

CHAPTER 7

**BEFORE AND AFTER FASCIST  
*BONIFICHE***

Spaces of Occlusion and Recursion in  
Contemporary Tavoliere

*Irene Peano*



INTRODUCTION

On the evening of 23 May 2017 a few dozen people staged a vocal protest, pouring into the main road that cuts across the small village of Borgo Mezzanone, located in the district of Foggia, on the northern edge of Apulia. Using their bodies and the dustbins they could find, for a few hours they barred the artery linking the settlement to the district capital, expressly to halt the bus shuttles that served the nearby asylum seekers' reception centre (Centro di Accoglienza per Richiedenti Asilo, CARA). Rumours had spread that, a few hours before, a guest of the centre had robbed and sexually assaulted a 72-year-old woman from the *borgata* (hamlet), causing the rage of her fellow villagers. The images of the blockade published on local media showed some of those who had taken to the streets, presented as residents, sporting waistcoats that bore the symbol of Forza Nuova – a political party commonly identified as neofascist, despite its members publicly refusing the appellation. In fact, Forza Nuova was not new to incursions in the seven hundred-strong *borgata* nor in the city of Foggia, and in the years to come would continue to maintain a vocal, if numerically slim presence.

While far-right political organizations have their footholds in several parts of Italy, the history of the *borgata*, and more generally of the whole plain to which it belongs – known as Tavoliere since the Middle Ages – makes of these places a particularly evocative terrain in relation to fascist-leaning

politics. What is today Borgo Mezzanone was officially founded in 1934 (and completed in 1935) as part of a grand scheme, which by that time had acquired the title of *bonifica integrale* ('integral reclamation/redemption') – one of the centrepieces of historical Fascism's policy across several regions in the 'metropole' as well as in Italy's overseas colonies. If Tavoliere had been the object of projects of drainage, irrigation, settler colonization, agricultural rationalization, urban regeneration and land redistribution for over a century, it was in the Fascist period that their widely celebrated apex was reached (see Peano 2021a). However, in this region the Fascist *bonifica* remained largely in its planners' imagination: after much controversy and delay, implementation was abruptly halted first by the Ethiopian invasion campaign that began in 1935 and then by Italy's participation in the Second World War from 1940 (Bevilacqua 1988). Following the end of the war, Marshall Plan funding and a timid Agrarian Reform avowedly sought to fulfil Fascism's ruralist promises. Yet policy orientations (more than political convictions) had since changed course (D'Antone 1990), leading to widespread dissatisfaction with the results of what seemed little more than a make-up operation to quell widespread peasant unrest and demands for land (Ginsborg 1990). Today, Tavoliere's landscape is littered with the debris of such unattained plans, scarred by their violent interruptions and haunted by their serial fiascos.

Despite such failures, however, or perhaps precisely on their account, as I show in this chapter, the logics undergirding those projects since the nineteenth century, in Tavoliere as elsewhere, have survived in spectral, ruined forms. What is more, a centuries-old genealogy notwithstanding, it is specifically Fascist imageries, materialities and aesthetics – rather than pre- (or post-)Fascist politics – that bear a strong, yet implicit import on the present. In other words, not only was it during the Fascist era that such designs were theorized and aimed to be implemented to their fullest; today, Fascism is also the most readily recognizable ideal, symbolic and affective reference for this assemblage of discourses and sentiments, in many of their manifestations. And yet, such heritage often comes in disavowed, spectral forms, cutting through a wide range of contexts, subjects and positionalities. Explicit homages to Fascism are rarer than ambiguous, half-voiced, uncanny allusions, even in the case of organizations such as Forza Nuova.

On account of its past as much as of the present conjuncture, and indeed of their imbrications, the agro-industrial district of Foggia thus represents an exemplary, if largely neglected case study to address the past's presence. Starting from the material cues disseminated in Tavoliere's urban and agrarian landscapes – whether in intact, ruined or spectral form, in their absence or removal – as well as considering discourses, materialities and events across a range of contexts, in this chapter I examine the contemporary attraction to

or neglect of a multiplicity of pasts. I explore how, if at all, the latter are re-inhabited, referenced and worked through – deliberately or spontaneously – in the present, scrutinizing their complex foldings through what Stoler (2016: 26) has defined as ‘recursive analytics’, which interrogate ‘processes of partial reinscriptions, modified displacements, and amplified recuperations’. I also show how such processes operate at the same time to occlude ‘categories, concepts, and ways of knowing that disable linkages to imperial practice and that often go by other names’ (ibid.: 10). In this sense, I am not interested in definitional debates here, and therefore employ ‘fascism’ as an emic – if ever disputed – category. Yet, precisely on account of such recursions, while historical, uppercase Fascism (the political movement and party that ruled Italy from 1922 until 1943–45) may on some occasions be distinguished from generic, small-caps fascism, telling one apart from the other is not always so straightforward an exercise, as I show in this chapter. In order to convey such ambiguity, I also employ the term ‘F/fascist’ when apt.

