

**Department of Business and Management**

**Master's degree in Global Management and Politics**

*Chair of Global History*

**"Ultras" Groups as a Breeding Ground for Fascism: Reflections  
of an Unresolved Past**

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## Introduction

Sunday afternoon. Thousands cross the Roman “Ponte Duca d’Aosta”, as chants can already be heard from in front the “Stadio Olimpico”. By the stadium gates, crowds are gathered under the marble obelisk which towers in the middle of the square. On it the inscription “MVSSOLINI” and “DVX”. Having passed the gates, a path decorated with mosaics and marble plates containing major milestones of Italian Fascism and fascist slogans leads to the stadium. On the inside, the “ultras” situated in the terraces on each side exhibit numerous fascist symbols, chants and gestures for the duration of the match. To an external observer, such scenes may seem like an alternate reality, one where Italy had not seen anti-fascism triumph over Fascism in World War II. To the stadium habitué in Italy, this is nothing out of the ordinary. Similar scenes can be observed across Italy every week. Today, the overwhelming majority of Italian ultras factions have declaredly neo-fascist beliefs and manifest these regularly both at matches and outside the stadia. Most apparently, besides the neo-fascist symbolisms and rituals incorporated in the stadium performance of the ultras, the expression of these extremist ideologies could be observed through the steady increase in racist, xenophobic and anti-Semitic incidents, which taint the image of Italian football on a weekly basis. In a country with an inherently anti-fascist constitution, which prohibits the glorification of fascism, this is certainly peculiar. The overt display of fascism within Italian stadia has, however, been widely downplayed or outright ignored by both state authorities and the general public.

The following dissertation aims at exploring the extremely complex world of the ultras and how ultras groups have progressively and seamlessly become a breeding ground for fascism and prone to neo-fascist infiltration, while also shedding light on the inadequate problematization of this phenomenon. It will be argued that the ultras, which throughout their evolution have accurately mirrored the socio-political developments in Italy, also reflect Italy’s inability to come to terms with its fascist past. This entails an analysis which will be conducted in two parts. In the first section, the socio-cultural dimension of football will be outlined, with a special focus on the social role that the football stadium has assumed over the course of football’s ascendance in Italian society. Subsequently, the rise of the ultras movement, its central characteristics, the progressive politization of the ultras factions and the expressions of these political ideologies will

be portrayed. In the second part, a historical examination seeks to uncover how Italy has inadequately addressed its fascist history. This is done by tracing the process that led to the inaccurate portrayal of the "Ventennio" in the post-war collective memory and how this distortion has contributed to the swift rise of neo-fascist groups and parties. Ultimately, these analyses will bring to light the factors that contributed to ultras groups becoming breeding grounds for fascism and why this phenomenon is tolerated and normalized.

## 1. More than a game: History of Italian Football and its Early Fans

The social dimension of football in Italy is almost unparalleled. Throughout its evolution, the sport has assumed an immense importance in Italy's social fabric, transcending the realm of mere sport and progressively becoming an integral part of the nation's identity and culture, while also reflecting the country's social evolution and historical experiences. Today, football dominates public discourses, forming a central focal point of everyday social exchanges. In the following, the ascent of football over the course of a century will be traced by exploring its journey through the lens of its socio-cultural dimensions. By firstly recounting the birth of modern football and its emergence in Italy and subsequently analyzing the early years of football fandom, the aim is to highlight why the game elicits such uncontrollable passion and how this led to the emergence of the football stadium as a liberated space in which football fanatics came to act in otherwise socially unacceptable ways.

### 1.1 The Birth of Italian Football

8<sup>th</sup> of May 1898, Velodromo Umberto I, Turin. Twelve men line up on the dusty pitch, ready to kick off the first official Italian football championship. Of the few dozen attendees spectating the men obsessively chasing the leather sphere, hardly any could have imagined that what they were witnessing was the institutional birth of Italian football, a game which would take Italy, and the world, by storm. After all, various forms of ball games had existed in Italy for centuries. Reflecting upon the historical evolution of ball games leading up to the birth of modern football, Bartolotti (2002) identifies "harpastum" as the first possible precursor to the modern game, a sport particularly in vogue in Greece around 1000 B.C., where it was known as "episkyros",

which consisted in trying to snatch a small ball from the adversary and was characterized by its intense physicality and violence. The game was especially popular among young men, gladiators and legionaries, which divided themselves into regular squads and effectively introduced the game to the British during their invasion of the island. As a direct descendant of “harpastum”, the “calcio fiorentino” or “calcio storico” would then emerge throughout the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and quickly rise to popularity in Florence, the center of the Italian Renaissance. Rapidly gaining popularity among young men, the game was first played on the streets and town squares of Florence, whereby famous recollections of early matches include the games played on the frozen river Arno between the “Ponte Vecchio” and “Ponte Santa Trinità” in 1491 and 1511, as well as the iconic match held on the 17<sup>th</sup> of February 1530, in which the Florentine population, under siege for months, descended onto Piazza Santa Croce to hold a “calcio” match in defiance of the imperial troops of Carlo V (Giovannelli, 2012). The “Siege Match”, as it came to be known, symbolized the pride and courage of the citizens of Florence, manifested through the enactment of one of the most distinctive practices of Florentine civilization, one which continued under the restored rule of the Medici family, which used the sport as an instrument of consensus of power (Bosisio, 2018), as well as a “formidable outlet for popular discontent (in the same way as the Roman circuses) and therefore they undertook to encourage and spread it” (Bortolotti, 2002).

The rules of the game, as codified by the 33 articles established by writer Giovanni de’ Bardi in 1580, were however vastly different to what is known as football today: the two teams of 27 players, known as “calcianti”, scored points (“cacce”) by depositing or throwing a ball in the opposing teams’ net, in 50-minute games played on Piazza Santa Croce during the Florentine carnival, whereby brute force could be used to dispossess the adversary of the sphere and all body parts could be used to move the ball. Not only was the sport of significant cultural and political importance, but it also reflected the rigid socio-economic hierarchy, as the game was played primarily by nobles and higher classes who sought to showcase their supposed physical superiority, while lower classes, whose participation in official games was commonly restricted, mainly used the sport as a means to vent their frustrations. However, despite its massive popularity throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> century, “calcio fiorentino” experienced a steep decline over the subsequent centuries, with only sparse recollections of official games being played, especially given the widespread bans imposed on the manifestation of the game, due to

the increased violence, brawls and public disorders surrounding matches (Brera, 1975). The legacy of the ancient Florentine game in relation to the ultimate advent of modern football should not be neglected, yet not overexaggerated. In Italy, the prideful notion of “calcio fiorentino” being the direct antecedent of modern football had been popular from the outset, with the attempt to claim the invention of the game being most apparent by the Italian denomination of football, which came to be known as “calcio”, while the attempt to nationalize football became most evident under the Fascist regime, which ceremoniously reintroduced “calcio fiorentino” in Florence, citing it as the only authentic precursor to modern football (Foot, 2007). Yet, despite the difficulties in composing a genealogical tree of a sport and the valid argument that “calcio fiorentino” may have effectively laid the groundwork for the subsequent emergence of a variety of modern ball games, the ancient Italian game exhibited only very vague and distant resemblances to modern football.

Contrary to such mythologized nationalist notions, the honor of having invented modern football can be attributed to the British, a thesis which enjoys widespread consensus. Since medieval times, “folk football” had existed in Britain, a sport which Kitching (2015) defines as an array of loosely connected and distantly similar ball games with uncodified and differing rules, which comprised both small- and large-scale team-games, played solely by kicking or with the occasional use of the hands, whose only common denominator was the scoring of goals in a “marked or informally agreed area at each end of a field or open space”. Kitching (2015) adds that these games were primarily an amusement for the poor and characterized by physical intensity and brutality, whereby injuries and even deaths were not uncommon. The turning point in the evolution of ball games toward modern football in Britain came in the Victorian Age, starting from the immense changes brought forth by the Industrial Revolution. The birth of modern football can therefore be directly attributed to the forces of the Industrial Revolution, which redefined social hierarchies and enacted migratory movements, especially of young males, and expanded urban populations to an unprecedented degree, leading to a gradual demise of traditional games commonly played in villages and small towns, which were also widely prohibited due to their brutality (Swain, 2020). However, aristocratic public schools, such as most notably Winchester, Charterhouse, Eton, Harrow and Rugby, took up football as a winter sport between residence houses (Joy, Alegi, & Rollin, 2023), a testament to the increasing

interest of upper classes in football, which had long considered the game to be a plebeian and rather primitive pastime. Initially, each college had distinct rules, which were then conformed by the imposition of the “Cambridge Rules”, a football code introduced by the Trinity College of Cambridge, which universalized the rules of the game and set the fundamental pillars of the modern game (Bortolotti, 2002). This enabled students from different schools to play together and the first football clubs to be formed by Cambridge graduates, while the further diffusion of the game was significantly fueled by the ongoing Industrial Revolution and the additional leisure time gained by the working class from the 1850s onwards, especially so on Saturday afternoons, which they dedicated to the new game of football to watch or play.

Ultimately, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of October 1863, representatives of eleven London football clubs convened in the Freemasons’ Tavern in the Londoner Great Queen Street, a meeting which culminated in the official establishment of the “Football Association”, which came to be commonly known by its acronym “FA”. With the establishment of the FA, which gave light to “Association Football”, governed by codified universal rules, modern football was officially born. A further decisive step toward the modern game known today was taken by the FA in 1885, when the association repealed its long-standing amateurism rule, thus enabling clubs to compensate players with modest fees, which evidently went in favor of more economically equipped clubs (Bortolotti, 2002). With average spectator numbers growing rapidly, from “4,600 in 1888 to 7,900 in 1895, rising to 13,200 in 1905 and reaching 23,100 at the outbreak of World War I”, especially northern clubs with larger supporter bases profited from the shift to professionalism due to their ability to attract better players, which were predominantly from the working class (Joy, Alegi, & Rollin, 2023). As such, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as Brera (1975) underlines, the first clearly defined supporter groups of the football world were emerging, which gradually started to have an integral role within clubs, for one by contributing to the financing of the club with periodic contributions and the purchase of match tickets, but most importantly by following the team at every match, at home or away, by forming “noisy and bellicose mobs acting for the love of the club colors.” Football therefore burst onto the scene as a powerful social force, a phenomenon which Brera (1975) considers going hand in hand with the progresses of the working-class masses and their newly found need to occupy their free time. Modern football thus emerged as a working-class game from the outset, where workers



supporting their club in the stands engaged in vulgar and excessively aggressive attitudes, brawling and yelling in favor of their team and in spite of its opponents, behaviors which would later earn them the name of “fans”, an abbreviation of “fanatics” (Brera, 1975). The fanaticism would soon transcend the stadia and lead to the first instances of football-related violence, or “hooliganism”. The most notable occurrence of early hooliganism could be observed in 1885, where after a friendly match between Preston North End and Aston Villa, won by the former by 5-0, the supporters, which were described as “howling roughs”, violently attacked the two opposing teams (Ingle, 2006), thus giving rise to a phenomenon which over the years would become a significantly pressing political issue. In essence, with the institutional establishment of a clearly regulated game deeply rooted in long-standing cultural traditions, accompanied by feverish supporter bases, whose attachment to their clubs surpassed any sportive aspects of the game and consisted in a profound sense of belonging, which also reflected the socio-economic structure and divide, the picture of modern football was now complete.

