

## Italy, No Country for Acting Alone? Lone Actor Radicalisation in the Neo-Fascist Milieu

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### Abstract

Recent research on lone-actor terrorism has emphasized that many far-right attackers are guided by the doctrine of Leaderless Resistance, which holds that individual militants have a personal onus to autonomously carry out attacks. In this framework, Italy stands out because, despite its bloody history of right-wing political violence and terrorism, it has heretofore avoided, with one notable exception, any fatal lone actor attacks. This article presents a deviant case design: focusing on the exceptional case of Gianluca Casseri, the CasaPound sympathizer who went on a shooting spree in Florence in 2011, it questions theoretical assumptions concerning the non-occurrence of lone-actor terrorism by advancing a general proposition for why terrorists opt to act individually in settings where collective action is the norm. Based on first-hand information from CasaPound militants, and extensive primary data on the radicalization of Casseri, we argue that the choice between autonomous and collective violence is not only a matter of contextual constraints, personality and strategic choice. Rather, it also crucially depends on the degree of embeddedness of an individual in his or her milieu, and on the nature of the radical movement itself. The findings thus contribute to identifying the conditions that make the occurrence of lone-actor terrorism most likely, as well as the circumstances under which existing countervailing forces might fail to impede individual radicalization.

**Keywords:** Lone actor, far right, Italy, CasaPound, leaderless resistance, modus operandi

### Introduction

In recent years, violent attacks by lone-actor terrorists, including by militant right-wing extremists, have become a major concern for European governments. Recent studies illustrate that right-wing actors are overrepresented in lone-actor violence.[1,2,3] Many of these extremists are motivated by the strategy of Leaderless Resistance which gained prominence in far-right American circles in the 1980s and 1990s.[4,5] However, it has also been adopted by many far-right European militants. Yet less attention has been paid to explaining how, when and why this violence becomes the *modus operandi* of lone-actor plots rather than more conventional types of collective violence.[6]

It has been argued that lone-actor violence inspired by Leaderless Resistance is a weapon of last resort when opportunities for collective mobilisation are absent.[7,8] But evidence from the far-right American movement shows that a combination of collective mobilisation and lone-actor terrorist attacks can be complementary rather than an either/or choice.[9] In this respect, existing evidence shows that contexts characterised by favourable opportunities for far-right mobilization, such as Germany and the UK, display both lone-actor attacks and organised group violence.[10] Other settings, such as Austria, experienced multiple lone-actor attacks but virtually no collective-level violence. Yet other countries - such as Italy - are characterized by high levels of far-right mobilization but experience low incidence of lone-actor violence. If country-specific cultural and political opportunities, such as the legacy of past movements, explain why lone-actor tactics find little resonance in a given context, we still know little about the factors facilitating the occurrence of lone-actor radicalization despite unfavourable circumstances and the availability of collective strategic alternatives.

The present article sets out to address this puzzle, singling out some of the crucial factors explaining the adoption of individual rather than collective forms of far-right violence, in contexts where collective action is the norm. We tackle this question by focusing on the case of Italy, a country where the far right has remained relatively immune to the global trend towards horizontalisation of violent movements.[11, p. 83] From 1990

to 2017 against a background of sustained right-wing mobilization in the country,[12] and many episodes of violence involving grassroots organizations of the neo-fascist right,[13] Italy has witnessed only two notable episodes of lone-actor terrorism. The first was a failed bombing attempt against a newspaper in Rome in December 2000,[14] organised by a neo-fascist activist formerly involved in the armed organization NAR;[15] the second was the December 2011 attack by a lone gunman, Gianluca Casseri, active in the milieu of the extreme right-wing group *Casa Pound Italia*,[16] who went on a shooting spree in Florence, killing two Senegalese street vendors and wounding three others.[17]

Focusing on this latter episode as a ‘deviant’ case,[18] we argue that the choice between autonomous and collective violence is not only a matter of personal preferences and strategic choice. Rather, it also crucially depends on the degree of embeddedness of an individual in the larger radical milieu, and on the structure and nature of the radical movement itself. In line with extant literature suggesting that radicalisation ought to be considered as a social process rather than just an individual cognitive one,[19] we understand it as the shift to a set of beliefs and behaviours which endorse the use of violence as legitimate.[20] We categorise lone-actor terrorists based on three criteria: they must operate as an individual in the preparation and execution of the attack; they must not act as a formal member of a group or movement; and they must not act on the direct orders of a group.[21,22] However, this does not imply that they are socially or politically isolated - rather that the attack is individually conceived and perpetrated. Lone-actor radicalisation is therefore understood on a relational basis encompassing the formation and breaking of social ties across a range of political and personal settings, leading to greater or lesser embedding in specific radical political milieus.