## REMEMBERING NOT TO REMEMBER: ENGRAVED NOSTALGIA, AMBIVALENCE AND THE SPACES OF CITATIONAL POLITICS

The founder of the nationwide movement Forza Nuova, former MEP Roberto Fiore, would visit Borgo Mezzanone a week after the episode with which I opened this chapter, attending a demonstration organized by his party with the slogan ‘Se la borgata non ci ridate, saranno barricate’ (‘if you don’t give us our place [*borgata*] back, there will be barricades’). According to a resident of Mezzanone, only two of those participating in the second demonstration were locals – ‘a notorious drunkard who doesn’t have a place to stay’, in his words, and ‘a woman in a wheelchair’. The others came from the larger towns and cities in the district, signalling how the place acts as a symbolically charged catalyst for more or less outspoken nostalgists of Fascism. During this second, sparsely attended rally, the Forza Nuova leader and his local acolytes reeled off the traditional repertoire of the far right: the ‘great values that bind our people together’; fearlessness against enemies, and a concomitant, if contradictory feeling of disenfranchisement and invasion by aliens who reap all wealth and benefits, depriving Italians of even basic necessities and keeping them prisoners in their own houses out of fear; the equation between migration, criminality and Islamic fundamentalism; and the defence of ‘our women’ against Black rapists, related to an essentialist notion of identity (‘If there is something that cannot be done in Italy’, Fiore stated in an interview to a local TV channel recorded on the same day, ‘and especially in southern Italy, that is touching women’<sup>1</sup>). Ultimately, the party demanded the immediate closure of the CARA and the dismantling of

the large slum that for the past two decades has sprawled outside its perimeter. There, in the minds of the (crypto-)neofascists, but also of many locals, regardless of their avowed political tendencies, as well as in the tales of several mainstream national media outlets, ‘clandestine’ immigrants (rather than deserving refugees) find their hiding spot, dedicating themselves to all kinds of illegal, criminal and immoral activities, and should therefore be immediately expelled from the country. Forza Nuova also proposed a petition to prevent the opening of a mosque in the village – of which plan, however, no previous or further notice was given by any other source.

Fiore would return to the city of Foggia a few weeks later, to lead yet another poorly attended rally against a proposed bill then under discussion in parliament, which planned the institution of a tempered form of birthright (*ius soli*) to grant citizenship to the children of (financially buoyant) migrants (cf. Tuckett, this volume).<sup>2</sup> To this day, no such bill has been approved, and debate on the matter is still raging. The demonstration demanded, again, the closure of the CARA and the ‘requalification’ and ‘reclaiming’ of the neighbourhood adjacent to the train station in the district capital, known as the Quartiere Ferrovia (the Railway Neighbourhood), where a high presence of migrants is manifest (‘Fiore, Forza Nuova’ 2017). Since 2016 the party has engaged in vigilante-style ‘security promenades’ (*passeggiate per la sicurezza*) to escort Italian citizens and protect them against the alleged dangers lurking in the area; organized self-defence training workshops for women; and staged demonstrations – not only against ‘migrant crime’ in the slum near Mezzanone and in Foggia, but also to protest the threatened eviction of several Italian families illegally occupying a former military barracks in the city. Most recently, they took to the streets to denounce the measures imposed by the government for the containment of the pandemic, as well as to oppose social media censoring of Forza Nuova’s (like CasaPound’s) accounts, which had been found to ‘spread hatred’ (cf. Molé Liston, this volume). In September 2017, Forza Nuova would also establish its local chapter in the city, and later campaign in some of the district towns for the upcoming general election, with very poor results.<sup>3</sup> During one such rally, which took place in February 2018 in one of central Foggia’s most prominent halls, when asked about his proposals to eradicate the mafia, Fiore first surreptitiously identified mafiosi with ‘Nigerians’ and – implicitly migrant – ‘gangmasters’, or *caporali*, supposedly operating within asylum seekers’ reception centres and often blamed for the conditions of fierce exploitation and inadequate housing reserved for most migrant farm labourers. He then put forth the idea to intern ‘such people’ in ‘concentration camps’, ‘suspending juridical datums [*il dato giuridico, il fatto giuridico*] and neutralizing their [mafiosi’s] capacity to do harm until the battle against the mafia is won’ (Greco and D’Agostino 2018). At the same time, he presented such ideas, alongside that

of forcibly deporting migrants, as an act of ‘love’ for African people, who have the right to ‘develop’ each in their own country.

In the small *borgata* of Mezzanone, parades led (or co-opted) by Forza Nuova had already taken place in the spring of 2016, when party members had ridden the wave of anger that ran through the residents, related to the daily, age-old scuffles with migrants from the CARA and the surrounding slum for access to public transport, especially during schooldays (‘Forza Nuova’ 2016). Two demonstrations had been organized, in which a range of complaints were vented against ‘degradation’ (*degrado* – see Sorge, this volume), lack of civility, and the threat to ‘mothers, sisters, wives and girlfriends’, and where the usual litany demanding ‘Italy for Italians’ was rehearsed. A Ghanaian migrant and long-term resident of Mezzanone also took part in one of the rallies, and was quoted as pleading with fellow Africans to behave in a more ‘respectful’ manner. As with Fiore’s statements regarding repatriation as an act of love, referenced above, the presence of an African migrant implicitly denied the racist character of the demonstration and of Forza Nuova more generally.<sup>4</sup>

While attempting to skirt accusations of racism, but also of ‘nostalgia’ and denialism (and to avoid being indicted for seeking to restore the Fascist party – a crime according to the Italian constitution), Forza Nuova’s rhetoric and its members’ public appearances gesture to the language and symbolics of historical Fascism and Nazism. Overt connections, ambiguous references or insider hints often relate to spaces that are strongly charged with the memory of those pasts – as testified by connections with the *borgate* of Fascist *bonifica*, references to concentration camps, or pilgrimages to sites such as Piazzale Loreto in Milan (where Mussolini’s corpse was exposed in 1945), among others (cf. Heywood 2019, 2022, on Predappio as a pilgrimage site where Forza Nuova organizes yearly commemorations in honour of Mussolini). In December 2023, together with several other party members, Forza Nuova’s leader was convicted in the first degree to eight years’ imprisonment after having been arrested for allegedly orchestrating a siege on the Rome headquarters of the post-Communist labour union, CGIL, during a rally organized by anti-vaxxers and anti-pass protesters in October 2021.