The obsessive frenzy around the newly established “Association Football” also infected Edoardo Bosio, a Turin native who took a liking to the game on his work-related travels through the UK. This prompted him, along with British colleagues, to form the first Italian football team in 1887, the “Football and Cricket Club Torino” (Brizzi, 2015), which then, in 1891, morphed into the “International Football Club” or “Internazionale Torino” (Foot, 2007). Nevertheless, it is widely recognized that the formalization of “Association Football” in Italy only occurred in 1893, when British consular officials formed the “Genoa Cricket and Athletic Club”, in the Ligurian coastal city which had become a strategic point on the trade route from England to India, following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 (Jones, 2019). Within the Genoese club, however, football was of marginal importance. This changed upon the arrival of James Richardson Spensley, a British maritime doctor and football passionate, sent to Genoa in 1897 to look after the sailors of the coal ships, who undertook to spread his beloved game of football, ultimately entering the local club and changing its name into “Genoa Cricket and Football Club” (Brizzi, 2015). Genoa CFC is to this day the oldest existing Italian football club.

It is therefore undeniable that the British effectively, both directly and indirectly, exported the modern game to Italy and especially so to Northern cities. In line with the original diffusion in Britain, the propagation of football in Italy could be directly linked to the socio-economic progresses of the industrializing northern regions, which formed the first “footballing triangle” between the major northern industrial hubs with strong connections to England, that is Milan, Turin and Genoa, once more highlighting the ever-lasting socio-economic divide between the North and South in Italy (Papa, 1988). The first unofficial game between the primary northern teams, being Genoa CFC and Internazionale Torino, captained by James Richardson Spensley and Edoardo Bosio respectively, took place on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 1898 in the Genoese “Ponte Carrega” and ended in a victory for Bosio’s eleven. Ultimately, this led to the creation of the “Federazione Italiana del Football” (FIF) in Turin on the 26<sup>th</sup> of March 1898, the first Italian football federation, with its distinct English nomenclature, that would subsequently be substituted by the “Federazione Italiana Giuoco Calcio” in 1909, in the above-mentioned nationalistic attempt to claim the invention of the game. It therefore came that the Velodromo Umberto I in the suburbs of Turin became the stage of the first Italian Football Championship, kicked off on the morning of the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 1898 and disputed between Genoa CFC, FC Torinese, Ginnastica Torino and Internazionale Torino. Genoa CFC were crowned champions on the eve of the same day. Italian football was born.

## 1.2 The Early Years of Football Fandom

Unlike the exponentially growing popularity of Association Football in England, certified by the rapidly growing spectator numbers, the turnout at football matches in Italy at the turn of the century was rather modest. Official documentations relating to the game played in Genoa on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 1898, evidence an overall attendance of 208 spectators, with a turnover of 280,50 lire and an overall profit of 101,45 lire (Brera, 1975). The subsequent quadrangular inaugural tournament of the FIF on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May of the same year attracted approximately 50 spectators for the semi-final and one hundred spectators for the final, for an overall income of 197 lire. The attendees “cheered their teams and even briefly fought among themselves” (Foot, 2007), leading

to what has been described as a “goliardic atmosphere of singing and drinking” (Brizzi, 2015). In its infancy stages, football therefore did not enjoy widespread popularity. At the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it came after pastimes such as cycling, riding, motor sports and hunting within the hierarchy of Italian sports, an aspect certainly influenced by the tumultuous events in Milan in those years, where bread riots were met by violent repression by the government, with little attention therefore being given to the newborn game of football (Foot, 2007). However, the slim frame of supporters accompanying the pioneering Italian football matches soon evolved into contrasting crowds composed of family, friends and companions of footballers on one side and also an “aggressive and sometimes quarrelsome mob” on the other (Papa, 1988). Violence and tension among supporters were characterizing features of these matches from the outset. As reported by Spagnolo (2017), the first documented instances of significant unrest at football matches occurred in 1902 during Genoa-Andrea Doria and subsequently in Juventus-Genoa in 1905, where the game was interrupted following the pitch invasion of overly excited spectators. In a decisive step in the development of football fandom in Italy, Spagnolo (2017) continues, the Italian “Camera dei Deputati” introduced law 489 on the 7<sup>th</sup> of July 1907, mandating Sunday rest for workers, therefore providing workers with more leisure time, which was increasingly spent at football pitches and in the first football stadia. The spectator numbers thus rose continuously, with a match played in Genoa on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January 1911 registering 4000 attendees (Papa, 1988). Concurrent to growing spectator numbers and popularity came increasing violence, leading to the tumultuous scenes of 1912, when in a game between Andrea Doria and FC Internazionale, the police had to intervene to save the referee from a stoning, while in 1914, in a Tuscan derby between Livorno and Pisa, stones and revolvers were used by fans in violent brawls (Jones, 2019).

Italy’s entry into World War I on the 24<sup>th</sup> of May 1915 brought an abrupt halt to football’s rapid ascent, as the championship was suspended in its decisive stages and a vast number of football players were sent into the devastating battles. The decision to engage in hostilities was enthusiastically welcomed by the Italian sports media, most notably by the “Gazzetta dello Sport”, today the primary Italian sports newspaper. Upon Italy’s declaration of war, the “Gazzetta” famously headlined its front-page with: “For Italy against Austria, hip, hip, hurray”, while the decision to suspend the championship was widely criticized by the various sports papers (Sbetti, 2020). According to Muollo

(2015), especially the “Gazzetta dello Sport” emphasized the obligation of athletes to step up in this time of need and they were indeed the first to volunteer and join the war effort. In the first three months of the conflict alone, 27 players lost their lives, followed by 12 members of the Milan team, both players and executives, and 26 members of Internazionale. More than half of the players of Udinese and Hellas Verona, as well as Juventus’ first president Enrico Canfari, did not return. Today, most stadia bear the names of fallen team players and executives, which were among the 258 footballers sent into the Great War. However, the author also highlights how football did not come to a complete halt in Italy during the war. While top league football was suspended, regional cups and minor tournaments superseded the national championship, with small clubs joining major ones in organizing these competitions. The matches held on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October 1917, among which a game between Milan and Unione Sportiva Milanese for the “Mauro Cup”, are particularly noteworthy for Muollo (2015), given that these took place a mere four days after the devastating defeat at Caporetto, during one of the darkest periods of the country’s wartime struggles, a testament to Italy’s unwavering determination to keep football alive and the role that the sport was beginning to assume within Italian society. In the trenches, football was of great importance to the Italian troops, as the soldiers anxiously awaited specially produced sports papers to be kept up to date and played the game at the front, prompting appeals in Italy to send footballs to the battlefields (Foot, 2007). The convergence of Italian soldiers from diverse geographical, social and cultural origins in the tragic war played a pivotal role in the assimilation of differing cultural and social habits, as well as in the further popularization of football among peasants and rural inhabitants who had been unfamiliar with the sport, with the trenches therefore exerting a powerful influence over the initial expressions of mass culture, from which football derived “unmeasurable benefits” (Papa & Panico, 2002).

The First World War thus proved to be a decisive catalyst in the propagation of football on the entire Italian peninsula, leading to an almost exponential surge in popularity of the sport. Upon the end of the war, the football championship was revived and the degree of violence accompanying the matches reached new heights, in the immensely tense atmosphere of political turmoil of post-war Italy. Pitch invasions, stonings, brawls and attacks on referees became the norm. The first deadly incident of football related violence soon followed, in a game between Sporting Club Viareggio and

Lucchese in 1920 in the Tuscan city of Viareggio. According to Foot (2007), the fatal episode was preceded by the hostile and violent reception the Viareggio supporters received at the previous encounter between the two teams in Lucca, leading to vows of revenge, thus prompting authorities to strongly discourage Lucca fans from attending the match between the two teams in Viareggio. In that infamous game on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May 1920 in Viareggio, controversial refereeing decisions led to intense arguments on the field, initiated by Augusto Morganti, a supporter of the local team who had stepped in as a linesman for the occasion, which then escalated into an enormous brawl when supporters invaded the pitch. The home fans were pushed onto the streets by police and in an unclear turn of events, Morganti was shot at close range by a member of the militarized police, killing him instantly. What ensued was, according to Foot (2007), nothing short of a revolutionary uprising, as crowds in Viareggio seized arms, erected barricades and isolated the city from any outside contact. An intervention by three military columns was needed to retake the city from the control of these subversives. The incident, the author further emphasizes, was certainly football related, yet evidently not necessarily about football, as the events in the stadium were merely used as an excuse for a violent uprising, thus accurately reflecting “the spirit of the times” at the heights of the “biennio rosso”, a period of intense socio-political conflict in post-war Italy. The emergence of fascist squads headed by Benito Mussolini would only further add to the already incredibly tense, near revolutionary, political atmosphere. As noted by Jones (2019), the groups known as "Squadre d'Azione" or "action squads" were also commonly referred to as "Arditi", meaning "the daring", and had distinctive and unsettling nicknames like the "desperates" or the "dauntless". These squads placed great emphasis on the concept of "giovinezza", that is youthfulness, while each such squad was led by a leader called a "ras", borrowing the Ethiopian term for a warlord. The fascist squads commonly carried „macabre banners, often with a skull-and-cross-bones“, while seeking to steal the symbols of their rivals and triumphantly display them. Decades later, "ultras" groups would display a striking resemblance to the fascist action squads in terms of their name, composition, structure, and methods, as will be explored in greater detail below.

Having seized power in 1922 with the symbolic March on Rome and the appointment of Benito Mussolini as prime minister, the Fascist regime set out to heavily promote sports. Italy, along with the Soviet Union, was therefore among the pioneering states to

implement a sports policy aimed at transforming the country into a sporting nation, a decisive step in making football the primary national sport in Italy (Felice, 1976). As noted by Giorgi (2016), the main requirement for sports under the regime was indeed the representation of national identity it provided, coupled with the fascist doctrine of anthropological revolution, which dictated the need to forge a new man, who would also become a sportsman. The epitome of this vision was evidently Mussolini himself, who presented himself as the foremost athlete in Italy, participating in almost all the popular sportive disciplines. Yet, as highlighted by the author, the “noble” sports, namely disciplines such as motor sports, boxing, rugby, fencing, or target shooting, which Mussolini saw “as better suited for fostering the typical virility of the fascist man”, failed to captivate and unite the people. It soon became apparent to the regime that football potentially represented the true sport of the masses and as such an optimal tool for propaganda and popular unification. Yet, despite the concepts of order and discipline being obsessively invoked, not even the totalitarian fascist state was able to escape the excesses of football fans, with almost every match being tainted by fan violence and confrontations (Spagnolo, 2017).

Infamous episodes occurred during the final playoff series between Genoa and Bologna in 1925, which decided the 1924-1925 championship. In the third game of the series, played in Milan in front of a massive crowd of 20,000 spectators, Bologna supporters, led by black-shirted fascists, stormed the pitch and intimidated the referee following a controversial decision not to assign a goal to their team, forcing the frightened official to overturn his decision (Foot, 2007). After the subsequent play-off game between the two sides, Bologna supporters fired gunshots at Genoa fans upon their encounter at Turin's "Porta Nuova" station, prompting the FIGC to condemn it as a "deplorable streak which threatens to disrupt irredeemably the very life of football" (Jones, 2019). During the fascist period, football had gained recognition as a significant issue of public order due to the unruly behavior of fans attending matches, marking the first widespread acknowledgment of this problem. Simultaneously, the implementation of the “Carta di Viareggio” in 1926 was a significant milestone in the further ascent of football as the national sport of Italy, by establishing a national football championship that brought together teams from across the Italian peninsula, transcending regional divisions and leading to the emergence of new teams and a significant surge in the sport's popularity, as an ever growing number of people able to support their local team.