In analytical terms, this implies explaining the occurrence of lone-actor violence in light of the structure and nature of the radical movement in which individuals are embedded. The case of the Florence 2011 shooting is then used as a deviant case[18] to understand what conditions lead to the choice of lone-actor tactics over more collective forms of violence, in a context where the latter are the norm. Having discussed the (relative) failure of the ideology of Leaderless Resistance to permeate extreme-right repertoires in Italy, which remain shaped by an inherited culture of strong hierarchical structures, we focus on the case of a man called Casseri to explain why attackers opt to act individually contrary to established theoretical assumptions on the non-occurrence of lone-actor terrorism. Specifically, we investigate how countervailing forces linked to the structure and legacy of the Italian Neo-Fascist movement nevertheless failed to prevent lone-actor terrorism. Focusing on the radicalization of Casseri, therefore, we seek to identify the conditions under which the lone-actor tactic is chosen in spite of the availability of collective strategic alternatives.

This article is organized as follows. In the next section, we introduce the concept of Leaderless Resistance and discuss the main traits of a relational approach to lone-actor terrorism. We then present the 2011 Florence shootings as a deviant case, and we discuss it in relation to the Italian political context, where the collective discipline and the legacy of the Neo-Fascist movement has heretofore undermined the diffusion of the strategy of Leaderless Resistance. We then appraise the case study from a relational perspective, illustrating how the specificities of relationship between the perpetrator and his socio-political context can potentially trigger lone-actor terrorism under specific circumstances. The conclusion presents the implications of this argument beyond the Italian case, suggesting that autonomous patterns of radicalization may still occur despite restrictive contextual and cultural opportunities, due to cognitive factors at the individual level, and the combination of macro- and meso-level factors: an active far-right milieu providing an “echo chamber” for potential lone actors, and the cautiousness of movements within this milieu in formally accepting new activists within their ranks.

### ***Leaderless Resistance and Lone-Actor Radicalisation: An Overview***

The notion of an isolated and self-reliant so-called “lone wolf” has been resoundingly debunked.[23] The most comprehensive dataset on lone-actor extremist violence has demonstrated that half of all cases had personal

contacts with political milieus, one third were members of parties or movements and in sixty-four percent of cases others had been informed about the attackers' plans.[3,24] Therefore, the dichotomy of "leaderless" and "truly leaderless" seems to refer to an argument that has had its day rather than being an accurate reflection of more recent findings from the field of study.[8] Recent research has focused less on the individual profiles of lone-actor terrorists themselves but has rather focused on their relations and ties with broader political milieus. This relational perspective argues that lone-actor radicalisation is not driven by individual personality traits or ideology per se, but by "processes of interaction between individuals and their social environment where radical frames of interpretation are encountered, adopted, and reinforced through social bonds, experiences, and emotions." [21] (see also:[22,25,26,27]) The loneliness of lone-actor terrorists is always relative, "derived from interactive patterns of relational embedding and disembedding in various social settings." [21] Accordingly, lone-ness is "not an inherent quality but a result of social processes triggered and shaped by individual lone actors' personalities and capacities for social interaction." [21] Furthermore, although lone-actor terrorists report with a higher rate of clinical and sub-clinical mental illness than the general population and individuals involved in collective forms of violence [28], it cannot be regarded as a causal factor by itself.[29] It has been argued that mental illness along with sub-clinical personality disorders, condition one's interactions – and different disorders like narcissism, psychopathy or depression result in different interactional challenges – with their immediate social environment. This often times renders it difficult for politically motivated individuals with mental illnesses to be included in collective radical endeavours due to perceptions of instability, or objections to domineering or erratic behaviour.