In the 1980s, Fiore had avoided arrest by escaping to London, where he was granted political asylum, to then return to Italy a free man in 1999.<sup>5</sup> Forza Nuova’s leader had been convicted for his active membership, during the previous decade, in the ‘black’ terrorist group Terza Posizione – whose symbol (in turn inspired by that of a Nazi SS combat division) would reappear tattooed on the forehead of Luca Traini, a 28-year-old who in February 2018 fired several gunshots at, and wounded, six migrants from sub-Saharan Africa in the city of Macerata (Marche). His attack also targeted the local chapter of the centre-left Democratic Party (PD), one of the heirs of Italy’s

Communist Party (PCI). Traini, who the previous year had run for local council elections with the Lega party, would be apprehended by the police shortly after the rampage, while intent on shouting ‘Viva l’Italia!’ and performing the Fascist Roman salute in front of Macerata’s 1933 Great War memorial, clad in the Italian flag. Immediately after the news had spread of the shootings, Forza Nuova expressed their solidarity, blaming uncontrolled migration and the mounting insecurity and anger it causes among Italians. They offered Traini economic and legal support through Foggia’s party candidate and lawyer, Margherita Matrella, who publicly declared her readiness to defend the author of the attack free of charge – to then retract her offer a day later (‘Macerata’ 2018).

Traini would be finally sentenced to twelve years’ imprisonment for attempted mass murder aggravated by racism. His gesture, as he himself declared in court, was conceived as a vendetta for the brutal murder of 18-year-old Pamela Mastropietro, which had taken place in Macerata five days earlier. Innocent Oseghale, a Nigerian citizen and street drug dealer, had been arrested a few hours after the recovery of the young woman’s body, found dismembered in two suitcases on a roadside, and would be subsequently tried and finally sentenced to life in prison. Thus, the logic of Traini’s actions derived not only from the purported equivalence of all Black bodies – a signature mark of racist thinking – but also from a concept and form of retribution that recalls Nazi-Fascist reprisals in the last phases of the Second World War, as they were recounted after the end of the conflict, in cinema and popular narrative, becoming ingrained in collective memory. For each German soldier attacked, multiple civilians would be put to death.<sup>6</sup> Traini’s homage to the First World War memorial built during the Fascist period, performed after his blind frenzy of armed violence, and to ultra-right terrorist groups, as well as his saluting gesture, equally testify to his attachment to historical Fascism and its post-war reincarnations. In turn, Luca Traini’s name would show up, alongside those of many other white supremacists and anti-Muslim ‘crusaders’, on one of the several magazines feeding the assault weapons employed by alt-right fanatic Brenton Harrison Tarrant, an Australian citizen who in March 2019 killed dozens of Muslim worshippers in what became known as the Christchurch Massacre. This chain of references makes the citational rhetoric, networked materiality and violent practice of far-right, supremacist politics explicit, pointing to its nostalgic core, regardless of attempts to whitewash the image of its organizations, to make them more ‘respectable’ and protect them from legal charges.

In Aprilia, one of the *borgate* founded during Fascism in Agro Pontino (now the district of Latina) as part of the project of *bonifica integrale*, on International Holocaust Remembrance Day in 2014, three young boys from the town, later identified by the police, hung a banner reading ‘Remember

not to remember' outside the local high school (named after the Rosselli brothers, killed by the Fascist regime for their political convictions while in exile in France), where a discussion on the Holocaust was taking place. The banner also bore the symbol of Forza Nuova, who were quick in disassociating their party from the gesture. The message, however, uncannily captures (crypto-)neofascists' ambivalence towards memory – as the celebration of Fascism's feats is often masked, downplayed or, indeed, denied through the very act of un-remembering, hence seeking to delete and thus implicitly validating that which public memorialization identifies as its major crimes. Even the siege on the CGIL union in 2021, just like Traini's attack on the PD chapter, recalls, indeed restages through an unclaimed citation, early twentieth-century Italian Fascism's violent suppression of the labour movement.

The history of Borgo Mezzanone is itself witness to such (censored) genealogy, which recent events have evoked. The *borgata* was originally named Borgo La Serpe, in honour of Fascist blackshirt militia fighter Raffaele Laserpa, killed in 1921 during a bloody attack against the labour chambers<sup>7</sup> of San Severo (an 'agro-town' in the northern part of Tavoliere). The name of the settlement would be changed in 1943, following the wave of *damnatio memoriae* (lit. memory-damning or cursing) that, across Italy, accompanied the fall of the regime – first with the arrest of Mussolini and then, to a lesser extent, after the end of the war (Fogu 2006; Foot 2009; cf. Heywood 2019) – and that was cast upon Fascist toponyms, buildings and monuments. The stone slab that had been placed on the *Casa del Fascio* (the Fascist Party's headquarters in the *borgata*) as a tribute to Laserpa was removed by the US troops stationed in the village (Mercurio et al. 1993; D'Alessandro 2002).

