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Women's Activism and Gender Relations in the Northern League (*Lega Nord*) party

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This paper is based on ethnographic and documentary research carried out in 2010¹ on gender and activism in the Italian 'anti-immigration' party the Northern league (NL), and on an on-going two-year comparative study focusing on the biographical trajectories of women and men activists in the NL and the National Front, France². Women constitute a minority of the voters, activists and politicians of this party³, which is characterised by a rhetoric championing traditional models of femininity and the 'natural family' as the fundamental base of the social order (Avanza 2008). Political organisations provide their activists with ideological frames and structures of meaning which they can use to make sense of the world and of their political engagement: these are

¹ British Academy small grant, 'Gendering the study of anti-immigration movements in Europe: women and men activists in the Northern League party in Italy', 2010; and Adam Smith Research Foundation Seedcorn grant, 'Women's associations and representations of gender in the Northern League party: a study of documentary sources', 2010.

² ERC – European Research Council, Starting Grant, 'Gendering activism in populist radical right parties. A comparative study of women's and men's participation in the Northern League (Italy) and the National Front (France)', <http://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/socialpolitical/research/sociology/projects/genderingactivisminpopulistradicalrightparties/> (2012-2014).

³ However since its origins there is evidence of a progressive feminisation of the NL party and activists; but also of its constituency (Barone and Mayer 2013).

gendered. The paper addresses the following questions: do women activists conform to the party's ideology or appropriate and manipulate it? How do female activists make sense of their engagement in a male-dominated organisation? How do women members make sense of the tensions between this ideology and their agency in the party? How do female activists enact or challenge the dominant models of femininity celebrated by the party? How do female activists challenge sexism within their party? These questions are particularly interesting given the nature of the LN as a disciplined organisation, relying on its activists to proselytise and characterised by an effective internal communication (Albertazzi 2013).

An important scholarly discussion has developed in the social and political sciences since the 1990s, which examines the electoral support and ideology of the populist radical right (Mudde 2007). Yet only a minority of ethnographic studies exist which focus on activism in these political organisations, as sociologists have tended to focus on left-wing social movements. More specifically, very few studies have investigated the role played by women activists in far-right and racist social movements. Most scholarly accounts of these male-dominated organisations in fact tend to dismiss women as apolitical members whose affiliation is channelled through a man - husband or father (Blee and Creasap 2010). Yet women are actively engaged in right-wing, nationalist and 'anti-immigration' organisations across the world and may feel empowered 'as women' by their activism (Bacchetta and Power 2002). Over the past fifteen years feminist scholars have made great strides in investigating how women tend to be mobilised as symbols of the nation by nationalist projects and organisations (Lutz, Phoenix and Yuval-Davis 1995). However the issue of women as agents of nationalist and 'anti-immigration' politics has remained marginal.

Through its focus on the underresearched topic of women's activism in populist radical right organisations, this paper engages with two bodies of relevant literature. Firstly, the paper will engage with scholarly work which, since the 1990s, has investigated gender as a major force in the emergence, organisation and crisis of collective political mobilisations. Feminist studies have addressed the intersections of gender and social movements with regard to the structures of opportunities and constraints in which activism is located, the strategies and mobilising networks which are used by the activists and the symbolic frameworks employed by both the political organisations and the activists to legitimate action and to construct collective identities (Taylor 1999). This scholarship investigates gender as a central explanatory factor in social movements but also how social movements contribute to the reproduction and transformation of gender relations.

Secondly, the research will draw on theories of racism and its interplay with gender. Contemporary forms of racialisation of migrants in Europe have been shown to be centrally based on essentialist definitions of cultural difference (Miles 1993). This social construction of migrants and their children as undesirable outsiders, because of their supposed radically different culture, is highly gendered. Migrant men are depicted as patriarchal and violently misogynist; conversely, migrant women are represented as vulnerable and oppressed. Recent studies have highlighted the fact that assumptions about the ‘sexual modernity’ of receiving societies are used in contemporary xenophobic discourses, as sexism is ascribed to the racialised Other (Van Walsum and Spijkerboer 2007).