The expansion of football on the entire Italian peninsula proved to be a crucial step toward the establishment of the foundations of modern football fandom, characterized by its fervor, rivalry, fanaticism, and unwavering loyalty to a team. As outlined by Papa and Panico (2002), a notable phenomenon of strong local sports loyalties began to arise in Italy in the 1920s, as football was being elevated as a representation of local rivalries, rooted in municipal pride. This trend coincided with the fusion of the numerous football teams within individual cities, which had initially formed in the early days of football, ultimately resulting in the concentration of fan bases. It was precisely in this period, the authors continue, that the term “tifoso” came to be widely used to describe Italian football enthusiasts, an allusion to the typhoid fever which symbolized the frenetic and feverish passion exhibited by supporters. Accordingly, the authors note that it was not “by chance that the cyclical nature of sports fandom was emphasized, likening it to a Sunday or seasonal illness, similar to the periodic rise of typhoid fevers”, with sports fandom therefore being “assimilated to a kind of mental epidemic, whose contagion produced effects of confusion, typical of the excesses of the illness”, thus portraying it as a sufferance rather than the mere allegiance to a particular team. The outdated Italian stadia, Papa and Panico (2002) continue, could barely contain the ever-increasing turnouts. The number of spectators consistently grew, as attendances reached 10,000 in 1922 for a match between Lazio and Genoa, 20,000 in the same year for an international game between Italy and Austria at Milan's Velodromo Sempione, and a remarkable 55,000 for the inauguration of the Littoriale di Bologna on May 29, 1927. As part of a series of public projects initiated by the Fascist regime to expand the sportive infrastructure, the development of the "Littoriale di Bologna," alongside the "Berta" stadium in Florence and the "Mussolini" stadium in Turin, which under different names are still used today by FC Bologna, ACF Fiorentina and FC Torino respectively, aimed to provide standardized stadia for mass participation in small and medium-sized cities and also served as “authentic architectural showcases” (Dietschy, 2010).

Local allegiances and rivalries were only put aside for the games of the national team. Guided by the management of Vittorio Pozzo, a former football player, journalist and army tenant in World War I, and the leadership of Italy’s most shining talent, Giuseppe Meazza, the Italian national team triumphed in the 1934 World Cup, held in their own country and played in the newly built stadia. Unsurprisingly, the crowning of the Italian national team as the world's best, a triumph that can be seen as the pinnacle of the

Fascist regime's heavy promotion of football, offered a wealth of material for fascist propaganda. According to Giorgi (2016), the media depicted the event as a veritable military conquest, symbolizing the superiority of a nation forcefully emerging on the stage of history, while aiming to present an image of a modern and virile Italy, finally rebuilt from its ruins. The author thus holds that football's success over the years coincided with the stabilization of Mussolini's government, as during the fascist period, it played a pivotal role in constructing a national identity. As a political tool, football captured the hearts of Italians and assumed the characteristics of an almost religious sentiment, thus becoming a social and communal factor capable of achieving political objectives that many governments have pursued in vain for decades. As such, in the 1930s, as highlighted by Dietschy (2010), the politicization of football was pervasive and the Fascist regime viewed sporting triumphs as a powerful symbolic tool to fulfill their quest for power. International sports competitions were seen as a platform to establish a "hierarchy between nations, showcasing the superiority of certain races". The stadium, the author continues, provided an outlet for suppressed anger and allowed for intense local rivalries to be expressed. Despite attempts to regulate fan behavior after the Bologna-Genoa incident in 1925, an electric atmosphere persisted in football matches until 1943. The excesses of fans were tolerated, according to the author, as they did not involve political motivations and thus posed no threat to the Fascist regime, with the "tifosi" therefore being seen as "an indifferent presence" in the stadia. Decisevely, the violence of that time was characterized by its spontaneous nature, as the aggressiveness of football fandom was still unorganized, without the structures, motivations, cruelty, and premeditation it acquired later (Papa & Panico, 2002). Amidst a backdrop of escalating political unrest and the looming specter of another global conflict, Italy emerged triumphant at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, ultimately solidifying its status as the dominant force in international football with their subsequent victory in the 1938 World Cup hosted in France. Football's growth and expansion in Italy now proved unstoppable and advanced in tandem with the escalating aggression of the Fascist regime on a global scale (Giorgi, 2016). By the onset of World War II, Italy had become a world footballing power, stadia were scattered across the country, an ever-growing number of people began to see themselves as fans, shots had been fired between rival supporters, politics "had intermeshed itself deeply into the organization, running and structure of the game" and significant money was beginning to be made from the game (Foot, 2007). An explosive mix had emerged.



Unlike during World War One, football was kept forcefully alive in Italy in the early years of the Second World War. For Papa and Panico (2000), the Second World War showcased the incredible resilience of football in the face of the greatest human catastrophe of the twentieth century, as the game survived in unimaginable conditions, involving both “winners and losers, prisoners and guards, executioners and victims”. Accordingly, the Italian championships continued regularly until the 1942-1943 season and the complete paralysis of Italian football was limited to the months between the fall of the Fascist regime and the announcement of the armistice with the Anglo-Americans, from July 25th to September 8th, 1943. In the months following, as the peninsula was divided and traversed by war fronts, the game was revived in every part of the country as soon as military operations allowed, through local competitions and tournaments. Notably, as Papa and Panico (2000) evidence, the survival of football symbolized the desperate search for a semblance of normalcy and was facilitated by the rulers of both warring sides as a means to alleviate tensions among the subjugated and even as a form of legitimizing a power imposed by force. In Rome, during the days of the “Via Rasella” bombing and the “Fosse Ardeatine” massacre in March 1944, a regular football tournament involving ten teams was being held, promoted by the German command and fascist authorities. Following the end of the war, between the summer and autumn of 1945, the Italian football fields hosted an increasingly large number of matches, with the participation of 240 new clubs, while on October 14th, 1945, just a few months after the end of hostilities, the first post-war national championship began. In the stadia of North Italy alone, 100.000 spectators filled the stands to watch the first seven games of the championship, 35.000 of which in Turin for the derby between Torino and Juventus (Louis, 2019).

Football had irreversibly cemented its central role within Italian society, assuming an importance which largely surpassed the mere sportive activity. In this regard, sport and football were perhaps the least problematic legacy that post-war Italy could inherit from the fascist era, serving as "the only field on which national pride could be expressed without reservation", as football emerged as a symbol of peace and regained freedom (Dietschy, 2010). Peacefulness would however not be a characteristic of football matches following the end of hostilities. The return to normalcy entailed the revival of the usual unreserved expressions of passion and local pride in stadia, which escalated

into the customary violent incidents. In recounting the various instances of football related violence in post-war Italy, Spagnolo (2017) highlights the numerous pitch invasions and attacks on referees occurring throughout the 1950s, episodes which had become the norm. Significantly, as noted by the author, the disturbances were solely instigated by the outcomes of the matches, the on-field events, or the actions of those directly involved in the matches. The evolution of football fandom in Italy was then further profoundly marked by the death of the 17 year old AC Milan supporter Giordano Guarisco, who was crushed by the immense mob of fans which had entered the San Siro stadium in Milan without a ticket for the game between Milan and Fiorentina on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November 1958. After the tragic event, as documented by Spagnolo (2017), the sports press titled “Here are the Teddy Boys of sport”, making a reference to the first instances of “teppismo”, or hooliganism, in Italian football. A fatality was also the result of the pitch invasion during the Salernitana - Potenza match of April 1963, when a 44-year-old local supporter, Giuseppe Plaitano, lost his life after being struck in the head by a warning shot fired by a police officer who intervened to stop the mob from attacking the referee.

Simultaneously, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, upon the initiative of supporters themselves or functionaries of the football clubs, fans of a number of teams began to organize themselves into supporter groups, increasingly following their own team on away matches and promoting various initiatives, with the first true fan association structures called "coordinating centers" emerging (Gori, 2014). The most notable clubs include the “Fedelissimi Granata” of FC Torino, the “Attilio Ferraris” fan club of AS Roma and the “Circolo Biancoceleste” of Lazio, all formed in 1951, followed by the “Moschettieri Nerazzurri” and the “Afcionados” of Inter and the “Club Vieusseux” and “Club Settebello” of Fiorentina (Spagnolo, 2017). Through the use of banners, flags, pyrotechnics, scarves, and an increase in their presence in the away stands, the supporter clubs gave significant impulses into the realm of football fandom (Louis, 2019) . The football landscape was decisively changing. More than ever, stadia were filled with tension. Concurrently, the streets were taken by widespread rebellious student and youth movements of political and social protest that erupted around the year 1968. It was in this climate that the first fully organized fanatic fan groups were formed, marking the inception of the Italian “ultras” movement, which permanently and irreversibly changed the scenery of Italian football and its stadia.

## 2. Ultras: Genesis, Evolution and Political History

It ran the year 1789 and revolutionaries took to the Parisian streets to set a movement into motion that would reshape the social and political fabric of French society. The most radical of revolutionaries fueling the upheaval of the French Revolution earned the label of “ultra-révolutionnaires”, mobs of individuals who pushed their political ideologies to the extreme. The latin term “ultra”, meaning “beyond”, described their inclination to go beyond the established boundaries of the revolution itself. The term then resurfaced during the Bourbon Restoration, where the intransigent partisans of absolute monarchy came to be known as “ultra-royalistes”, a grouping of fanatical opponents of the constitutional charter granted by Louis XVIII in 1814. Referred to collectively as “ultras”, the extremist movement evolved into a political faction representing the far-right royalist movement, which vehemently rejected the egalitarian and secularizing principles of the Revolution (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998). In the aftermath of World War II, the term found its application in France to depict intransigent nationalists and extremists, while in Italy, it transformed into a label applicable to political extremists from both the left and the right.

“Ultras” thus emerged as a rather neutral term, devoid of any specific social or political connotation, which encompasses an array of differing single individuals, groupings or movements who primarily share one common trait: a fervent promotion of extremist ideals that widely exceeds the prefixed boundaries and goals upon which the movement or group was initially built. In the context of football fandom, "ultras" groups, initially formed with the stated purpose of supporting their teams, exhibit a level of passionate dedication that goes well beyond this established limit. At the inception of the movement, the term "ultras" consequently referred to the most passionate fans of a football team, organized in groups, characterized by a strong sense of belonging and a daily commitment to living out their passion and support for the team, which reached its peak during sporting competitions with other teams and usually took place in the working-class sections of stadia, often called "curva" (D'Auria, 2009). Using this broad description as a foundation, the numerous further characteristics that define the fluid and ever-changing ultras world can be extracted by recounting the milestones and evolution of the phenomenon in Italy, which can be broken down into distinct phases. The central elements of the ultras subculture that have emerged within these phases can

subsequently be used as a basis to delve deeper into the complexities of the extremely multifaceted ultras world. The following section recounts the different phases of the evolution of the ultras movement with a special focus on the progressive politization of these groups, in light of the political and social changes which occurred simultaneous to this development in Italy.