The same fate also befell the fountain placed at the centre of the hamlet, a heavily symbolic piece of infrastructure in a land that historically had suffered from the lack of drinking and irrigation water, as well as from swampiness. The lictorian fasces (symbols of the regime, in turn mimicking those of Roman *imperium*) that originally decorated it were removed. It was on this very fountain that in 2017, after the aggression against one of the *borgata's* residents by an African asylum seeker (and the reactions that followed it) took place, two swastikas and the word 'DVCE' were spray-painted in black, to be later erased. In November 2020, the same inscriptions, as well as a Celtic cross, were marked (this time in white spray paint) all over the shutters of Borgo Mezzanone's recently opened CGIL labour chambers ('Svastiche' 2020). The union, for their part, denounced the desecration – pointing out that it occurred on the eve of one of its founders' birth: local peasant turned national leader and popular hero, Giuseppe di Vittorio,<sup>8</sup> hailed from Cerignola, a few miles to the south, where on the same date in 2022, the town's chapter of the labour chambers was also attacked and vandalized, in what was interpreted as a fascist attack ('Cerignola' 2022).

In this corner of the Mezzogiorno, the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century's landless peasants' struggles, animated by revolutionary, anarcho-socialist and communist ideals, were taken up again in full force after the Fascist regime's downfall, but apparently disappeared at the close of the 1960s, with public memorialization only faintly and selectively recalling them in the present. The celebration of this history is in fact circumscribed to the iconic figure of Di Vittorio himself, usually purged of his revolutionary edge. While the plight of today's migrant farm labourers is often compared to that of local peasants at the dawn of the workers' movement, little mention is usually made of migrants' current (self-)organized struggles. Furthermore, any explicitly antifascist reclaiming of space on the part of locals is limited to sparse inscriptions, graffiti and sporadic demonstrations, and usually confined within the official rhetoric of anniversary commemorations. The same cannot be said of F/fascist orientations.

Across the *borgate* of *bonifica* – which in Tavoliere were for the most part erected between 1938 and 1941 – as well as in the city of Foggia itself, nostalgic attachments materialize among the (symbolic or actual) heirs of those who invested economic, physical and emotional resources into the Fascist project. The material, affective and ideological debris of Fascism emerges from and attaches to landscapes, architectures, discourses and dispositions (cf. Heywood, this volume). Buildings, monuments, landscapes and ruins from that era or later contribute in various ways to an uncritical or even celebratory recollection of Fascism, evoking and relaying a nostalgia that is picked up on and reinscribed onto places, not only by the most 'extremist' groups but on a diffuse scale. In many cases, constructions erected during the Fascist era still bear its effigies and display heroic depictions of its leader and of Italy's colonial 'empire', having escaped the (sometimes violent) iconoclasm that followed the fall of the regime. A monumental M-shaped building – an obvious homage to the *Duce*, complete with marble bas-reliefs celebrating his feats – still hosts the town hall today. The state offices building (Palazzo degli Uffici Statali), in whose courtyard a large white-marble slab depicts Africa and Europe, with Italy and its overseas colonies (as of 1939) painted black, an eagle resting on a pedestal at its feet, have also maintained their original function. On 25 April 2022, a few representatives of left-wing party Sinistra Italiana, on the occasion of the celebrations of the official anniversary of Italy's liberation from Nazi Fascism, plastered handwritten notes on street names and plaques commemorating prominent Fascist figures ('L'Attacco TG' 2022), listing their responsibilities during the regime – for which action its promoters later received a fine from Foggia's municipal police.

Besides remnants from the *ventennio*, more or less overt official homages to Fascism have been inscribed on the urban landscape even in very



recent times. In 1998, in Foggia's central Piazza Italia, under the direction of the then post-fascist mayor, two pillars, standing a dozen metres tall, were installed, at whose top a semi-circular extension is attached. Among many others, the left-wing university students' union Link, in a Facebook post published on 25 April 2021, noted that this urban décor recalls the shape of the lictorian fasces (Link Foggia 2021). Presumably, the poles were meant to evoke the much taller 'victory antennas' (*antenne della vittoria*) erected in 1936 to commemorate Italy's alleged 'success' in the First World War,<sup>9</sup> in the square that most evidently bears the mark of the Fascist intervention on the urban fabric in a plan to create a 'Grande Foggia' (Corvaglia and Scionti 1985; Cucciolla 2006), and taken down in 1961. Despite the town administration's denial of any connection to Fascist symbolism at the time of their construction, the pillars proved sufficiently embarrassing that the subsequent, centre-left municipal council (which took office in 2004) applied several coloured plaques to some of their component parts, but never embarrassing enough to be removed.

Both in the city of Foggia and in the *borgate* built during Fascism, nostalgia also materializes in the form of calendars dedicated to Mussolini (or other images of the *Duce*) hanging behind the bars of cafés or otherwise on display; commemorative posters dating to the foundation of the *borgate*, depicting the first settlers and bearing the symbols of the regime, proudly framed and exposed in local stores; and graffiti and stickers featuring fasces, swastikas, Celtic crosses or other F/fascist icons (also of recent creation) disseminated on walls, lamp posts, monuments and street signs, sometimes accompanied by slogans – which are habitually also repeated by many supporters of the local football teams and by members of the student organizations affiliated to far-right groups.