Research focusing on the forms and evolution of ties between lone-actor terrorists and the radical milieus with which they interact, has identified two dominant patterns of radicalisation: peripheral and embedded.[21] These patterns shed light on why individuals engage in personal violent projects, despite a potential preference for, or exposure to, a norm of collective violence. Although peripheral lone-actors internalize the beliefs of their ideological milieus of preference sufficiently to carry or attempt to carry out violent attacks, they fail to fully integrate or gain acceptance by their co-ideologues. On the other hand, embedded lone-actors are, as the term suggests, accepted by their contemporaries, can be prominent and respected actors in their milieu or indeed formal members of groups and organisations. Nevertheless, they decide to plot and carry out individual violent attacks,[21,30] leading to the question as to why an attacker would prefer to conduct an individual attack rather than a collective one with his/her comrades? Within this embedded form of lone-actor radicalization, there are two distinct sub-patterns: Formerly Embedded and Autonomous lone-actors. The former are individuals who leave or are rejected by movements to which they used to belong, for example returned foreign fighters (e.g. the former al-Shabab militant who tried to murder a Danish cartoonist Kurt Westergaard in 2010.[21]) Autonomous lone-actors are neither socially nor politically isolated and they combine non-violent activist careers in parallel to preparing their subsequent violent plots. They are firmly embedded in radical movements and usually have potential routes of advancing their objectives through more widespread forms of contentious or conventional campaigning.[21] There are three main reasons why an Autonomous lone-actor would choose to act alone.[21] Firstly, divergence from the group on questions of individual ideological preference; for example. Mohammed Bouyeri felt that his contemporaries in the Dutch Hofstad group did not give sufficient attention to the question of *Takfir*, so he executed Theo van Gogh on his own.[31] Secondly, they might question their comrades' actual commitment to violence like Timothy McVeigh who believed that most of the far-right American patriot milieu had no actual intention to engage in violence.[32]

This is often combined with fears of infiltration by security agencies which has undermined many collective movements.[9, p. 46] Thirdly, they may be excluded from violent clandestine activism because of perceived individual weaknesses, but they may have other skills of value to the broader forms of activism, reflecting the importance of trust in underground networks.[33, p. 60]

Regardless of ideology, Autonomous lone-actors make frequent use of the strategy of Leaderless Resistance. Leaderless Resistance was formally theorised in 1983 by American far-right militant Louis Beam who described it, in an eponymous article, as a "child of necessity" following federal government infiltration of conventionally structured movements.[4] Beam described the functioning of the concept as: "all individuals and groups operate independently of each other, and never report to a central headquarters or single leader for direction

or instruction, as would those who belong to a typical pyramid organization.[4] (see also [6,7,34,35]) It was also adapted for the European context particularly in Germany and Sweden.[36, p. 53] Anders Breivik explicitly lauded it as bring the best strategy for right-wing militants to avoid detection.[34] It is also present in the British far-right scene, with the killing of Labour M.P. Jo Cox in 2016 as a clear example of its application.[37]

It has been highlighted that autonomous lone-actor attacks are better organized and more deadly than other forms of lone-actor violence. The shared know-how and collective morale inherent in their activism in a broader militant milieu ensure that their attack preparations are more prolonged and systematic.[38] Importantly they also obtain moral and political support from these milieus bolstering their motivation to continue with the violent struggle and maintaining their identity as righteous vanguards struggling on behalf of their chosen people.[39, p. 982] Indeed, without this “echo chamber” of the radical right milieu whereby potential lone-actors’ beliefs are publicly validated and their opponents vilified and de-humanized,[41,42] the motivation to attack could dissipate over time.

### ***Far-Right Violence in Italy: The Neo-Fascist Movement, a Deviant Case and Data***

Against this background, previous research on right-wing terrorism during the post-war years underlined the rather “unique” characteristics of the Italian experience of extreme-right political violence.[45, p. 221] From the mid-1980s, the spiral of left- and right-wing terrorism came to an end, and the development of far-right politics in Italy realigned with the rest of Western Europe. As Communism no longer appeared to be a threat, right-wing activists progressively ‘demobilised’, and terrorism and political violence declined.[46] While the heirs of the Italian Social Movement (*Movimento Sociale Italiano*, MSI) – the most enduring Neo-Fascist organization in any advanced industrial country[12] – completed their transition to national conservatism,[47] new challengers emerged in the form of modern populist radical-right actors (Lega Nord), and the extra-parliamentary right flourished in a multiplicity of grassroots neo-fascist organizations, involved in street violence and subcultural activism.[43,48,49]

The structure of the contemporary extreme-right movement in Italy can thus be considered poli-cephalous, in that it displays traits of both centralization and segmentation.[50] The network is centralized in that it comprises a few actors in control of most internal exchanges; yet it is also segmented because marginal actors can participate to the political life of the movement without having to rely exclusively on central actors. While centralization is generally considered beneficial for collective action,[51] which explains the sustained far-right mobilization throughout recent decades, and the high presence of right-wing violence,[2] a segmented structure might facilitate individual forms of mobilization.[52]