## 2.1 Phase 1 (1968-1980): Pioneers

At the dawn of the 1970s, Italy entered the “Night of the Republic”, a period of significant political turmoil which profoundly marked the turn of the decade. In line with the globally spread upheavals of the late 1960s, younger generations and workers formed a tumultuous movement based on the ideals of revolutionizing society and politics, by challenging traditional values and institutions, a movement which came to be known as the “Sessantotto”. The uprising, which emerged from factories, universities, schools and public squares, fundamentally influenced the mindsets and behaviors of the younger generations which formed the prominent part of the movement, while also heightening their engagement in political activism and anti-establishment sentiment (Bongiovanni, 2006). The atmosphere was fiery, as the nation was fueled by a desire to discard an outdated understanding of participation, a longing for social transformation and a shift in the power structure, elements which resulted in increasing radicalization and aggression across various spheres of daily life (Spagnolo, 2017).

This period of crisis was immensely exacerbated by the events of the following years, an era known as the “anni di piombo” (“years of lead”), which produced a revolutionary atmosphere of extreme political tension, characterized by countless acts of terrorism which threatened the republican state. In contextualizing this period, Cosimelli (2020) highlights the deep socio-economic transformations that Italy experienced in the years leading up to these upheavals, spanning from the 1950s to the 1960s, which were defined by the impact of the economic boom, often referred to as an economic miracle, which lifted the country out of its post-war poverty. Yet, the newly found prosperity did not spread to everyone, as the emergence of a modern industrial economy especially in the Northern industrial hubs disrupted a society still functioning along agrarian

rhythms. The massive migratory flows that resulted from this transformation, where until 1970, 9 million Italians moved from one region to the other, commonly from Southern areas to the North, depopulated smaller towns in favor of big cities. However, by 1965, as the author further points out, the pace of economic growth had diminished, resulting in a rise in underemployment, precarious employment, and exploitation, leading to the stagnation of workers' wages. The wages of workers stagnated, public services and the educational system were increasingly inadequate and societal norms lagged behind. It was within this context that the two radical confrontationist waves collided onto Italian society and its political institutions.

The “anni di piombo” were marked by the contraposition between “black” and “red” terrorism. For one, neo-fascist groups, tolerated with limited resistance, carried out acts of violence, “squadristi” actions, and even attempted coups in a series of attacks which resulted in a total of 50 deaths and over 300 injuries in the years between 1969 and 1974 (Cosimelli, 2020). The most significant incidents initiating the era of terror occurred on December 12, 1969, when five terror attacks were carried out within 53 minutes, the most infamous being the bombing of the “Banca Nazionale dell'Agricoltura” headquarters in Milan's Piazza Fontana, causing sixteen deaths and eighty-eight injuries (Conci, Grigolli, & Mosna, 2009). On the day after the massacre, in describing the ongoing terror attacks, the British weekly “The Observer” coined the term “strategy of tension” to describe the proliferation of terror attacks in Italy. The widely accepted hypothesis of the “strategy of tension”, which provides a decisive insight into the complexities of the tumultuous period in the 1970s and the immediate political and legal aftermath of the “Piazza Fontana” incident, could be defined as follows: “A multifaceted strategy comprised of plots, attacks, ambushes, or massacres, held together by the declared or implicit objective of creating an atmosphere of widespread insecurity, uncontrollable tension, and constant danger, aimed at promoting or fostering an authoritarian turn inspired by a response of the State of equal significance and intensity. It is a top-down reaction to defend or restore the threatened order and thus close the season of protests, diminishing the strength and ambitions of the left-wing forces” (Silveri, 2019). Just as the squadristi caused unrest in the 1920s, the neo-fascists aimed to fuel disorder in the 1970s, hoping that a charismatic leader would emerge from the chaos, akin to Mussolini, to unite the nation and reestablish order (Doidge, 2015).

In this atmosphere, left-extremist factions emerged to contrast the violence of the radical right. The deeper motivation of these left-extremist groups was the perceived betrayal of the Italian Communist party, which in their view had aligned with the "system", abandoned the working class, and neglected the pursuit of a communist revolution (Cosimelli, 2020). The most notorious among these organizations was the Marxist-Leninist terrorist group "Brigate Rosse" ("Red Brigades"), a movement which aspired to radicalize the anti-capitalist discontent and act as a champion of revolution of the extreme left (Drake, 1999). Throughout the 1970s, the Red Brigades enacted their armed struggle, a relentless campaign of violence. The first assassinations carried out by the group, in which two members of the neo-fascist "Movimento Sociale Italiano" (MSI) were killed in Padova in 1974, were accompanied by a declaration from the Red Brigades, which highlighted the importance of "striking at the heart of the state" and calling on the extra-parliamentary left to make a significant leap forward, forsaking the approach of clashing with the neo-fascists (Lazar, 2013). What followed were targeted attacks, in the form of kidnappings, kneecappings and killings, on exponents of the state, that being politicians, magistrates, law enforcement officials, as well as executives of the "oppressive" capitalist institutions. The culmination of this campaign of terror was the abduction of Aldo Moro, the leader of the Christian Democrats, who was executed after a 55-day-long captivity and whose corpse was found in the trunk of a red Renault 4 in the Roman "Via Caetani" on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May 1978. Seldom has an incident had such a profound impact on a nation's history as the events that unfolded in Rome in the 55 days between March 16 and May 9, 1978, which came to an end after 9 statements of the Red Brigades, numerous letters from the detainee, and widespread appeals (Re, 2012). After the assassination of Aldo Moro, the Red Brigades lost their social support, while some members collaborated with authorities, leading to arrests of comrades and the discovery of weapons, ultimately resulting in the defeat of the terror organization through a rigorous crackdown that began immediately after Moro's death (Cosimelli, 2020).

It was in this context of extreme political and social tension that the first ultras groups were formed. As recounted by Louis (2019), in the initial months of the 1968-1969 championship, a group of young Milan which formed part of the "Milan Club Fedelissimi" fan club, began drawing attention due to their exuberant behavior in the stands, which differed greatly from the behavior of older and calmer supporters. In the

club headquarters, a bar in the Milanese “Via Savona”, the young fans decide to form a new group under a different name, with the options of “Brigata”, “Commandos”, “Clan” and “Tigres” put to a vote. The name “Commandos Clan” emerged victorious from the vote and was immediately printed on a cloth banner. In 1969 the banner was ripped apart by Ajax Amsterdam supporters, leaving only the first word, which led to the collective renaming their group “Commandos Tigre”, under which it became widely known. The group, Louis (2019) continues, consisting predominantly of young originaries of the working-class “Giambellino” neighborhood in Milan, had the distinctive habit of marching together in a procession toward the stadium prior to games and occupied the bottom part of San Siro’s “Curva Nord”. In the “Rampa 18” of the lateral stands of the stadium, a further youth group, known as the “Clan di Porta Romana”, exhibited similar animated and demonstrative behaviors during games. With an ever-increasing number of fans joining the ensemble, it was decided to formalize the group under the name “Fossa dei Leoni” in 1968, after the nickname of AC Milan’s former stadium. The “Fossa dei Leoni” is widely regarded as the first Italian ultras group.

What followed was an outright proliferation of such factions. In 1969 the “Ultras Tito Cucchiaroni” was formed, which was the first to incorporate the term “ultras” in their name, whose acronym also stood for “Uniti Legneremo Tutti I Rossoblù A Sangue” translating to “united we’ll beat the red and blues until they bleed”, evidently referring to the arch-rivals Genoa CFC. Louis (2019), citing the remarks of one of the group’s founders, notes that the final “s” of “ultras” was added to set the group apart from the “ultra”, which at the time denoted political fanatics and extremists. Still in 1969, members of the “Fedelissimi Granata” fan club formed the “Commandos Fedelissimi”, the first ultras group of FC Turin, which occupied the “Curva Maratona” in the Olympic Stadium of Turin. In 1971, after having been described by the journalist Davide Messina of “La Stampa” as “ultras”, subsequent to an incident in which the Turin supporters followed the referee of the Turin-Vicenza game of February 1971 to the airport, the “Commandos Fedelissimi” decided to adopt the name “Ultras Granata”. To this day, the honor of having introduced the term ultras into the nomenclature of supporter groups is heavily contested between the Sampdoria and Turin groups. The year 1969 also saw young members of the “Inter Club Fossati” decide to break away

and form a new group, the “11 assi. Boys – Le furie nerazzure”, a name inspired by the comic book character “Boy”, which appeared on Inter’s official magazine.

As such, between the years 1968 and 1969 the core of the Italian ultras movement emerged, with the historic groups formed on the initiative of young members of the fan clubs, which sought to manifest their passion in more extravagant, nonconformist and organized ways. In this initial phase, the ultras groups had distinctive characteristics, listed by Balestri and Viganò (2004). For one, as has emerged above, the authors underline the involvement of young individuals, typically between the ages of 14 and 18, often already friends, who actively engage in occupying the working-class sections of the stadium, commonly known as “curve” (“terraces”), while forming a habit of consistently supporting their team even during away games. The increased presence of young supporters was greatly facilitated by the decrease in ticket costs and the incentives offered by different clubs to encourage attendance among the younger demographic. Secondly, the ultras exhibited a clear desire for visibility, prominence, and acknowledgment, which was demonstrated through innovative and varied fan customs, including the display of large banners with their group's name, the presence of massive flags, and the beginnings of choreographed performances, along with continuous vocal support through chants, drums, trumpets, and more. On the individual level, the desire for visibility was emphasized by militant and aggressive looks with a plentiful use of team-related merchandise like scarves, hats, jerseys and badges among others. Such behaviors, unsurprisingly given the various aforementioned incidents of football related violence, commonly escalated into aggressive or openly violent conduct. Thirdly, the fusion of these ideas with the political or pre-political experiences of that historic era of significant socio-political unrest and increasing radicalization, proved to be a further significant element in the emergence of the ultras. The groups' familiarity with fundamental organizational principles and a sense of strong dedication enabled them to establish a solid foundation and subsequently experience significant growth, in terms of both numbers and quality. The political and ideological labels associated with the early ultras groups played a crucial role in shaping the initial complex web of hostilities and rivalries among fan communities, which, within a few years, encompassed the entire national football landscape. Lastly, the authors argue that this rebellion against traditional norms and rejection of common standards, in favor of nonconformist methods and expressions of fandom, were further characterized by two



decisive elements: differentiation and competition. Regarding differentiation, this applied “in relation to the non-ultras public who, by primarily focusing on the match rather than the rituals and practices of fandom, are often regarded with hostility or extreme coldness by these new "superfans"”. Secondly, in terms of competition with opposing fans, for the ultras, “fandom served not only to help one's own team prevail on the field (its original mission), but soon, as the proliferation of ultras groups repeatedly brings them into confrontation, it also becomes a perpetual challenge between opposing fan bases, played out through vocal or spectacular encouragement, intimidation, aggression, and physical confrontation, without hesitation.” The Italian model of organized fanatic fandom was being formed, thus introducing the ultras concept to the football world. An exponential growth of the phenomenon soon followed.