However, as already noted, the nostalgic penchant for citation, its spatial and more broadly material attachments and its often covert or ambivalent character are not the prerogative of the ultra-right, being common among a wider cohort of right-wing party affiliates and sympathizers, but also surfacing in even more unexpected contexts. Such inklings, furthermore, have often invested the spaces and symbolics of *bonifica*. The pension reform implemented in Italy in 2019 bore the eerily familiar appellation Quota 100, a possible homage to Mussolini's economic measure Quota 90 – a policy against currency devaluation and inflation that pegged a fixed exchange rate between the Italian *lira* and the pound sterling. While the reference might seem spurious, a closer look at the author of the reform's credentials may lead one to conclude otherwise. Claudio Durigon, a member of the xenophobic right-wing Lega party (in whose ranks Luca Traini, the perpetrator of the Macerata shootings, had been running for local elections) and of post-fascist union UGL, defined himself as 'a child of the *bonifica*' (Telese

2019) by virtue of his grandparents' having resettled from Veneto to the Fascist-redeemed Pontine Marshes. In *Agro Pontino*, the Fascist regime implemented its apparently most successful and widely acclaimed feat of land reclamation and peasant resettlement. In August 2021, Durigon was forced to resign from his position as assistant secretary at the Ministry of Economy and Finances, due to a controversy that vividly captures the imbrication of nostalgic affects and spatial symbols, and the importance of the memorialization of *bonifica* in such attachments. The setting for this political drama, Latina, is the district capital of Agro Pontino and historical Fascism's only example of a fully fledged 'New City' (originally called 'Littoria'). Not coincidentally, in 1998 it was also the stage for the national launch of Forza Nuova. On 6 August 2021, during a public rally preceding the mayoral election, Durigon proposed that Latina's central park be renamed in honour of Mussolini's younger brother, Arnaldo, as it allegedly had been on its inauguration in 1932 (which coincided with that of the city itself), until its renaming in 2017. As a matter of fact, before being christened after the iconic martyred anti-mafia magistrates Falcone and Borsellino in 2017, the park's toponym underwent several changes: renamed 'Parco Comunale' after Benito Mussolini's fall in 1943, its original title was unofficially restored by a neofascist mayor in 1996 alongside other symbols of Fascism (Fuller 2020), while most citizens simply referred to it as the *giardinetti*.<sup>10</sup>

### BONIFICA AND THE SPECTRALITY OF ORDINARY F/FASCISM

As many of the (spectral or overt) citations mentioned above testify, the affective and symbolic importance of *bonifica* and of its spatial-material settings in contemporary Italian political discourse cannot be overstated. But if *bonifiche* have acted as a *lieu de mémoire* throughout Italy's contemporary history (Bevilacqua 1996), today's imaginaries almost invariably anchor them to the Fascist era. Attempts to rehabilitate, more or less surreptitiously, the figure of Mussolini and the regime more generally summon the alleged 'successes' of *bonifica* as one of their common refrains almost without fail (for a debunking of this and other myths of and about Fascism, see Filippi 2019; cf. Mariani 1976). Furthermore, *bonifica* also pops up in less explicit or canonical discourses that specifically relate to the socio-material landscapes of Tavoliere. In this context frequent recourse to the trope of reclamation and purification has been made in relation to the presence of migrants in Mezzanone, Foggia and Tavoliere more generally, striking particularly evocative chords.

Applied to conjure a need to 'cleanse' locales frequented and inhabited by migrants, as it was during the demonstrations sponsored by Forza Nuova,

this idiom has been repeatedly mobilized by a number of other subjects to refer to measures adopted to address the ‘degradation’ of the neighbourhood skirting Foggia’s train station. In recent decades and concomitantly with the arrival of high numbers of migrants (mostly employed as casual farm workers), a series of dedicated stores have flourished there, selling specialty food from West Africa, Eastern Europe and South Asia, as well as *halal* meat and electronic goods, or providing money transfer, communication and betting services. While migrant farm workers these days are for the most part relegated to slums, labour camps or dispersed, derelict dwellings outside or in the outskirts of cities and towns (cf. Peano 2021b), these commercial and recreational facilities – located in an easily accessible part of the district capital – have attracted large clientele from those peripheries, in turn fostering the development of parallel economies, especially for commercial sex and informal second-hand goods.

Complaints from local residents about the rise of crime and the presence of an unruly, drunken, foreign ‘rabble’ (in several instances accused of violence against Italian women), and their bad effects on business, real estate prices and ‘perceived insecurity’, have been a constant and rising feature of public discourse. Anxieties about impurity, crime and degradation have also led first to the formation of vigilante squads and neighbourhood watch-type organizations among Italian residents (including Forza Nuova’s, as well as others that are more or less explicitly tied to different right-wing organizations, such as the tellingly named ‘Italexit’ party, which advocates the country’s abandonment of the euro and the EU). Such calls for increased security also resulted in the establishment of a permanent (yet never used) local police post in the square immediately facing the train station and to increasingly frequent and aggressive police raids that lead for the most part to the identification and banishment of undocumented (and sometimes wanted) subjects, street peddlers or migrant sex workers. On 6 December 2017, a local city council representative from the Lega party, Joseph Splendido, claimed that ‘In order to actually cleanse [*bonificare*] the Quartiere Ferrovia all local police must be equipped with a service weapon’ (‘Armiamo Tutti gli Agenti’ 2017). The politician’s comments came in the wake of the municipal anti-loitering by-law, enforced a few days before, that in turn reflected the nationwide provisions of the latest Security Bill, which had come into force earlier the same year. Both legislative measures, as well as public discourse, responded to a heavily racialized, criminalizing logic, in a climate of growing and ever more institutionalized intolerance that fuelled hatred campaigns, lynching parties and terrorist attacks against migrants, and especially against Black migrants, some of which I have mentioned earlier in this chapter.<sup>11</sup> All those deemed to undermine the city’s *decoro* (‘decorum’, a recently popularized, strongly moralizing, if extremely ephemeral concept), according to