Beam’s Leaderless Resistance pamphlet that has been circulating across extremist right-wing circles in the U.S. since the early nineties was only translated and discussed in the Italian context considerably later.[53]. This is due to cultural factors related to the nature and legacy of right-wing extremism in Italy. On the one hand, the Leaderless Resistance logic of violence by self-directed individuals or small cells does not coincide with some tenets of the subcultural Neo-Fascist ideology that dominates vast parts of Italian extreme-right milieus.[54] Interestingly, its tenets had been put into practise by late 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian anarchists. Indeed, Italy’s brand of Neo-Fascist ideology tends to incentivize collective understandings of political participation, articulating a project for the collective rediscovery of the national identity. Even though violence plays a crucial role, thus, it generally does so by means of regulated collective practices, of either a symbolic or physical nature. [58]

On the other hand, the poor resonance of the notions of Leaderless Resistance in contemporary Italian extreme-right milieus is partly explained by the legacy of the strategic choices of Italian Neo-Fascism in the late 1970s, and most notably the “collective madness”[12, p. 189] that paved the way to the notion of *Spontaneismo armato*, or armed spontaneity.[55] This consisted in the formation of small autonomous groups which operat-



ed independently but with occasional overlap in personnel; they used to strike swiftly before disappearing. The strategy was shaped by a perception of violence as a personal, anti-system statement, but it was also conceived as the first stage of a revolutionary progression that would comprise terrorism and culminate in guerrilla warfare. The failure of this strategy in integrating the extreme-right into a collective movement, the many victims it produced even before the massacre at Bologna's train station (eighty-five deaths on 2 August 1980), ultimately led to the demise of Italy's armed Neo-Fascism in the 1980s.[12] In sum, Leaderless Resistance has heretofore found little resonance in Italian Neo-Fascist milieu, mainly due to the legacy of the failure of armed spontaneity, and the subsequent state repression that it generated.

Nevertheless, the morning of 13 December 2011, Gianluca Casseri, a 50-year-old accountant who had a long history of engagement with local far-right groupings, drove to a crowded street market in the periphery of Florence. There, he shot at a group of Senegalese market traders, killing two: 40-year old Samb Modou and 54-year old Diop Mor, and wounding another. His rampage continued two hours later at the central market of Florence, where Casseri fired at, and injured two other street vendors of African origin. After fleeing the market, the killer drove into an underground parking lot. According to the public prosecutor of Florence, Casseri shot himself dead in his car, as the police closed in on him (Doc. Police I).

The subsequent investigation revealed that Casseri was not a very communicative person. He had recently moved to Florence from the smaller Tuscan town of Pistoia (Police Interview I; II and III). The Italian Neo-Fascist organization CasaPound, confirmed that Casseri was a "sympathizer" who had frequented some of the initiatives of the group and held talks at public events co-organized by CasaPound about a historical novel he had published the previous year. The group, however, denied that Casseri was ever a formal member or a militant of CasaPound. [40] While the attack was racially motivated according to authorities, the official investigation was closed without confirming the hypothesis that the killer had accomplices in the planning and the execution of the homicides (Document II). Furthermore, there is no evidence that Casseri had shared his intentions prior to the shootings (Document I).

Focusing on the Florence 2011 shooting, this article is thus based on a deviant case study design.[18] The underlying idea is that while collective far right mobilization (and violence) would be the norm in Italy, the case of Casseri represents a deviation from this norm. This type of design facilitates a detailed examination of a negative deviant case, and it permits an exploration of the conditions in which an event that would ordinarily not be expected to occur actually happens. Accordingly, the analytical strategy will be oriented at examining in detail a case in which lone actor terrorism occurred, in a context in which it was predicted not to take place, with the goal of identifying mechanisms clarifying or extending existing explanations for the choice of individual rather than collective violence.

To this end, the empirical investigation of the case makes use of a mix of primary and secondary data. By combining these multiple empirical materials and sources by means of triangulation, we examine in detail the relationship between the lone actor terrorist, and the milieu in which he was embedded.[44] Specifically, with respect to Italy's far right milieu, we rely on existing information from empirical research on the ideology, practice and strategy of Italian Neo-Fascist organizations. This includes historical accounts on political violence and radicalization in the post-war years,[12] as well as empirical research conducted by the authors on the repertoires of action of the contemporary far-right, and most notably CasaPound Italia.[13,16,43]

Furthermore, we make use of primary data stemming from the official investigation by Italian authorities in the aftermaths of the shootings to discuss the personal and psychological background of the killer, as well as his *modus operandi*. These data includes police reports and files from the investigative proceedings (health assessments, interrogation of the perpetrator's peers and relatives, results from the investigation of his house, email and computer), as well as the ruling by the Italian court that assessed the case (see: Appendix 1).