The 1970s saw a process of both consolidation and significant expansion of the ultras culture. As highlighted by Gori (2014), the countless youth micro groups that now populated the stands of the major football stadia formed an array of new ultras groups: the "Brigate Gialloblù" of Verona and the "Viola Club Vieuusseux" of Fiorentina founded in 1971; the “Comando Ultrà Curva B” of Napoli and the “Atalanta Commandos” formed in 1972; the "Brigate Rossonere" of Milan, the Genoa "Fossa dei Grifoni" of Genoa and the Bologna "Forever Ultrà" established in 1974; the Juventus "Fighters" of 1975; the "Brigate Nerazurre" of Atalanta and the Empoli "Rangers" created in 1976; the Lazio "Eagles' Supporters," and the "Comando Ultrà Curva Sud" of AS Roma born in 1977. This specific period in the ultras’ expansion exhibited distinctive characteristics, to add to the previously mentioned elements. As Gori (2014) points out, the spread of the movement was most significant in Northern Italy, with the notable exceptions of cities like Naples, Bari, Cagliari, and Catanzaro. As noted, some of the listed groups distinguished themselves from existing fan clubs, both due to their different underlying mentality and internal conflicts, significant examples being the “Boys” of Inter that originated from the “Inter Club Fossati” or the “Ultrà Granata”, which split from the “Club Fedelissimi”. Others emerged from short-lived small groups that were dissolved or merged, such as the Bologna “Forever Ultras”, which emerged as the successors of the “Brigate Rossoblù”, the “Fighters”, which trace their roots to the “Panthers Juve”, or the “Comando Ultrà Curva Sud”, commonly known as “CUCS”, which was formed through the fusion of the “Boys”, “Guerriglieri

Giallorossi”, “Fossa dei Lupi”, “Brigate Giallorosse”, “Pantere” and “Fedayn”. Some groups were based on a specific urban area or a group of peers who gather at a bar, school, or game room. Certain characteristics of extremist political groups, such as a sense of cohesion, camaraderie, defiance of established authority, and a confrontational mindset, gave substance to the ultras groups, which quickly gathered increasing numbers of young people. Another distinctive aspect of these ultras, the author continues, was a strong sense of territoriality: the terraces were gradually abandoned by "regular" fan clubs to make way for ultras groups and their banners. Group activities in the early years were often financed through collections, and each member had specific tasks, ranging from organizing team trips to purchasing fabric, flagpoles, and paint cans. Furthermore, for Gori (2014), this period was marked by a constant and progressive growth of ultras groups, with their ranks now composed of hundreds, and in some cases, even thousands of members. Ultras fandom extended to lower divisions as well, and by the end of the decade, there was not a single team, from the first to the fourth football division, that was not followed by more or less numerous organized youth factions. This proliferation of groups inevitably led to the emergence of a complex network of friendships and rivalries and brought about a significant shift in the unruly behaviors of crowds. While certain behaviors, such as pitch invasions, continued to exist in the early years of the decade, they gradually declined after 1974, giving way to an increase in confrontations between rival factions. These disturbances, the author further notes, often originated from long-standing rivalries, such as local derbies, or were influenced by the political affiliations of the fan groups and were consequently no longer directly linked to the events or incidents on the pitch, as had been the case for decades prior. Nonetheless, the violence remained localized within a specific territory, primarily encompassing the stadium and its immediate vicinity.

As mentioned, political allegiances were primary characteristics of the pioneering ultras groups. Emerging in an era marked by political violence and possible revolutionary changes at the heart of the nation, political neutrality was hardly a possibility. This evidently also applied to the young football supporters that began forming the first ultras groups. In light of its prominence, organization, and following, football was more vulnerable to political influences and more conducive to the expression of dissent, even in violent ways, among young activists, a dynamic which led to the natural alignment between political parties and football teams, with the team's identity often reflecting the

political ideology of its supporters (Imperi, 2020). Podaliri & Balestri (1998) provide a comprehensive account of the politization of early ultras groupings. Accordingly, in a society in which political conflict permeated all aspects of life, public affairs, cultural events and sports were endowed with political significance, perpetuating the contraposition between a clerical-conservative worldview, which could sometimes be considered pro-fascism, and a vision associated with the communist left. In this climate, the political tension extended to football, with noticeable distinctions in teams based on the social status of their supporters and the varying strengths of different political ideologies across geographical regions. The very birth of the ultras phenomenon was therefore linked primarily to the political situation in Italy in the late 1960s. As evidenced by the authors, during the period of student protests and significant labor disputes in 1968-1969, at which numerous young blue-collar workers joined in, youth subcultures gained significance and strength. Building upon the experiences of this movement, many young individuals formed gatherings, occasionally establishing small political parties, some of which aligned with Leninist principles, which then took to the streets and squares of Italy, engaging in confrontations with the police and organized right-wing factions. The very first ultras groups that emerged in this politically extremely fertile period borrowed their name directly from the political language of the times, naming themselves “Commandos”, “Brigate”, “Folgore” and “Vigilantes”, as well as “Tupamaros”, after a Uruguayan guerrilla movement and “Fedayn”, meaning “those who sacrifice themselves” in Arabic, a term commonly used to describe Palestinian nationalist militants. Evidently, in their nomenclature, organization and structure, the early ultras groups were deeply inspired by the model of militancy and toughness exhibited by the extremist political factions occupying the Italian streets and town squares, while also drawing inspiration from militant groups in other countries. It was in this period that right and left extremist ideologies were assimilated by many groups, defining political allegiances which would persist to this day.

The extremist politization of ultras groups in this period could also be attributed to the fact that Italian football culture was, from its very birth, only loosely dependent on working class supporters, leading to a heterogeneity in the composition of these groups, both in their socio-economic standing and in their consequent political sympathies (Podaliri & Balestri, 1998). More specifically, an array of individuals in the ranks of these groups had experience with mass violence in the political realm, be it proletarians,

lower middle class, and middle class supporters from both the left and right, while others had experience with violence in their day-to-day lives through affiliations to local gangs (Marchi, 2003). The chants heard on the terraces and slogans displayed, such as “better red than dead”, reversing the typical anti-communist phrase, or “Boys get back in the sewers”, referring to fascists, echoed the rhetoric of the political struggle, while the imitation of political insurgency was most evident in the gestures observable in the curve, such as Roman salutes, or waving the two forefingers of the right hand as if holding a flat pistol, aimed at the bourgeoisie (Jones, 2019). Political allegiances were prominently revindicated at any given occasion by the groups, be it on matchdays or outside the stadia. The deeply rooted political ideologies, which were a foundational pillar for most groups, gave the ultras’ action a more complex significance, distancing them even further away from the football alone. Doidge (2015) notes how political ideologies were predominantly exhibited through political banners and flags, similar to those used in marches and demonstrations, while politically themed songs were continuously sung during games, elements which were all integrated into the choreographical spectacle. Similarly, by wearing combat jackets and camouflage outfits, along with balaclavas and scarves obscuring their faces, the attire adopted by the ultras resembled the military style of the urban guerrilla fashion during the times of political upheaval. The ultras not only mirrored the politization of Italian society, but also, given their deep connection to their territory, became an extension of the city’s politics.

A further central element in the evolution of the ultras phenomenon throughout the 1970s was the consolidation of the rituals, symbolisms and further distinguishing behaviors of ultras groups. Through a process of cultural "hybridization" among ultras groups worldwide, Italian groups drew inspiration from other fan bases to make their displays of support for their teams increasingly choreographic, by adopting elements such as the use of trumpets from Brazilian “torcidas” and the tradition of wearing scarves with their team's symbols from English fans, complementing or encouraging the most spectacular plays with the famous "scarf-waving " (Masiello, 2010). The addition of a range pyrotechnics, flares, smoke bombs and fireworks then gave the Italian ultras a visually unique characteristic in the world of football fandom to add to the phonetics of the incessant chants. Lastly, banners of differing lengths and inscription, set up in specific locations within the areas in the stadia occupied by the different groups, also played a pivotal symbolic role for the ultras, as will be further

explored below. In 1979 then, the closing year of a massively influential period in the expansion of the ultras movement in Italy, an incident occurred which profoundly shook the evolution of the phenomenon and which combined many of the distinguishing elements of this period. Prior to the derby between Roma and Lazio on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October 1979, Vincenzo Paparelli, a 33 year old mechanic and Lazio fan sitting in the “Curva Nord” of the “Stadio Olimpico” in Rome with his family, was hit in the eye by a self-exploding flare, a cylinder measuring 20 centimeters in length and 4 centimeters in diameter which had travelled an astonishing 250 meters and was fired by a Roma fan standing in the opposing “Curva Sud” (Cabrio, 2019). Paparelli died almost instantly, thus marking the first death related to violence between fan groups in Italy.

## 2.2 Phase 2 (1980s): Crest of the Wave

In 1982 Italy won the World Cup in Spain. The surprising victory and the redemption story of the team’s hero Paolo “Pablito” Rossi, who had previously been banned from football for two years due to a match fixing scandal, produced a rare moment of national unification. What may have seemed as a moment of possible reconciliation between football fans was but a mere illusion, as the most turbulent decade in Italian football fandom had just begun. Product of the expansion of the previous decade, the evolution of the ultras wave reached its culmination in the mid to late 1980s.

The rapid rise of the ultras culture not only took place in terms of a proliferation of new groups, which were now present across the whole country and sportive divisions, but especially in terms of the number of memberships to the different groupings, with the movement therefore becoming a mass phenomenon. Thousands adhered to the groups, whose growth required new degrees of organization. It is throughout the 1980s that the organizational frame of the Italian ultras model with its distinct hierarchical structure was consolidated, serving as an inspiration for football fanatics across Europe, where the model gained significant momentum. The level of internal organization within the groups became such that it allowed for a significant improvement in the aesthetics of fan support and a numerical growth in participants during away trips, while meticulous self-financing activities, including the production of personalized stadium materials featuring the name and symbol of ultras groups, transformed the organizations into

small economic powerhouses (Balestri & Viganò, 2004). On their own home turf, ultras groups organized increasingly spectacular choreographies. One notable example is the choreography organized by the “Ultras Tito Cucchiaroni”, “Hell’s Angels”, “Gunners” and “Bulldogs” of Sampdoria in 1982, consisting of the first giant banner capable of covering the whole terrace, in this case the “Curva Sud” of the “Marassi” stadium (Spagnolo, 2017).

With rising numbers came increasing power. As recounted by Masiello (2010), the size of these fully fledged organizations, such as the “Fossa dei Leoni” of AC Milan, which had reached 15,000 members by mid-1980s, enabled the ultras to increasingly intervene in key decisions of their football club, namely for instance the appointment or dismissal of coaches and players. The ultras groups’ leaders themselves became public figures, their reputation built upon anecdotes and urban legends. Trips to away games also progressively became an integral and exhilarating part of the life of an ultra, occasions for which the groups prepared flags and banners. Choreographies became a source of pride for ultras groups, who were in a true competition with rival groups to make their section of the stands as visually impressive as possible. For the most important and emotionally charged matches, Masiello (2010) adds, thousands of balloons, flags, cardboard and fabric banners were arranged, and pyrotechnic displays created. The immense number of travelling fanatics were assigned special train services, introduced by the national railway in an effort to avoid overcrowding on regular trains.