arbitrary standards, are issued with expulsion orders. Indeed, the disturbing alien elements ruining the *decoro* of the once prestigious Quartiere Ferrovia, formerly known as Foggia's 'parlour' (*salotto buono*) – developed by agrarian capitalist money in the late nineteenth century and then during the Fascist era – are thought to come, among other encampments, from Borgo Mezzanone. The alleged robbery and sexual assault with which the chapter opened was immediately relayed by local and national media, which periodically run reports on the 'degradation' (*degrado*) of the slum that surrounds the reception centre, where, it is constantly and obsessively repeated, prostitution and drug dealing are rife; workers are recruited for daily farm labour by ruthless (and, it is implied, always foreign) gangmasters; rubbish piles up and no proper sanitation is in place. Just like the rhetoric of *bonifica*, at once a process of reclamation and of cleansing, *degrado* (a central rhetorical and political trope in contemporary Italy) belongs to the constellation of biopolitical discourses used to justify repressive measures against all kinds of undesirables, who mar the image of (wannabe) showcase cities that must be fit for tourist consumption and who, more generally, are symptomatic of a decay in the body of the community and the nation, which must be repaired by expelling its bearers.

The notion of *bonifica* has also been used in more abstract terms by former Minister for Internal Affairs Luciana Lamorgese, who referred to the need for a 'cleansing of immigration' ('*bonifica dell'immigrazione*') by way of an amnesty for the undocumented ('23-12-2019 Lamorgese' 2019; see Peano 2021a). Since the statement came during a visit to Tavoliere, where the security issues plaguing the district were under discussion, the Minister (a 'technocratic' figure unaffiliated to any party) was presumably seeking to appease what is considered an anti-immigration audience by gesturing towards heavily charged pasts and their politics. The very term employed to indicate such a measure of mass regularization, *sanatoria*, inscribes it into a biopolitical discourse impregnated with cleansing and sanitation undertones.

The 'unruliness' and biopolitical dangers represented by contemporary migration, pitted against the imagined past of purity brought forth by *bonifica integrale*, also surfaced during a conversation I held with Vito (not his real name), an unmarried and childless farmer now in his seventies whom I had the chance to meet in 2021 in another of Tavoliere's Fascist-era *borgate*, Borgo Incoronata. The son of settlers from the northern Veneto region, today he cultivates rented land and employs migrant workers in the harvest of tomatoes. Like dozens of other families, his parents and grandparents had been recruited in the early 1930s to work as sharecroppers at the experimental farm of S. Chiara, located in Tavoliere's Margherita di Savoia, on the Adriatic coast. Some of the colonists, as they were referred to in official rhetoric, were veterans demobilized from the African wars of conquest (the

brutal ‘pacification’ of Libya completed in 1934 and the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935), or migrants enlisted for the agrarian colonization of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, who subsequently returned to their homeland only to find that their entire family had relocated to Apulia, and thus joined them. This latter was the case for Vito’s father. After the end of the Second World War, Vito and his family were transferred to Incoronata, and became employees of ONC (Opera Nazionale Combattenti), the veterans’ organization founded after the First World War, which was in charge of *bonifica integrale* across many patches of Tavoliere.

Discussing the continuities and breaches between past and present, Vito was emphatic in nostalgically remarking that his family’s had been an ‘organized’ migration, unlike those of the present. Here and elsewhere in our conversations, his depiction of the contemporary farm workforce oscillated between the image of the dubiously moral and that of the thoroughly subjugated migrant, conjuring the common Janus-faced icon of a criminal-victim, associated with the idea of unruly and unruled flows. In our discussion, reflecting back on his family’s experience, Vito also quipped: ‘People were resettled in ways that were designed to “improve the race” [*migliorare la razza*]. Following my critical remarks regarding such a project, as if to justify his statement, he offered: ‘Perhaps I chose the wrong word [referring to ‘race’]. I meant to say that they were installed alongside those from different villages and parts of the country, to avoid inbreeding.’ His sequestered lifestyle and anxieties about talking to strangers are possibly a reflection of his unease with a world in which the biopolitical control of flows no longer explicitly follows eugenic blueprints. After the war, many of Vito’s fellow settlers from S. Chiara preferred to move back up north and find employment in the factories of Lombardy and Veneto. All were defrauded of their right, postulated by the agrarian reform, to become owners of the land they had farmed as sharecroppers. Among their last remaining descendants, those who continued to work the land and live on the farm of S. Chiara were finally expelled in the spring of 2021, to be replaced by African migrants.

The new wave of poverty criminalization, today in full swing, bears the echoes of an endlessly haunting past and feeds off long-lasting, heavily racialized tropes. The control of mobility and access to space is one of its central instruments and preoccupations, just as it has been since the nineteenth century, when the battle against urbanization by means of ruralizing projects took hold across Italy. Indeed, *bonifica integrale* and its prehistory were also conceived as a direct response to peasant struggles, which had their centres of organization in ‘agro-’ or ‘company towns’. Such (often slum-like) settlements had grown with the expansion of capitalist investment in farmland after the abolition of the feudal system that began in the early nineteenth century (but reached completion after Italy’s unification in 1861). From the

close of the eighteenth century, southern intellectuals and ‘enlightened’ administrators had progressively come to see the organization and use of the Neapolitan crown’s estates in Tavoliere as highly inefficient and unproductive. Since early modernity, the largest portion of the vast feudal demesne had been allocated to seasonal sheep-grazing pastures (one of the principal sources of revenue for the Kingdom) alternating with extensive wheat cultivation, and administered through byzantine codes by a ‘sheep customs force’ (*dogana delle pecore*). The need to reform the state, homogenizing its practices and hold and abolishing the customs system, was deemed essential to the establishment of private property and thus of efficient, profitable forms of extractive cultivation through the sale of common land.