Finally, to analyse the radical movement in which Gianluca Casseri was embedded, and the nature of his involvement, we rely on data from primary sources retrieved at the time of the massacre, most notably four in-depth interviews conducted by one of the authors with militants of CasaPound in Florence a few months after the shootings (see: Appendix 2). This information is complemented with additional material that could be retrieved from non-governmental organizations that have contested the result of the official investigation, and have conducted further research on Casseri's prior activities, political engagement and publications (all quotes included in text have been translated from Italian to English by the authors).

This data was systematically assessed, using a coding frame focused on capturing the social embeddedness of Casseri vis-à-vis CasaPound and the Italian Fascist milieu, as well as the factors explaining his choice of individual rather than collective violence. The coding frame was informed by extant studies of lone-actor radicalization and leaderless resistance but left flexible and open in order to explore and capture the interplay between the Neo-Fascist movement culture and autonomous lone-actor radicalization.

### ***The Florence Shootings 2011: Autonomous Lone-Actor Terrorism in a Neo-Fascist Movement***

As we have seen, lone-actor radicalization in Italy has been limited by restrictive cultural opportunities linked to the legacy of past movements, and by the presence of available options for collective-level violence in Italy's active extreme-right movement. Nevertheless, the case of the Florence shootings in 2011 coincides with the definition of an autonomous lone-actor developed by Malthaner and colleagues.[21] Casseri operated individually in the preparation and the execution of the attack, he did not act on the direct orders of a group, nor was he a formal member of a group. In this section, we look at Casseri's relational embeddedness within the extreme-right movement to explain how lone-actor radicalization occurs in settings dominated by collectivised forms of violent organisation.

Indeed, while the attack was individually led, Casseri was neither socially nor politically isolated. The investigation uncontroversially confirmed that he was connected to CasaPound Italia. His embeddedness in the movement, however, was only partial, since his personality made him partially incompatible with the type of collective action – including violent confrontation – that is tolerated and promoted in this Neo-Fascist subcultural milieu. In this respect, our interviewees confirm that Casseri's peculiar psychological profile confined him to an intermediate position vis-à-vis CasaPound. He was considered potentially damaging to the movement and was never fully integrated in the group but as he did not seem to constitute an actual danger, he was never fully excluded from it either. As a result, Casseri was relegated to a subordinate, form of participation in the group's collective milieu. We argue that lone-actor radicalization is facilitated by the partial embedding in radical political milieus which serve as an “echo chamber” amplifying the public validation of his beliefs, without however exerting the degree of social control that vertically structured far-right movements normally exert in the Italian context.

Casseri was known for holding far-right ideals within CasaPound in both Pistoia (his hometown) and Florence. CasaPound Italia is a political organization originating from the youth branch of a pre-existing political party of the Neo-Fascist area (*Movimento Sociale-Fiamma Tricolore*). In 2008, a small group of militants left the party under the leadership of Gianluca Iannone, a recognized public figure in the Neo-Fascist music subculture. In the following months, the group started the ‘metapolitical’ project of CasaPound Italia, as a youth cultural centre promoting alternative music events alongside demonstrative political actions. In a few years, CasaPound has been able to develop an innovative political language and imagery, largely inspired by the experiences of 1970s youth Neo-Fascism, thus attracting both nostalgic Neo-Fascists and younger recruits. By the late 2000s, CasaPound was actively engaged not only on the internet and in the Neo-Fascist subculture, but also with demonstrative political actions, occupations, as well as street clashes with political opponents and the police.[16] In 2013 and 2018 CasaPound contested elections with its own candidates, but with little success.

The links between Casseri and the Neo-Fascist movement followed two parallel lines. On the one hand, Casseri was a fan and a writer of fantasy novels. He had a passion for fantasy literature and had active ties with a number of subcultural groups of fantasy fiction, which in the Italian context at times overlap with Neo-Fascist circles. Furthermore, Casseri was a passionate reader of Fascist literature and philosophy, and allegedly self-defined as a follower of the doctrine of the Italian esoteric philosopher Julius Evola (Doc. Police IV). A police tap on his friends' phone after Casseri's death captured his friend recounting that around a year before the attack, Casseri picked him up in his car, dressed in the typical black shirt of the Fascist movement and drove around blaring songs of the Salo Republic while shouting "Viva il Duce" (Doc. Carabinieri V). Casseri had regular direct contact with militants of CasaPound, as confirmed by both the brother of the killer in a police interview, and by CasaPound officials themselves:

*Since you are asking me, I would like to point out that, in fact, my brother hung out with members of the "CasaPound" organization in Pistoia. I remember that he once had flyers from this organization and that he had attached them to a wall in our house. They were flyers for an event to be held in Pistoia. This happened in September last year.*

(Police Interview III)

*Casseri was not a militant of our association, but he sometimes attended the offices in Pistoia. We have no reason to keep this a secret.*

(Official statement by CasaPound, 13 December 2011)

The investigation confirmed that Casseri sent several emails to the organization in the months preceding the shootings, and that the last four emails that he sent from his email account were to CasaPound Pistoia (Doc. Police VI). Furthermore, he visited several websites of the Italian far right in the days preceding the shootings (Doc. Police VII). Even though the investigation could not identify any facilitator for Casseri's actions (Document II), the police investigation confirmed his connections with CasaPound, as well as his sympathies for extreme-right ideologies and his acquaintances in the far right milieu.

*Sometimes he talked about people with black skin: it was part of his ideals to be against the blacks more than other ethnicities. I remember that once, several years ago, we stopped with the car at a traffic light. I remember that he went out of the car, he stole the bucket of a Maghrebi guy who stood there, poured it on the floor and ran away.*

(CasaPound, 13 December 2011)

At the same time, our primary data offers evidence concerning Casseri's mental health. In the years preceding the shootings, and most notably from 2007 onwards, Casseri sought medical assistance for a number of psychological and physical problems before being diagnosed with depression in 2008 (Doc. Police II). He also suffered from diabetes, which according to one of the interviewees caused his sudden shifts of mood (Carabinieri Interview I).

His peers and relatives described Casseri as an introspective, taciturn person who seldom spoke about himself or his personal problems (Police Interview III). Reports confirm that Casseri had difficulties in building relationship with other people, especially with women. Furthermore, these tendencies had been exacerbated in the three years before the attack. His father had died and his mother had fallen ill with Alzheimer's, then one of his two close friends died and he moved out of his family home to live in an apartment in Florence. Most importantly, this happened at the same time as Casseri started intensifying ties with CasaPound (Doc. Police IV). These dramatic personal events whereby his prevailing social ties had begun to unravel before re-stabilising good enough new ones within a political milieu, seem to be an example of "unfreezing", which has been suggested as a mechanism of radicalization.[56, p. 82]

Concerning the relationship between Casseri and CasaPound, our data confirms the pattern of autonomous lone actor's partial embeddedness in a radical milieu, which we believe explains why the aforementioned countervailing structural factors did not sway Casseri away from lone-actor terrorism. Indeed, the embeddedness

of the killer in the movement was neither full nor straightforward. In an interview released a few days after the shooting, the national leader of CasaPound set out the official position of the group on this issue, reporting that:

*The killer was an absolutely normal person. He was about fifty years old and he was an intellectual who wrote fantasy novels, among other things. He was above suspicion. What happened is a tragedy, because he was an introverted and lonely person.*

(CasaPound, 13 December 2011)

It was also added that a political organization cannot be expected to possess a mental health certificate for all of the people taking part in its initiatives. In short, the argument is that Casseri was neither a militant, nor a member, but only a sympathizer of the group. While CasaPound made sure to stress that there was nothing 'unusual' about him, little is said about why he did not obtain a membership card, and why he was not considered an activist, despite being regularly involved in their actions, both offline and online, and participated in numerous activities organized and promoted by CasaPound in Tuscany.

This is partly explained by the peculiar nature of participation in a group like CasaPound, which is located at the crossroads between party and protest politics. Participation thus includes not only elements reminiscent of typical party organizations (such as the explicit adherence to the statute of the group, application to obtain a membership card, payment of a fee, etc), but also practices that are more typical of subcultural organizations (such as identity-building practices through leisure and sport activities, access to specific rituals of belonging, admittance to the groups' inner circle, bars and summer camps, etc.). These two dimensions of participation are, however, strictly intertwined since CasaPound does not envisage membership without active militancy. [57] The selection of who is entitled to be a member thus follows very strict, albeit informal, criteria. Activists are generally incorporated by means of co-optation by other members. After being introduced to the group, prospective activists are first invited to public events and leisure activities organised by CasaPound (such as also in the case of Casseri). This type of participation is understood as a way to test their motivation, before integrating them as active militants, entitled to full status and a membership card (Interview 1). This form of initial screening is clearly also essential to keep the more unpredictable, violent and extremist elements at bay. Supporters and sympathisers who do not wish to become active militants, instead, can be appointed as 'web supporters' in charge of promoting CasaPound Italia's messages, images, and activities on the Internet. Even web supporters, however, are screened by the central organization and – upon approval and payment of a fee – provided with an official card testifying to their affiliation to the group.