The NL has been a member of various governments in Italy, based on a centre-right coalition with PDL (*Partito della Libertà*). In the early 1990s, it has developed an ethno-regionalist ideology which posits Northern Italy as a ‘nation’⁴ and grounds a claim of independence of the North on an alleged common ethnic identity of the Northern Italians. The party gave voice to a perceived political marginalisation of the wealthy Northern industrial districts claiming that, despite their economic importance, they had no political weight; and has advocated autonomy of the richer Northern regions from the rest of the country. Indeed, its ‘anti-immigration’ agenda is predicated upon the attacks to the Italian central State: it is claimed that fiscal pressure, economic policies and immigration legislation curtail the wealth and social rights of Northern Italians, whose contribution to the national economy is not recognised. However the NL has eventually shifted from advocating regional secession to fiscal federalism. During the 1990s, Southern Italians (who migrated to the North of the country to seek employment) and the central State institutions, based in Rome, were identified as the principal ‘enemy’ of the ‘Padanians’. In the late 1990s, anti-immigration politics have also taken priority over issues of regional secessionism in the party’s agenda. More specifically, there was a shift from the stigmatisation of Southern-Italians (*terroni*) to one which targeted international migrants. Northern Italians are described as the victims of ‘wild immigration’ and of ‘anti-white racism’. At this time, the NL imposed the issue of ‘security’ and the association between immigration and crime on the national political agenda. In the 1990s, the restrictive turn in the Italian immigration policy was heavily shaped by the NL’s views, which focused on the idea of ‘national preference’ in access to the labour market and the Welfare state. The changing focus of the party’s discourse was even more pronounced after September 2001, when the NL’s ‘anti-

⁴ This is called Padania from the Po river which separates the North from the rest of Italy.

immigration' discourse become overtly anti-Islam; migrants coming from Muslim countries were identified as a threat for the survival of Christianity. The party intensified its references to the Catholic religion as the 'Padanian' religion. Scholars have pointed out to the tension between the party's aggressive 'anti-immigration' and 'anti-globalisation' rhetoric on the one hand, and the socio-economic structure of its electoral basis, which has thrived on the migrants' flexible labour and the globalised economy⁵ (Cento Bull and Gilbert 2001). Since 2012, the NL has experienced a major electoral decline and crisis, associated the taking over of Roberto Maroni from Umberto Bossi as leader of the party, internal conflicts following the new leadership and scandals concerning corrupted NL representatives which were highly visible in the media.

As far as its ideology is concerned, the NL provides an example of the key role played by gender in the symbolic organisation of the radical right: according to feminist scholars, its defining characteristic is its reliance on essentialist constructions of the Other to forge and reproduce hierarchical differences, variously based on gender, sexuality, culture, class or religion (Bacchetta and Power 2002). Scholars have also pointed out that dominant constructions of femininity and masculinity are celebrated and reproduced within radical right organisations: women and men may be drawn to radical right organisations because they identify with these hegemonic definitions of gender (Kimmel 2007). The gendered construction of the Padania nation enacted by the party's ideology relies on metaphors concerning three spheres of activity across the public/private divide: work, war and the family. Indeed, this gendered construction involves, first, the naturalisation of the gendered division of work: as in other populist radical right parties (Scrinzi, under review), domestic metaphors are used to construct the nation; women are assigned the role of biologically reproducing and caring for the nation/domestic community; and demographic issues are raised against immigration (Avanza 2008). Further, the Padanian masculinity is associated with sexual

⁵ The backbone of the NL's electoral support is constituted by the small and medium size industries which are at the core of the dynamic economy in small-size towns of the North of Italy, especially in the Lombardy and Veneto regions. Instead the NL does not achieve very good electoral results in large (formerly industrial) cities, such as Milan, Turin and Genoa. In the regional elections in 2010 the NL obtained more than 35 percent of the votes in the Veneto region, becoming the largest party in this region. It also got stronger in the rest of Northern Italy and progressed in some regions of Central Italy. However its polls decreased in the local elections in 2011, when the centre-right coalition failed to secure control of important cities such as Milan. The electoral geography of the NL has further been transformed over the most recent years. In the 2012 elections votes for this party experienced a major decrease in the regions Piemonte and Emilia-Romagna but also in areas of Lombardia and Veneto, its strongholds. The backbone of the NL's electoral support is constituted by the small and medium size industries which are at the core of the dynamic economy in small-size towns of the North of Italy, especially in the Lombardy and Veneto regions. Instead the NL does not achieve very good electoral results in large (formerly industrial) cities, such as Milan, Turin and Genoa. The stereotypical voter of the populist radical right – a young male blue-collar worker – constitutes only a minority of the electorate for this party.

proWess and heterosexual normality: the former leader, Umberto Bossi, is described by both activists and his official biographies and auto-biographies as a womaniser but also as a respectable head of household and father. The political conflict tends to be described in military terms as the Padanian masculinity is associated with strength, resistance and toughness in politics. Finally, Huysseune (2004) suggests that the gendered construction of Padania is associated with rationality, a modern work ethic, industriousness, honesty and individualism: ‘In this respect, the alter ego of the Padanian worker and entrepreneur is represented by the lazy Southerners, migrant or Roman bureaucrats and parasites. In this respect, Padania is constructed as a masculine nation. While celebrating traditional models of femininity and masculinity, the leaders and the party press tend to ‘attribute masculine superiority to the Padanian people as a whole’: ‘every Padanian, regardless of gender and race can become, if not a patriarch, at least a manager or an entrepreneur, a natural leader of the productive community’ (Huysseune 2004). Internal social divisions such as gender and class are thus made invisible, as Padania is portrayed as an ethnically homogeneous community. This representation of Padania emphasises qualities of strength, toughness and bravery, which are socially constructed as ‘naturally’ masculine and are, to some extent, attributed to Padanian women too. Current gendered developments in the party’s ideology assimilate the NL with other European populist radical right parties: the discourse championing traditional models of femininity and the ‘natural’ family coexists with the mobilisation of the theme of women’s rights and gender equality, to legitimate the party’s ‘anti-immigration’ agenda. Immigration is associated with sexual violence and gender conservatism, and is represented not only as a threat for women’s physical integrity but also for their rights (Scrinzi 2012).