In this process, the swampy, malaria-bearing parts of Tavoliere were recast as desolate, semi-desert and dangerous spaces, populated by brigands, outlaws and uncivilized, nomadic shepherds. At the same time, the purported need to reclaim wetlands for capitalist agriculture through state-led projects began to be associated with a project of moral reform for different sectors of the displaced, urbanizing underclass, attracted from nearby Appenine villages to urban centres by the conversion of pastures for the cultivation of labour-intensive wheat (Bevilacqua 1988; Mercurio 1988; Snowden 1986). Increasingly, the newly discovered backwardness of transhumant pastoralism and of southern peasants, which went hand-in-hand with the consolidation of ideas of modernity and progress, began to be associated with those subjects’ putative ‘Africanness’, in the context of the development of ‘racial science’. The proletarianization of landless peasants coincided with their racialization. Also, as Welch (2016: 6) has noted, in post-Unitary ‘liberal’ Italy ‘a major point of articulation for Italian racial discourse is at the intersection of primarily agricultural labor productivity and biological reproduction’.

While the idea of reclaiming land through projects that involved the organized resettlement of dispossessed and often criminalized peasants had developed since the late eighteenth century, Fascist rule certainly invested more than any previous governments had, either before or after the proclamation of the unified (if ‘incomplete’) Kingdom of Italy in 1861. Not only was this an unparalleled economic and infrastructural effort; it was also couched in partially new ideological garb, and certainly copiously elaborated on what in previous decades had only been summarily sketched. Projects for the reclamation of swampy lands and the irrigation of arid soils, located mostly along the Italian coastline as well as in the overseas African colonies, were coupled with increasingly ‘organic’ visions in which demographics, politics and ‘racial science’ converged (Bevilacqua and Rossi-Doria 1984; Poidimani 2009; Protasi and Sonnino 2003).

Fascism’s ‘integral’ vision progressively inserted such plans into a wider project that included eugenic, racial cleansing, which tellingly went under

the label of *bonifica umana* and would be achieved by reconnecting the peasantry and the urban poor to a mythicized, healthy rural milieu by means of mass resettlements from supposedly overpopulated areas where unemployment was rife, thereby finally ridding the racial build of southern peasants of its more bastardized (i.e. still essentially ‘African’ and ‘Semitic’) elements (Ben-Ghiat 2001; Poidimani 2009). The idealized connection between ‘blood and soil’ materialized in very concrete forms through such projects. In Ben-Ghiat’s (2001: 4) words,

land reclamation merely constituted the most concrete manifestation of the fascists’ desire to purify the nation of all social and cultural pathology. The campaigns for agricultural reclamation (*bonifica agricola*), human reclamation (*bonifica umana*), and cultural reclamation (*bonifica della cultura*), together with the anti-Jewish laws, are . . . different facets and phases of a comprehensive project to combat degeneration and radically renew Italian society by ‘pulling up the bad weeds and cleaning up the soil’.

The vicissitudes of Borgo Mezzanone since its foundation, and of Tavoliere more generally, provide some illuminating clues as to how old refrains have come to the surface again, if refracted. The upward social mobility of once landless settler families has determined processes of substitution that have altered the composition and organization of labour, but reproduced the racial categories that have sustained its control since the very beginning of the project of national formation and the concomitant development of agriculture and industry. Other processes of displacement and emplacement, of command and abandonment, have taken shape in Mezzanone at the same time as those involving migrants. Across from the original buildings erected by the Fascist regime for the initial settlers of the *borgata*, new houses were constructed in the 1990s by a powerful entrepreneur from Foggia, who obtained kickbacks from local administrations. Locally known as *case gialle* (yellow houses), they are occupied by those who previously lived in precarious, shack-like places or illegally squatted council houses in the district capital, and received the support of groups such as Forza Nuova. The most recent settlers of the *borgata* are known to the original nucleus of inhabitants in Mezzanone as ‘Cheyenne’, for their reputation as ‘savages’. Unlike the founders’ descendants that still live in the *borgata*, who prosper thanks to the small family businesses established after the Second World War, the ‘Cheyenne’ are sub-proletarian clients of local entrepreneurs and politicians, unemployed or with precarious, badly paid informal (and in some cases illegal) jobs and free (but poorly maintained) housing guaranteed by their attachment to a patron.

## CONCLUSION

The presence of a local underclass, hit by waves of crisis, outmigration and endemic unemployment, further reinforces a mechanism of racialized fragmentation that operates by way of a fractal mirror game of othering, finding in the F/fascist repertoire and its materializations a ready-made, prefabricated script and scaffolding on which to feed. Yet deployments of such a repertoire widely exceed the perimeters of contemporary neofascism. The dehumanization and criminalization of faceless and nameless farm labourers, despised for their ‘African’ origins; the rejection of bodies perceived as invading and foreign based on recursive articulations of the paradigm of ‘blood’ and descent; the demonization of old and new urban and slum-like concentrations of workers; and the recurring failures and disavowals of projects of resettlement and redistribution are examples of imperial ‘Möbius strip’ recursions (Hom 2019) that cut across established ideological divides.