Neither of these forms of participation to the group was granted to Casseri. His affiliation with CasaPound was kept even more informal, despite him being actively involved in numerous public events and actions, which enabled the group leaders to argue that they bear no responsibility for Casseri's actions as he was not a formal 'member' – i.e. possessing a membership card. This, however, disregards the effect the racism and violent rhetoric of CasaPound had on Casseri, normalising violence and contributing to his motivation to conduct the attack.

The interviews conducted in the aftermaths of the attacks further illustrate the ambivalent relationship between CasaPound officials in Tuscany and Casseri, and certify his partial embeddedness in the local extreme-right milieu. On the one hand, Casseri was respected for his intellectual activity, for his motivation and adherence to right-wing ideals and values. On the other hand, CasaPound officials appear to be aware of the psychological distress that Casseri had been suffering in recent years.

*I was not very familiar with him. He came every now and then to our public events in Pistoia. He was a typical case of someone a little bit weird [stranettino], but not enough to raise some suspicion in us that this weirdness might lead him to become violent. Otherwise we would have told him to go. As I was mentioning before for these other people: there is plenty of people that we send away because they are too weird. He was not like that.*



(Interview II)

*I really cannot understand how it is possible that he held a gun. With his depression, they renewed his license.*

(Interview III)

These quotes illustrate the specific form of relational interaction existing between Casseri and the local far-right radical milieu. CasaPound officials certify that they were aware that Casseri had some psychological difficulties. While his behaviour was not enough to justify his exclusion from the group (unlike what allegedly happened with other potential members; Interview II), it was certainly sufficient to deny Casseri access to full membership. The collective self-defence mechanism of CasaPound identified Casseri as a potential danger, but not as a concrete one: this led to his partial embeddedness in the group, as he was a participant without membership. On the one hand, this ambivalent position ruled out the possibility for Casseri to engage in collective violence within the extreme-right movement, as this form of participation only pertains to militants who are fully embedded in the group. On the other hand, Casseri was an autonomous lone-actor, who benefitted from an “echo chamber” validating his beliefs, while being subject to little social control by the group, as certified by the fact that there is no evidence that he communicated his intentions to carry out the attack with anyone beforehand (Doc. Carabinieri IV; V).

### **Concluding Remarks**

Consistent with other research on lone-actor radicalization, Casseri is a clear example of an autonomous lone actor who radicalized in a collective environment but proceeded to conduct an attack of his own design and execution. This reinforces the evidence that most lone actors are indeed not isolated individuals but are shaped by their existing relations and ties to political movements. This article has argued that Casseri’s militant trajectory within the milieu around CasaPound was undermined by his erstwhile colleagues’ perception of him as somebody unsuited to positions of responsibility or indeed collective violence. Nevertheless, he was welcomed and acknowledged for his intellectual capacities. This highlights the important role of radical milieus in the violent socialisation of its adherents, which importantly need not necessarily be formal members. Thus, in order to understand the radicalisation of individuals who proceed to carry out lone-actor attacks, it is not sufficient to focus on the perpetrator him/herself but on their broader sets of relational ties, their formation and rupture, intensification and lessening.

The deviant case of Casseri also serves as a reminder that the analysis of lone-actor terrorism, demands that greater attention be afforded to historical and structural features of specific contexts’ repertoires of violent contention. In this respect, the Casseri attack brings the broader *modus operandi* of the Italian far-right into question, as it shows how autonomous radicalization might take place even in contexts where collective action is the norm. As we have shown, in fact, violence in the Italian far-right is highly structured and collective in nature, mainly due to the legacy of the immense bloodshed in the 1970s and 1980s. The horizontality and networked disaggregation of far-right movements evident in North America and other European countries has not taken root in the Italian context. Violence in the Neo-Fascist Italian milieu remains controlled within the far-right movement. Repeated reports attest to the emergence of publicly unacknowledged and juridically unpunished forms of violent mobilization by the extreme-right in recent years. Investigative research reported more than fifty random punitive expeditions against migrants in a single year (2013). These are allegedly conceived as rites of initiation for young militants in CasaPound, but could also be potentially considered as violent outlets which pre-empt the likelihood of lone actor violence countervailing forces for autonomous radicalization. The attackers act in small groups and usually target victims of migrant backgrounds, (mainly Bangladeshi citizens in Rome), with the expectation that they will not press charges due to their fear of attracting the attention of the authorities or their lack of social and linguistic skills to report such crimes. [58], [59]