From a political ideological standpoint, substantial transformations could be observed within ultras groups in this period. During the 1980s, as political movements waned, the ultras shifted their focus towards regional and local identities, rivalries, and historical hostilities to determine their enemies, replacing the notion of the curva as a liberated space with that of a small “mother country” (Poldaliri & Balestri, 1998). These transformations were further reinforced by the socio-political dynamics of these years. According to Doidge (2013), in the 1980s, Italian society was significantly impacted by the forces of globalization. The consumption boom, which led to an increasing movement of people and consequent fragmentation of traditional residential areas, the heightened migratory flows from Eastern Europe and Africa, as well as the changing media landscapes, challenged traditional societal notions. These transformations were reflected in the world of football, as these factors starkly influenced the clear increase

in racist chants and banners, and the symbolic idolization or desecration of certain players. Several ultras groups shifted to apoliticism or toward more extremist ideologies, while those with preexisting extreme right orientations intensified their political stance. This fragmentation of the ultras identity in the 1980s, the author adds, mirrored the wider fragmentation of political identities across Italian society. In the same vein, Testa (2009) holds that the changing dynamics in the curve “represented an Italian society that during the 1980s celebrated individualism, self-indulgence and ostentation”. The period between 1983 and 1985 therefore saw the emergence in the ultras realm of new collectives, predominantly of younger generations, which did not conform to the established rules of the ultras world, lacked political consciousness and historical knowledge about the ultras movement, leading to them refusing to engage in political matters. These boundary breaking individuals came to be known as the “cani sciolti” (“loose dogs”). The nomenclature of the newly emerging groups reflected these tendencies, as “names with political connotations were substituted by those linked to psychological conditions and drug and alcohol consumption”, leading to the creation of gatherings named “Sconvolts (Deranged) and Kolletivo Alcoolico (Alcoholic Group) Wild Kaos and Arancia Meccanica (Clockwork Orange- from the controversial 1971 Stanley Kubrick film with its dystopian vision of violence nihilism)”. The strong opposition to this metamorphosis by the traditional groups, Testa (2009) highlights, was reflected by the constitution of groups in the most notorious of Italian terraces, that being for instance Roma, Bergamo, Napoli and Genoa. These large groups, which came to be known as the “Vecchia Guardia” (“Old Guards”), were hardened collectives which stood firm on the founding principles of “masculine hardness, quasi-military organisation, and attachment to territory but added values now more meaningful based in the doctrines of fascism”. The fascist ideology of these groups became evident through names such as “Ordine Nuovo” or “Boys” and the prominent exhibition of fascist mottos and emblems, such as the two-edged ax symbol. Yet, the newly founded groups that did not conform with the foundational pillars of the ultras mentality and strongly focused on violence in its purest form, as an ends rather than a means, displaying an unprecedented degree of militarization and new military tactics, which included the use of a variety of weapons (Doidge, 2015). This led to a redefinition of the employment of violence by the ultras groups.

Concurrent to the rising numbers of rival fans occupying the away sections of the stadia and roaming the cities prior to the games, the degree of violence significantly augmented and its modalities changed. Violence transcended the stadia and reached the streets, in episodes that Masiello (2010) describes as outright “urban warfare”, which were further aggravated by the widespread diffusion of cutting weapons and the rising tendency of consuming drugs, such as primarily marijuana, cannabis and LSD, prior and during games, to enhance the excitement of the already overly ecstatic fans. The violent incidents, Balestri and Viganò (2004) recount, which now took place exclusively outside the stadia, often turned extremely brutal and involved the use of sticks, chains, rockets, and bladed weapons. The most severe incidents seemed to be driven by senseless violence, detached from any specific purpose, and were often perpetrated individually or by small groups of uncontrollable “loose dogs”, with this violence taking precedence over the primary objective of supporting one's own team. According to the authors, the new generation of “loose dogs” exhibited superficial motivations, driven by a more fleeting perception of identity and group cohesion and a pursuit of personal fame and individual prominence, perhaps also influenced by the systematic attention that the mass media consistently dedicate to the phenomenon, although usually only to highlight its most negative aspects.

The pinnacle of the ultras' evolution was but a natural and inevitable chemical reaction to the combination of flammable elements which had progressively been added to the cocktail of the ultras world: exponentially growing groups, increasing power, travelling fanatics, rivalries, accessible weapons, drugs and a new generation of overly-excited youths which did not shy away from violent confrontations. The results were a number of fatalities, starting from the death of Stefano Furlan during the clashes with the police after the Triestina-Udinese derby of 1983, followed by Marco Fonghessi, who was fatally stabbed in the aftermath of the Milan-Cremonese match of 1984, Nazareno Filippini who died in 1988 in the midst of a fight between Inter and Ascoli fans and Antonio De Falchi who perished from a heart attack while being viscously beaten by Milan ultras, solely due to his allegiance to AS Roma, which the Milan supporters had recognized due to his distinct Roman accent. The ultras world began to be viewed in a highly negative light not only by the media but also by the general public. The phenomenon could not even be stopped by the increasing militarization of stadia and the emanation of special legislation, such as Law No. 401 of 1989, the first ad hoc



measure enacted to counter fan violence. In its original version, progressively modified in a repressive sense over the years, the law envisaged the prohibition of individuals deemed responsible for acts defined broadly as violent from attending sports events (Balestri & Viganò, 2004). The law introduced the much-feared “Daspo”, an abbreviation of "Divieto di accesso ai luoghi dove si svolgono manifestazioni sportive", also referred to as "diffida", meaning the prohibition from accessing sports events. The crest of the ultras wave had been reached and it was only a matter of time until it would come crashing down.

### 2.3 Phase 3 (1990s): Times of Crisis

The events of the late 1980s had profound repercussions on the further evolution of the ultras world, inaugurating a decade of deep crisis and necessary change, upon which the very survival of the phenomenon depended. Simultaneously, Italy found itself in a significant political crisis, as the whole system’s credibility came crumbling down in the “Tangentopoli” scandal. "Tangentopoli" comprised a series of judicial investigations between 1992 and 1994, that revealed an extensive and organized corruption scheme employed by several prominent political parties to fund their operations and, in numerous instances, to personally benefit politicians and executives (De Luca, 2022). The scandal came to light following the so-called “Mani Pulite” (“Clean Hands”) investigation, which initially led to the arrest of the PSI politician Mario Chiesa for bribery in 1992. Chiesa, who was publicly ostracized by his own party, began collaborating with law enforcement, leading to the uncovering of systemic political corruption both at the local and national level, which resulted in a long list of arrests targeting prominent politicians of the government parties, which had been under investigation for extortion, corruption, receiving stolen goods, association with criminal organizations and violations of laws regarding public funding of political parties (Della Porta, 2007). Several ministers of the Amato government resigned from their posts, while Bettino Craxi, the leader of the PSI, also stepped down from his party position. The revelations resulted in public disillusionment with politics and eventually led to the downfall, through judicial investigations, of an entire political class (Barbacetto, Gomez, & Travaglio, 2002).

According to Testa & Armstrong (2010), within this period, notions of extremist ideologies proliferated in the curve. Hardcore supporter groups increasingly showcased shared symbols or slogans linked to neo-fascism on their banners, turning the stadium into a space where individual identities and collective political sentiments were openly expressed. This was evidently facilitated by the loss of credibility of the primary political parties. In this politically unstable climate, the authors add, political renewal was represented by the surge of various extreme parties, including MSI (later transformed into Alleanza Nazionale), “Forza Nuova”, “Movimento Sociale Fiamma Tricolore”, and “Fronte Nazionale”, as well as the reaffirmation of extreme left ideological parties like “Rifondazione Comunista” (the new Communist Party). New political entities like Silvio Berlusconi's “Forza Italia”, established in 1994, and Umberto Bossi's “Lega Nord”, founded in 1996, also played a significant role in the country's political renewal.

The ultras' crisis of the 90s began with the dissolution of one of the core historic ultras groups, namely the “Brigate Gialloblù” of Hellas Verona, which disbanded in 1991, for reasons that date back to the events of the late 1980s. As recounted Milazzo (2020), the ultras of Verona had gained an infamous reputation of being violent, brash and extremist following the episodes of urban warfare against the Brescia ultras prior to a derby in 1986, an alarming event which prompted the prefecture to closely monitor the activities of the group. Prior to the game between Milan and Verona in February 1987, the police conducted an operation targeting the Veronese ultras, leading to 12 arrests with the serious accusation of “criminal association”, that being the first time a group of fans were publicly described as outlaws. The subsequent weekend, the author continues, the center of the terrace of Hellas Verona was left empty, figuring only a large banner which read “Not 12 but 5000 culprits”. The incessant violence that followed compelled the judicial system to take more forceful and resolute measures of repression, leading to a number of further arrests and trials against members of the “Brigate Gialloblù”, which ultimately decided to disband in 1991. This inaugurated “what would also become a trend with the disappearance of group banners and the start of a seemingly less organized and certainly less controllable form of support, making it harder for law enforcement to monitor”, inspired by British hooliganism. Similarly, two years later the “Fossa dei Grifoni” of Genoa ceased to exist, for reasons listed in a public statement by the group, published on the 28<sup>th</sup> of July 1993. The declaration conveyed

that the "Fossa dei Grifoni" no longer identified with the ultras scene, rejected being constantly scapegoated by Genoa CFC, expressed disappointment with certain fans' attitudes towards their group, refused to tolerate police repression and careless entry bans, and expressed disdain for the biased media coverage that overlooked their humanitarian and social initiatives. The disbandment of two of the ultras' community most important and influential groups were indicative of the crisis the movement was just beginning to undergo, a period of turmoil caused by the decline of traditional ideals, the growing violence of the new generation of ultras and the increasingly repressive attitude of public entities. The "loose dogs" that rose to prominence in the generational turnover displayed demonstrations of different and highly questionable support, producing an outright crisis within the ultras spirit, as it had become stylish to be extremists, in symbolism, violent language, and the expression of their manifestations of allegiance (Masiello, 2010). Being an ultras had become fashionable, a trend, a shift which went against every ideal of ultras culture, which was fundamentally built upon nonconformism and the rejection of the ordinary.

Simultaneously, the advent of pay TV altered the entire model of Italian football, adding to the turbulent moment for the ultras movement. According to Spagnolo (2020), in 1993, when "Telepiù" began broadcasting the first paid Serie A and B matches, the idea of showcasing the power of their support or displaying their choreographic abilities in prime time seemed appealing to a part of the ultras world. However, within a few years, it became apparent that television would soon overflow, leading to the exposition of banners with messages such as "Turn off the TV, ignite the passion". Indeed, Spagnolo (2020) continues, pay-TV channels quickly began to influence the match schedule, spreading matches across multiple days, from Friday to Monday, and at various times of the day, to accommodate their programming and allow viewers to watch more matches, with the aim of creating a football for couch-dependent audiences, shifting away from the stadium atmosphere. Thus, the ritualistic aspect of football was sacrificed. Since then, the entire world of ultras, in a united and unanimous manner, began to criticize and strongly oppose modern football, which had turned into a televised product, devoid of its soul.

The most emblematic event depicting the crisis of the movement and complete loss of control within the ultras world then occurred on the 29<sup>th</sup> of January 1995, in occasion

of the game between Genoa and Milan in the Ligurian capital. As narrated by Jones (2019), the Milan fans arrived on the special trains provided for them, except for one group, the “Brigate Rossonere 2”, a splinter group of the famous “Brigate Rossonere”, who took a train departing later. On the train with the “Brigate 2” was 18-year-old Simone Barbaglia, a member of a further sub-group of this splinter group, called “Gruppo del Barbour”, named after the brand of jackets they wore. As recounted by the author, a few days prior, Barbaglia had borrowed a butterfly knife from a friend, stating that he wanted to “cut up” a Genoa supporter. The “Brigate Rossonere 2” arrived in front of the “Marassi” stadium at 1.40 PM on the Sunday of the game, charging the Genoa supporters who were present in the vicinity of the stadium. Barbaglia targeted the 25-year-old Vincenzo Spagnolo, who engaged using his bare fists, stabbing him to death. The death of Spagnolo represented a turning point and to many effects a point of no return, an inevitable culmination of an evolution which had gotten out of control. It was a dramatic episode, like many others, but more significant and with far-reaching consequences than most, for two reasons: because it unfolded live on television, making the entire country suddenly aware of what was really happening in stadia, and above all, because Spagnolo's death occurred solely due to the “ultras mentality” and its consequences (Francesio, 2020).