Yet the catalysing function of F/fascist tropes, symbolics, affects and materialities also works to circumscribe what are made to appear as isolated, exceptional attitudes – both historically and synchronously. On the other hand, the longer genealogy of, and wide recourse to, notions of *bonificha* and their biopolitical implications point to much more pervasive mechanisms that F/fascist references occlude. Historical Fascism’s ideology has been famously characterized as a nonsynchronous philosophy (Bloch 1977), one in which unfulfilled and mythical pasts (of rural attachment to ‘blood and soil’, and of imperial grandeur, pure identities and solid values) became the bases for active history-making in the present (Fogu 2015). Today, nonsynchronicity itself recurs in the nostalgia for an imagined Fascist golden era, in which *bonifiche* play an important symbolic and material role, especially in a context such as that of Tavoliere, which was heavily impacted by them. However, more than explicit attachments, nostalgia for a mythicized but contested and repressed past surfaces in ambivalent, indirect, uncanny ways, pointing to the need to account for the presence of the past in more complex ways than simple continuities, returns or flat analogies. Indeed, even an exclusive focus on F/fascism as political nemesis partakes of that same nonsynchronicity and myth-making. To counter F/fascist discourse, its occlusions and spectral hauntings, de-fetishizing and decentering its primacy and supposed uniqueness vis-à-vis both its pasts and futures, but recognizing its import, anthropologically grounded analysis must sharpen its tools to critically interrogate such assemblages.

**Irene Peano** is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon. Trained as a social anthropologist, she currently adopts a trans-disciplinary approach in her work, which spans the themes of migration and



labour, specifically focusing on sex and farm work, and their intersections. She has conducted research in the Italian, Nigerian and Eastern European contexts, analysing forms of labour organization, mobility containment and exploitation, but also resistance, excess and flight. She is currently working on a monograph that investigates the genealogies of current forms of spatial containment in different agrifood districts in Italy.

## NOTES

The research and analysis for this piece was carried out between 2017 and 2020, within the ERC Advanced Grant project ‘The Color of Labor: The Racialized Lives of Migrants’ (grant no. 695573, PI Cristiana Bastos), and subsequently supported by a grant from the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) (grant no. 2020.01002.CEECIND/CP1615/CT0009).

1. <http://www.norbaonline.it/od.asp?i=27457&puntata=Borgo%20Mezzanone:%20leader%20Forza%20Nuova%20incontra%20cittadini&pr=SERVIZI%20TG>, retrieved 14 March 2018.
2. The bill, that excluded the children of migrants who fell below a certain income level, was subsequently scrapped, boycotted by the vast majority of MPs who felt it was unsavoury to pass what was widely perceived as an unpopular law just before the general elections.
3. Apart from the numbers of people taking part in demonstrations, in local and national elections neither Forza Nuova nor the other post-fascist organization, Casa-Pound (cf. Cammelli, this volume), obtained large numbers of votes. In the general elections that took place on 4 March 2018, in Borgo Mezzanone the two parties were voted for by four people out of four hundred in total, which amounts to less than their national average, while across the district of Foggia they gained just above 1.18 per cent, a little below the national average. The Lega, on the other hand, reached 6.34 per cent of votes in Mezzanone, in line with the district’s average.
4. Forza Nuova’s denialist attitude towards its own fascist sympathies and racist orientations was made evident also in its pressing defamation charges against two journalists at *Corriere della Sera*, one of Italy’s leading newspapers, who in 2006 had quoted the vice-president of the Province of Rome defining Forza Nuova ‘an evidently fascist organisation and bearer of values such as racism, xenophobia, violence and anti-semitism’ (*‘La Cassazione’* 2011). Italy’s highest tribunal, the Court of Cassation, acquitted the defendants, arguing that Forza Nuova is a nazifascist party and thus necessarily racist too.
5. See Biondani et al. (2017).
6. In 2006, the Military Court of La Spezia, in their pronouncement at the end of the trial against an alleged war criminal, sub lieutenant Heinrich Nordhorn (judged guilty for two separate instances of reprisals against civilians), dedicated a whole paragraph to the matter, titled ‘Dieci italiani per ogni tedesco’ (‘Ten Italians for each German’). In it, the court refutes the widespread belief according to which this was in fact the unwritten rule of the Wehrmacht Command, and yet cites copious evidence that

- Nazi-Fascist troops did indeed carry out reprisals against civilians and partisans in which for the death or wounding of one German soldier (or even without this or any threat of it ever occurring) several Italians (but also partisans of other nationalities), in variable numbers, would be massacred. See Ministero della Difesa (n.d.).
7. *Camere del Lavoro*, or labour chambers, were local manifestations of the socialist party, which had the function of organizing workers and conducting negotiations with employers and their organizations. They later became the headquarters of the communist-leaning CGdL (Confederazione Generale del Lavoro) union, renamed CGIL after the end of the Second World War (cf. Milanese 2001).
  8. For an oral history of the mythicization of the figure of Giuseppe Di Vittorio by landless peasants in Tavoliere, and most especially in Cerignola, Di Vittorio's home town, see Rinaldi and Sobrero (2004).
  9. Cf. Inserra (2022).
  10. For an analysis of the affective charge of multiple histories and temporalities in contemporary Latina, particularly in relation to the Fascist period, see Miltiadis (2020).
  11. These have mirrored and intersected with the daily war against women waged across the country and counting almost one victim every day, as well as innumerable and diverse acts of physical and symbolic violence.

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