, such as as Berlusconi or the M5S, the leader of the neofascist Fdi Giorgia Meloni, or her counterpart in the Lega, Matteo Salvini. On the contrary, we have adopted a different 'gaze' in our examination of populism because we think it is essential to look at it from various historical and critical perspectives and to consider not only the political conditions that have surrounded the rise of populism in various forms in Italy and abroad over the decades, but also whether Italy's relationship with populism is in some way unique.

Categorisations would surely distract us from the complexity of the phenomenon in Italian history; we have therefore resisted the temptation to define 'populism', and especially to introduce a hypothetical category of Italian populism, or to compare the theoretical and ideological components of what populism is (an approach that parallels the conceptual boundaries between neofascism and fascism discussed in Mammone 2015).

In conclusion, we would like to thank the colleagues who made both the conference and this special issue possible: the other members of the conference organising committee, Carl Levy (Goldsmiths, University of London), George Newth (University of Bath), Marta Musso (King's College London) and Franco Zappettini (University of Liverpool); Philip Cooke, chair of ASMI; the other editor of *Modern Italy*, Francesca Billiani; and the Istituto Italiano di Cultura for its support and hospitality, especially Nicola Locatelli. We hope to continue the interdisciplinary journey embarked upon in this special issue

with further workshops and publications, in particular placing Italy's experience in a comparative and transnational context, focusing on the effect populist discourse can have on national, regional and European identity.

## References

- Baldini, G. and M.F.N. Giglioli, 2020. 'Italy 2018: The Perfect Populist Storm?' *Parliamentary Affairs* 73 (2): 363–84.
- Maglione, G. 2021. 'Techno-sovereignism: the Political Rationality of Contemporary Italian Populism'. *Theory and Society* 50 (5): 791–813. doi: 10.1007/s11186-021-09429-1
- Mammone, A. 2009. 'The Eternal Return? Faux Populism and Contemporarization of Neo-Fascism across Britain, France and Italy'. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 17 (2): 171–92.
- Mammone, A. 2015. *Transnational Neofascism in France and Italy*. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tarchi, M. 2015. 'Italy: the Promised Land of Populism?' *Contemporary Italian Politics* 7 (3): 273–85.
- Tarragoni, F. 2021. 'Populism, an Ideology without History? A New Genetic Approach'. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, doi: 10.1080/13569317.2021.1979130