Recognizing the impossibility of persevering on this road, a national gathering of ultras was organized in Genova by the ultras of Genoa and Sampdoria seven days after the incident, an unheard-of meeting which most of the leaders of the principal ultras groups of the country attended and which opened channels of dialogue between the different groups. With the aim of attempting to curb violence and establish at least some rules for a world that seemed to have lost them, the meeting produced a statement, signed by most of the leaders present, titled “Basta lame basta infami” (“Stop with blades stop with thugs”) and contained the following: "Enough with these so-called ultras who are not true ultras, who seek to make headlines and become famous at the expense of the ultras world, ignoring the irreparable harm they have caused. Enough with the trend of 20 against 2 or using Molotov cocktails and knives" (Balestri & Viganò, 2004). The aftermath of the communiqué was of great importance to the survival of the movement. Roversi and Balestri (2000) note how the statement faced harsh criticism from the majority of public opinion, the media, and Italian politicians, who failed to grasp its important element of novelty: it represented a concerned, albeit belated, recognition of

the ongoing crisis within the ultras world and the fear that the entire movement could collapse due to the actions of those who, through cowardice and irresponsibility, disregarded the traditional values and original spirit of the ultras, providing a pretext for a more severe crackdown by authorities. Acknowledging their own failure to perceive the escalating unregulated violence in time, the ultras made the decision to redefine the codes and rules regarding the use of violence, labeling as "thugs" not only those who betrayed their comrades or group but also anyone who disregarded the established rules. In general, according to the authors' observations, the ultras community appeared to adhere to the recently implemented code, resulting in a decrease in acts of violence. While during the period between February 1995 and June 1997, the number of individuals injured by bladed weapons remained alarmingly high (14 people), the 1997-1998 season reported no stabbings at all. Equally noteworthy is the fact that many perpetrators of such incidents did not originate from organized groups but rather fall into the category of "loose dogs". As such, the statement was not only surprisingly auto-critical, but also proved to be astonishingly far-sighted, as it clearly anticipated the subsequent phase in the history of ultras, namely the increasingly heated and fierce clash between ultras and law enforcement, which in the following years led to more violence and further tragedies (Francesio, 2020).

#### 2.4 Phase 4 (2000s): A new beginning?

The Genova meeting inaugurated what many hoped to be a new era, a period of renewal and redemption. The initial developments following the Spagnolo incident seemed to go into the direction of profound change within the ultras world. This new phase was characterized by occasions of dialogue, discussion, and joint initiatives among ultras groups. The ultras sought to set aside deep differences and conflicts, instead valuing their shared belonging to the same movement as a point of contact and common action, leading to the establishment of the "Ultra Project" in 1998, which made these initiatives a common practice throughout the subsequent years, aimed at addressing issues related to fan rights and the defense of popular fan culture in response to the growing influence of the football industry and its commercialization (Sibilio, 2020). The ultras were reacting to the mounting pressure against them, stemming from public opinion and the constant calls for more repressive measures for this unruly world. As such, in this

period, significant efforts were made by fans to position themselves more strongly as a genuine socializing agency, thus complementing the deep sense of solidarity that has always characterized the ultras world with the numerous charitable initiatives organized by and within the fan communities: from national campaigns supporting organizations like “Telefono Azzurro”, to humanitarian aid for the former Yugoslavia, and a multitude of local initiatives (Balestri & Viganò, 2004).

Genova was also the stage of one of the most controversial episodes of Italy’s recent history. Between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> of July 2001, the Ligurian city hosted the G8, the conference of the world’s leading economic powers. The meeting took place amid intense and violent anti-globalization protests in the city, initiated by a minority faction of the "No Global" movement, opposing the economic development model associated with globalization, resulting in a harsh response from law enforcement, which sought to suppress a movement that had grown in strength and significance in Italy (Nazzi, 2021). The clashes between protestors and law enforcement, which led to the death of protester Carlo Giuliani and incidents of brutal assaults on defenseless demonstrators, caused public outrage. The events in Genova were indicative of a deeper transformation within Italian society. According to Foot (2007), increasing immigration, coupled with anxieties linked to deindustrialization, rising crime rates and spatial segregation in major cities, had created an increasingly hostile political environment. As a consequence, consolidated extremist ideologies found major expression in the initial years of the new millennium. Racist and anti-immigrant sentiment was starkly spreading in Italy. This was true, Foot (2007) highlights, even among politicians and ministers, such as for instance the Lega Nord leader Umberto Bossi, who referred to immigrants as “Bingo Bongo” whilst he was Minister for Reform and other members of his party who called for immigrants to be dropped from planes, without parachutes. In the stadia, this translated to a strong increase in overt fascist displays and racist attacks targeting black or Jewish players. This led to the introduction of new laws against banners in the stadia in January 2000. Players themselves began overtly displaying their political allegiances, the most notable examples being the declared fascist Paolo di Canio of Lazio and the openly communist Cristiano Lucarelli of Livorno, two of the leagues most influential players, which reflected the political ideologies of their ultras. The 2000s therefore witnessed a rise in both the ideologization and politization of ultras groups (Testa, 2009).

The politization of ultras groups was most notable through their increasingly active involvement in party politics. The emergence of a deep interconnection between football and institutional politics could be traced to the second half of the 1990's. Football and politics in Italy had become entrenched to a degree which was hardly comparable to any other country. In recounting the long-standing historic relationship between football and politics, Scalia (2009) underlines how following the immense popularization of the sport by the propaganda machine of the Fascist regime, outlined above, politicians have increasingly used football clubs as an extension of their patronage machine. The concurrent process of "footballization of politics" then led organized fan groups to wield their cultural hegemony, that being the dominance over fan culture and the ability to shape public discourse, over Italian politicians. Therefore, a strong correlation can be observed between politicians and the ultras, where politicians employ the ultras as an electoral and support committee, as well as, evidently, voters. In certain instances, Scalia (2009) highlights, such as in the case of the vice-presidency of Palermo FC by Salvatore Matta, the brother of a local prominent Christian Democratic leader, football clubs under the ownership or executive membership of influential party officials were utilized as branches of the patronage machine, leading to a symbiotic relationship between the party and the ultras. Here, support and consensus were exchanged for various economic benefits for the ultras.

Silvio Berlusconi became the symbol of the process of fusion between football and politics. Starting from his early announcement of "entering the field" in 1994, media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi strategically built his party with a deliberately football-inspired name "Forza Italia" (meaning "Come on Italy!"), adopting the characteristic blue color of the Italian Olympic team, effectively basing his entire public discourse on a range of symbols, metaphors, and signifiers that resonated with the world of sports and in particular football (Porro & Russo, 2000). The fact that Berlusconi owned AC Milan since 1986, a presidency which would go down as one of the most successful in the sport's history, laid the groundwork for the cementation of the profound relationship between football and politics. The media began integrating football terminology in the reporting of political matters, strengthening the association between traditional football terms and political expressions, therefore further blurring the distinction between political and football governance (Hamila, Morrow, Idle, Rossi, & Faccendini, 2010). As noted by Doidge (2015), Berlusconi, who was supported by the ultras in his

acquisition of AC Milan, also progressively incorporated the ultras into the legitimate football network. This occurred through the propagation of a model based on a close relationship between the ultras and the clubs, where the club owners granted concessions, such as free tickets or merchandising rights, in exchange for favors, especially with regards to stimulating interest and filling the stadium, leading to the ultras being effectively incorporated into the owners' patrimonial networks. Berlusconi further utilized the ultras' inclination for violence as a justification for his debt-spreading decree, known as "salva-calcio", stating that allowing clubs to fail could lead to a revolution, a portrayal employed to support his actions in football and defend his own club. As such, Doidge (2015) adds, instead of addressing the issue, Berlusconi used it to preserve the existing status quo, thereby undermining the league's integrity and the regulatory bodies while legitimizing the ultras' behavior. Paradoxically, while Italy's most prominent politician in that period legitimized the entire movement, which increasingly engaged in party politics and grew closer to club owners, the ultras, who had found unity at the turn of the millennium in fighting their shared battles, would soon find new common nemeses, namely the state and law enforcement.

The intense conflict between ultras groups and law enforcement was primarily exacerbated by the increasing repressive action taken against the ultras world following the tragedies of the 80s and 90s. As mentioned above, the first special legislative measure contrasting the unruly behavior of ultras was implemented with Law No. 401 of 1989, which famously introduced the "Daspo" and was then complemented by decree-law No. 717 of 1994, which was converted into Law No. 45 of 1995. As evidenced by Sibilio (2020), the ban on access to sporting events, as stipulated in Article 6 of Law No. 401/1989, was enforced 632 times in its first year of existence (during the 1989/1990 season), while no such measures were reported during the 1990 World Cup. Subsequently, the issuance of "diffide" varied but remained significant, reaching a peak during the 1990/1991 season (with 1,879 measures) and a minimum during the 1993/1994 season (910 measures), but then rising to 1,130 in the subsequent season (until May 1995) following the introduction of Law No. 45/1995. Yet, despite more positive relationships between ultras groups and increasingly repressive legislation, violent incidents persevered, leading to numerous further fatalities. Roberto Bani died in 1997 following a fight that broke out during the Salernitana-Brescia match, Fabio Di Maio perished in the same year amidst a police intervention at a match in



Treviso, while in 2001, the Messina fan Antonino Currò was fatally hit by a flare. Still in 2001, Sibilio (2020) continues, the incident known as the "motorbike throw" at Milan's "Meazza" stadium during the match between Inter-Atalanta was emblematic. Although it did not cause any casualties, the act of some Inter ultras of throwing a motorbike from the stands resulted in a stadium ban for the perpetrators and sparked discussions about the accuracy of stadium entrance controls. As evidenced by the author, the continuing violence was met with further strong repressive action at the legislative level, first with the decree law n. 336/2001, converted into Law n. 377/2001, and then with decree law n.28/2003 converted into Law n. 88/2003, which introduced new prohibitions and stricter sanctions. However, neither the legislative measures nor the increasing militarization of stadia was able to eradicate the phenomenon of violence in stadia, which did not decrease or increase but rather transformed into violence against the "repressive institutions" represented by law enforcement. The power the ultras continued to enjoy was made most apparent in 2004, during the derby between Roma and Lazio, which came to be known as "the derby of the dead child", where the game was stopped at the command of the ultras of both sides, following the spread of the fake rumor that a child had been killed by a police vehicle prior to the game.

In 2005, as highlighted by Masiello (2010), the Pisanu Law further tightened the severity of penalties, expanded the scope of the "Daspo", the conditions for access and stay at stadia, and established a Permanent Observatory for sports events. The culmination of the escalating conflict between ultras against institutions and law enforcement came in the 2006-07 season and the murder of Chief Inspector Filippo Raciti, killed during the clashes between police and the Catania fans. The Amato Decree, issued in response to the events in Catania and ratified hastily, aimed to combine repression with a comprehensive approach to the problem, expanding the scope of the "Daspo" and introducing harsher penalties. The Amato Law proved to be revolutionary to the nature of football events. Specifically, "technical measures were implemented, such as the immediate compliance of facilities (turnstile and pre-filtering areas), and the contracting of football clubs for internal stadium security (where stewards have gradually replaced law enforcement), along with the prohibition of economic relationships between clubs and organized fan groups", while "new repressive measures were introduced, such as the preventive ban on stadium access, arbitrarily evaluated by the police based on the "social dangerousness" of individuals

(including adolescents), the extension of the flagrancy period to 48 hours, the delegation of control over choreographic materials and banners to the local police authorities in agreement with the sports clubs, and the prohibition of their entry into the facilities without explicit authorization, along with drums and megaphones” (Giudici, 2019). As noted by Sibilio (2020), the tense atmosphere between fan groups and law enforcement was again fueled by the death of Gabriele Sandri, a 28-year-old Lazio supporter, who was killed on the morning of November 11, 2007, by an officer from the Highway Police who intervened following a brawl between Lazio and Inter Milan fans at a service area along the A1 highway. The episode sparked a full-scale urban guerrilla across Italian cities, with the anger of the ultras directed against various institutions, particularly the police and the Italian National Olympic Committee, while incidents occurred in various stadia across Italy, leading to the interruption of some matches. Furthermore, the author notes that the immense fury of the ultras’ protest, which united fiercely rivalrous groups, was incinerated by the contrasting reaction that the institutions had following the killing of Gabriele Sandri, compared to the murder of Filippo Raciti, seen as an indication of a differential value placed on the life of a police officer versus that of a fan.