However, as we have illustrated, neither the legacy of Italy’s right-wing terrorism, nor the theoretical avail-

ability of collective alternatives, discouraged individual radicalization in the case of Casseri. Based on extant theories and primary sources, we have suggested that this is mainly a result of his partial embeddedness in the far-right milieu, resultant from CasaPound's unwillingness to extend full membership to him which would have allowed him access to the movement's organised practises of collective violence. Since the Florence killings there has only been one other potential lone-actor attack by a former *Lega Nord* candidate in Macerata in 2018. However, given the heightened anti-migrant sentiment in Italy and the muted public response to the Macerata shootings, the risk remains that it might be viewed by others of a similar disposition to Casseri, as a legitimate course of action.

This article has taken a single, deviant, case study to attempt to understand how and whether the modus operandi of the Italian far-right has evolved in light of broader international trends, in particular the rise of Leaderless Resistance. It has shown that even though contextual and cultural opportunities make lone-actor terrorism less likely in Italy, autonomous patterns of radicalization may still occur thanks to the combination of an active far-right milieu, which provides the needed "echo chamber", and the cautiousness of movements regarding who can earn the status of full militant. As the case of Casseri shows, while there are opportunities for participation in collective violence within the far-right movement, these are limited for subjects considered "risky" or less suited to such tasks. This argument regarding strategic preference for lone actor or collective violence in contexts where both are potentially realisable is exploratory; it could be bolstered by the analysis of further cases both within Italy (the Macerata attack) and international comparisons with cases in other European countries with a traditionally strong far-right scene, such as Greece, Turkey or Germany. Finally, it would also benefit from application to other ideological contexts such as Salafi-Jihadist milieus which incorporate both collective and individual forms of violence.

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## **APPENDIX 1: List of Primary Sources**

### ***Criminal Proceedings***

- Document I – Judge of Florence: Certification of closure of investigation (March 2013)
- Document II – Office of the Public Prosecutor request of closure of investigation (27/11/2012)
- Document III – Criminal Proceedings I (November 2015)
- Document IV – Criminal Proceedings II (November 2015)
- Document V – Search and seizure of items authorization (13/12/2011)

### ***Investigative Reports***

- Doc. Police I – Report of suicide Gianluca Casseri (December 2011)
- Doc. Police II – report G. Casseri health and mental health disorders (13/12/2011)
- Doc. Police III – Report on threats to the Senegalese community (14/12/2011)
- Doc. Police IV – Report phone tracking operations (14/12/2011)
- Doc. Police V – Report browsing chronology G. Casseri (December 2011)
- Doc. Police VI – Report email account G. Casseri (December 2011)
- Doc. Police VII – Report browsing internet point (December 2011)
- Doc. Carabinieri I – Report search and seizure report G. Casseri residence (December 2011)
- Doc. Carabinieri II – Report scientific evidence (20 December 2011)

Doc. Carabinieri III – Report street violations and criminal record G. Casseri (16/12/2011)

Doc. Carabinieri IV – Report G. Casseri house (15/12/2011)

Doc. Carabinieri V – Report phone tapping (14-29/12/2011)

Doc. Carabinieri VI – Report email account G. Casseri (December 2011)

Doc. Carabinieri VII– Report hard disk G. Casseri (December 2011)

### ***Police and Investigative Interviews***

Police Interview I – Witness (13 December 2011)

Police Interview II – Friend of G. Casseri (13/12/2011)

Police Interview III – Brother of G. Casseri (13/12/2011)

Carabinieri Interview I – Friend of G. Casseri (21/12/2011)

Carabinieri Interview II – Interviews II: colleague of G. Casseri (21 December 2011)

Carabinieri Interview III – neighbour I (15/12/2011)

Carabinieri interview IV – neighbour II (15/12/2011)

Carabinieri interview V – neighbour III (15/12/2011)

Carabinieri interview VI – neighbour IV (15/12/2011)

Carabinieri interview VII – neighbour V (15/12/2011)

Carabinieri interview VIII – neighbour VI (15/12/2011)

### ***APPENDIX 2: List of Semi-structured Research Interviews***

Interview 1: Activist *CasaPound Italia* (Florence, 30/03/2012)

Interview 2: Local official *CasaPound Italia* (Florence, 19/04/2012)

Interview 3: Local official *CasaPound Italia* (Florence, 19/04/2012)

Interview 4: Local official, youth section *CasaPound Italia* (Florence, 19/04/2012)