How do female activists negotiate this masculine public image of their party in making sense of themselves as women, mothers, workers, activists? Most of the female activists I interviewed describe themselves as women with a masculine character – defining themselves as strong women. They refer to themselves as women with masculine attributes.

‘I started this political struggle, I am a combative person, when I set my mind on something then I achieve that objective, I say: better one day as a lion than one hundred days as a lamb. I am someone who can become aggressive and beat hard’.

In this respect NL female activists conform themselves to the masculine self-representation forged by the male leadership of the party. This self-representation as ‘strong women’ is in line with the views of other right-wing female activists in Italy (Peretti e Mapelli 2012), who take as their model of reference the role played by women in managing the household in traditional families of the past; these right-wing women are critical of both the acceptance of the submissive role assigned to middle-class housewives in industrialised societies and of the feminist route to emancipation, taken up by the younger generations. In addition, the celebration of feminine models of rural societies is consistent with the narratives and ideology of right-wing activists, claiming that they are dissatisfied with the present state of society and praising an idealised past (Klandermans and Mayer 2006).

‘Women can make it!, always! They are strong, otherwise God would have not assigned to them the maternal role. When the woman gives up, the whole family collapses because she is the pillar of the family. When women try to imitate men, as it happens today with women who smoke, drink and have casual sex, then they become worst than men. Normally women are not as proud and egocentric as men are, because they must be patient and humble, but they are also headstrong... Women can be focused and resolute while men tend to get lost in their own discourses...’

However NL female activists do not simply describe themselves as strong, ‘masculine’ women: they say that women in general are stronger than men and that they can be better activists and politicians than men. They express regret for the fact that women have little time to devote to politics because of their domestic responsibilities: this is why, they argue, there are few women in politics. However they consider that these domestic responsibilities enable women to provide a ‘plus-value’ in politics in terms of intellectual and organisational qualities: women are said to be more rational than men, because they know how to make compromise and to manage tense situations and conflicts. These qualities are seen as innately feminine and are associated with the role of women as mothers⁶.

⁶ While some informants identify themselves as women and claim that there are some feminine specificities which predispose women for engaging in politics, others claim that they don’t consider that they have different qualities or skills because of their gender; instead, they emphasise that they want to be treated as individuals who are entitled to have an equal treatment and opportunities in a meritocratic society. These informants are not necessarily younger than those claiming that women are endowed with ‘feminine’ qualities which predispose them to politics because of their maternal role (being aged 35-50 as opposed to 40-70), however they have in common the fact of not having children.

'Even if women have little time to devote to politics, because they have to care for their family, they are better endowed for politics than men because they are rational, not irrational as many people say'.

'Women are much more pragmatic than men so in a political party they can give a plus value'.

'If a woman is willing to devote herself to politics, then she is better endowed for that than men, because she is more efficient and ready to make decisions, she is better at organising, perhaps due to the fact that we are born to organise and supervise things in the family'.

'I make my choices and I stick to them, this is something that women normally do, even outwith politics, unlike men, and I believe the NL has the same approach in politics, they say: we go ahead'.

Whether they claim that, as women, they are better activists than men because of their maternal role, or whether identify as individuals who are the equal of men, my informants use notions of gender to construct a positive image of themselves as activists. In order to legitimate themselves as activists, they mobilise the party's populist arguments, based on the distinction between 'a virtuous and homogeneous people' on the one hand, and on the other 'élites and dangerous "others"' who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice' (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008: 3). They express a view of the NL which is in line with the image promoted by the party, based on the idea that the NL, unlike other parties, is close to the people and rooted at the local level; that its priority is the management of concrete problems and not political power; that its members are devoted, selfless, hard-working and coherent people who won't accept any compromises; that they are not involved in politics for interest but for passion and consider politics as a service to their community; that they are not interested in politics as a professional career. These arguments are used in the context of the ambivalent and sometimes tense relationships between the NL and its main ally, the PDL party. A recent study (Albertazzi 2013) indicates that NL members negatively compare their own party with

their 'plastic ally', the PDL: while the latter appear to them as an 'artificial' organisation which was set up by its leader Silvio Berlusconi, the LN is said to have been born 'from the grassroots' as a spontaneous expression of the people's rage against an unequal treatment. The same arguments are mobilised by the activists in the context of the current crisis and electoral decline of the party. A distinction is made between on the one hand the activists who joined the party before this took part in the coalition governments led by Silvio Berlusconi, and on the other those who joined more recently: my informants claim that some of the new activists are driven by self-interest, that they are too ambitious and that they are pursuing a political career. It is suggested that participating in the coalition government has eventually led the NL leadership to quitting its original objective of secessionism; further, NL activists see the coalition participation in Rome as an experience which conflicts with the genuine 'ethnic' identity of the NL political movement, as in the party ideology Rome is the symbol of the main political enemy of the NL.

The informants set their own 'feminine' way of doing politics against those activists who, for the sake of their personal interest, joined the NL and against those who betrayed the Padanian cause following the party's access to government. They mobilise ideas of gender not only to trace a distinction between themselves and these unworthy NL members, but also between themselves and (certain) NL men. Female activists, according to my informants, have a moral superiority on men: they are selfless and more devoted to the cause. They claim that NL women are more devoted to the community interest than male NL activists, who are sometimes superficial and driven by their ego. They identify their 'feminine' way of doing politics with the honest, coherent part of the NL. These women activists describe themselves – as well as NL women in general - as tough, headstrong, coherent, concrete, selfless and honest.

'I have not talked in the party meetings for a very long time, but when I have started doing that then many people have regretted that... [she laughs] because I have always had a strong character, I have tried to maintain our principles, unfortunately in some periods we have had to change many members in the party because since the PDL was founded, many people have been lured on by the hope of an easy political career, many activists left us to join them'.

'We [women] have a more articulated political vision, while men have a more simplistic way of seeing things, they make a decision on the basis of two or three pieces of information, and they

make a wrong decision! Instead we look at the future, we have a long-term perspective. It is two different ways of doing politics, for us this is a service for the community while for them it is often a way of self-affirmation. Even if in the NL I have seen more often an approach to politics as a service than as a means of self-affirmation... it depends on the period, today unfortunately we observe that the attempt to pursue one's self-interest is predominant'.

In order to legitimate themselves as activists, my informants also compare themselves with female members of other political parties. Gender is mobilised by the informants to distinguish between themselves and those women belonging to those political organisations which are the NL's competitors and enemies: the PDL and left-wing feminists. NL activists tend to portray PDL female members as frivolous women lacking in morality as well as in political skills. They hint to the possibility that PDL female members have exchanged sexual favours for a political career. These comments echo the recent scandals which involved the exchange between sexual favours and political positions in this party.

'Bossi has always supported and trusted both male and female members in the party, if you are a woman the party does not restrict in any way what you can do, while in other parties such as our allies, the PDL, there are strategies which tend to limit women quite a lot. In the NL there are many more women than in the PDL and while in the PDL those who progress in politics are always the prettiest, this is not the case in the NL'.

Finally, NL female activists claimed that, unlike feminists and left-wing politicians, they are consistent and concrete. They dismissed the feminists' claims for affirmative action legislation as 'whining'. Feminists were also criticised for 'hating men'. The informants described themselves as women who nurture true feminine solidarity and blamed left-wing female politicians and feminist activists for being 'spineless' and too accommodating with regard to immigration, described as a threat to women's rights. Female activists tended to represent themselves not only as 'strong' and 'independent' women but also as 'emancipated' women. Sexism within the party was recognised to some extent, but it was described as the expression of a sexism which characterises the Italian society more generally. Some of the interviewees considered Italy as a backward country and compared it with Northern European societies, where – they argued – gender equality has been

achieved. Other interviewees instead cast Italy as a country where women are emancipated and benefit from gender equality, as opposed to the migrants' home-countries, more specifically Muslim countries. However in some interviews a distinction was made between Northern Italy and Southern Italy. The latter was considered as a backward society from the point of view of women's rights: the sexism of Southern Italian men was opposed to the greater equality which, according to the informants, characterises gender relations in 'Padania' and within the NL. Various interviewees described the party as a meritocratic organisation and considered that the NL is the least sexist party in Italy. In addition, some informants explained that the overtly sexist discourse of the party's male leaders was a conscious rhetorical strategy: these were seen as 'jokes' aiming to increase the visibility of the NL in the media. These interviews show that, while rejecting the label of 'feminists', these women advocate certain rights for those women whom they consider as belonging to their 'community', the 'Padania' nation. This echoes findings on radical right organisations from across the world where women activists may favour rights for women of their 'community' while countering the same rights for racialised women (Bacchetta and Power 2002).

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