In 2010, the Minister of the Interior Roberto Maroni introduced the “tessera del tifoso”, a fan membership or fidelity card necessary for the acquisition of a season ticket or to buy away-game tickets, which was defined by the National Observatory on Sporting Events as follows: “The “fan card” is a tool of “loyalty” adopted by the football club. The project launched by the Observatory aims to create the category of “official fans.” (Fontana, 2010). The “tessera del tifoso” was to be issued by the football club upon request from the fan, with prior approval from the Police Headquarters, upon the condition that the applicant did not have an ongoing stadium ban or a criminal record connected to a “stadium-related” offense committed within the last 5 years (Sibilio, 2020). The project outlined in the Maroni legislation can be seen as an attempt to foster fan loyalty from a commercial perspective, while also being linked to the goal of public safety (Giudici, 2019). With the simultaneous ascent of pay Tv and in particular “Sky” which assumed a dominant position in Italian sports broadcast, the triad formed by the government, football authorities, and pay TV shared the same objective, albeit from different perspectives: to distance ultras or at least “regulate” organized fan groups in order to eliminate disruptive elements and those not conforming to the new “television

product" (Spagnolo, 2020). These developments were evidently everything the ultras world despised and stood against, that is a commercialization and conformation of fandom. Vehement protests against these measures were imminent.

From pay TV, stricter stadium bans, delayed fragrance, named tickets, turnstiles, the Pisanu decree, closed-door matches, pre-filtering zones, group warnings, and the fan card, the early to mid 2000s marked the slow and steady abandonment of the stands, not only by ultras but also by many ordinary fans, as "these were years in which the clash between law enforcement, the government, and football authorities on one side, and ultras on the other, reached its peak; years of (short-sighted) repression, which had the demerit of creating a desert in the stands, mistaking such effect for peace" (Pedemonte, 2017). In this atmosphere, with their world at risk of crumbling down, violence inevitably persevered. Prior to the Coppa Italia final between Napoli and Fiorentina to be held on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May 2014, the Napoli supporter *Ciro Esposito* found himself in the midst of a violent clash in the Roman neighborhood of "Tor di Quinto" and was shot in the back by the ex-Roma ultra *Daniele De Santis*, who was himself known for his prominent role during "the derby of the dead child". Further clashes erupted, but it was decided to proceed with the match following a "negotiation" inside the stadium with the Napoli ultras led by their leader "*Genny 'a Carogna*," who was wearing a t-shirt with the words "*Speziale libero*" imprinted on it, *Speziale* being the Catania ultra convicted for the murder of Chief Inspector *Filippo Raciti* (Macerollo, 2015). The highly controversial "negotiation", in which the ultras leader effectively gave his permission for the game to proceed, once again highlighted the power of the ultras, who could not even be kept at bay through increasingly repressive legislative action. *Esposito* would then die after 50 days of agony in the Roman "Gemelli" hospital. In the same period, further facets of the ultras world were uncovered, starting from the ties between Juventus directives and members of the mafia organization "ndrangheta" (found among the ranks of Juventus ultras), while the outright execution of the leader of Lazio's "Irriducibili" group, *Fabrizio Piscitella*, also known as "Diabolik", uncovered his prominent involvement in drug trafficking (Sibilio, 2020). A further notable incident occurred in December 2018 in Milan, prior to the game between Inter and Napoli, where amidst the violent clashes between the two fan groups, *Daniele Belardinelli*, who already found himself on the floor, was fatally run over by a car driven by the Napoli ultra *Fabio Manduca*. Of the various further incidents of the recent

years, which have not produced casualties, the events which unfolded on the 8<sup>th</sup> of January 2023 are the latest noteworthy occurrence. On said day, Napoli fans, who had been travelling to Genoa, noticed minibuses of Roma supporters directed to Milan and proceeded to throw stones and bottles at the vehicles. The two fan groups then met at the service station in “Badia del Pino” in Arezzo, known as the location at which Gabriele Sandri had been killed in 2007, violently clashing on the highway in scenes that caused widespread indignation. The attack by Napoli fans was claimed to be an act of revenge for the death of *Ciro Esposito*, an incident after which the already tense relationship between the two fan groups had deteriorated consistently.

The developments of the past two decades have once again brought to light the incredible resilience of the ultras movement. In his article “Il Movimento Ultras Sta Benissimo” (“The Ultras Movement Is Doing Very Well”), published on the magazine “Rivista Undici” on the 22 of March 2023, *Fulvio Paglialunga (2023)* summarizes the recent developments and the current state of the ultras world, by drawing on the analysis of influential authors within this field. *Paglialunga (2023)* holds that all the measures used to contain violence during these years were intended to curb the ultras culture, make it a side issue, and disband the groups. However, the ultras phenomenon is a subculture with its own unwritten rules, and when faced with a common enemy, it becomes stronger. Attempts to uproot the ultras world have damaged not only the groups but also football itself during the years of intense conflict between institutions and ultras. *Paglialunga (2023)* continues that dissolving old groups through repressive action, led to the emergence of smaller, less controllable groups, undermining the pyramid structure that, in a way, maintained some order. In effect, it resulted in chaos, which also caused confusion in the management of clubs, as they grappled with doubts about the resilience of their hardcore fan base. To this, *Paglialunga (2023)* adds the considerations of *Pierluigi Spagnolo*, who comments that “undoubtedly the Italian ultras movement is far from its golden era, from the fervor of the 1980s and 1990s. The surviving historical groups are very few. It is a subculture that they have tried to weaken with strict laws and regulations, and with the overwhelming power of pay-TV. The stadia gradually emptied, an attempt was made to downplay the weight and role of organized fan groups. Then it was realized that the decline was not of the ultras, but of football itself, and that's when the movement returned, alive in a way I never imagined.” In the same vein, the analysis of *Sébastien Louis* underlines how following the

significant crisis between 2007 and 2017, caused by the introduction of the fan card, other forms of repression rather than prevention (such as abolishing special trains that could have avoided the clash on the highway between Napoli and Roma supporters), the ultras made a significant comeback following the suspension of the fan card in 2017. "The Italian ultras movement," Louis explains, "has suffered greatly in recent years due to repression, bans, and restricted away matches. However, being a movement born in Italy, it has shown to have strong roots. It has been like a tree exposed to strong and opposing winds, swaying, but still standing." What the 50-year evolution of the ultras phenomenon in Italy has clearly shown is that this ultras wave cannot be brought to a halt by external factors, for the opposing winds only accelerate it. The only ones able to destroy the ultras world are the ultras themselves.

### 3. Anatomy of the Ultras World

The ultras world is highly complex and multifaceted. It is a world full of intricacies, of coherence and contradictions, anarchy and hierarchies, lawlessness and self-established rules, moral codes and blatant immoralities, politization and apoliticism, fierce rivalries and alliances, solidarity and apathy, passion and indifference, fame and anonymity, unity and individuality, diversity and conformity. It is, in many regards, a unique phenomenon. As such, in the following discourse, the fundamental components that contribute to the exceptional nature of the ultras world will be thoroughly analyzed. This entails a comprehensive exploration of its internal and external organization, as well as the sociological and psychological perspectives surrounding this phenomenon. Progressively, this will also paint a comprehensive picture of the true nature of ultras violence, in all its facets.

At this point, a fundamental distinction has to be made between the ultras and the hooligans, two concepts often erroneously used as synonyms. Originally coined in Victorian England, the term "hooligan" was initially used to describe an aggressive and confrontational group of Irish immigrants residing in London and over time, it has acquired a broader global application, encompassing gatherings of young men whose behavior deviates from societal norms and is deemed unfavorable by authorities (Testa & Armstrong, 2010). During the 1960s the term became linked to aggressive conduct

exhibited at football matches, even though the occurrence of violent confrontations among certain fans, previously referred to as “roughs”, had a much longer history predating that period (Hodges, 2014). As evidenced by Doidge, Kossakowski & Minert (2020), the composition of football hooligans primarily consisted of males, with a relatively informal structure where a group of dominant older men rather than a single leader took charge. Violent altercations often occurred spontaneously with rival fans, commonly revolving around notions of territorial dominance, such as rival stands or pubs. Over time, these conflicts shifted to more secluded locations like car parks and abandoned areas away from stadia, in order to evade police detection. This particular aspect, the authors highlight, played a significant role in the emergence of the “casuals” style, wherein fans purposefully avoided wearing team colors to minimize the risk of being identified by law enforcement.

During its subsequent progression, compelling evidence surfaced in the late 1970s and 1980s indicating the recruitment efforts of far-right factions within football hooligan circles, leading to a prominent association between racism and hooliganism (Hodges, 2014). Overall, Roversi & Balestri (2000) add that football hooliganism can be understood as an extension of the long-standing behavioral patterns observed within the rough working class, owing to its historical roots and connection. Typically originating from the most marginalized segments of society, the hooligan collective adopts a distinct “violent masculine style”, primarily gathering to provide support during matches and engage in altercations against visiting fans, with violence for the British hooligans being “the main device for aggregation and union” and therefore an end rather than a means. Consequently, the rise of English football hooliganism played a decisive role in the emergence of youth groups across Europe that expressed their support in significantly more aggressive manners. However, within each national context, this phenomenon was intertwined with indigenous cultural, social, and political factors, resulting in varying timelines and adaptations of the English model. Notably, there is a decisive absence of well-developed and enduring structures for coordinating, organizing, and promoting activities within stadium ends. According to the authors, this British model thus hinges on a “set of activities that exalt the group sense but with no particular suggestion of a durable and consistent commitment outside the match itself or during the week, even less working groups or sector leaders for the various activities”.

Over time, hooliganism emerged as a pressing political issue, prompting the British government to take decisive action. In the 1980s and 1990s, a series of legislative acts and stringent measures were implemented to address the escalating violence and enhance stadium safety. Notably, tragic incidents like the Hillsborough disaster of 1989, which resulted in the tragic loss of 96 lives, played a significant role in shaping the government's response. The influential “Taylor Report” of 1989, which followed the Hillsborough tragedy, further propelled the implementation of reforms and contributed to a substantial reduction in instances of hooliganism. For while there are evident similarities and certain aspects of hooliganism have been incorporated by the ultras into their culture, drawing inspiration from their British counterparts as the two models rose to prominence in tandem, the distinctive elements characterizing ultras differentiate them from the British model of fanatic fandom. The associative nature and internal organizational structures, the employment and nature of violence, the relationship with other fan groups, the degree of politization and the expressions thereof, as well as the social heterogeneity within the ultras groups, are undoubtedly highly distinctive elements. These characterizing facets shall be examined in the following.

### 3.1 Governance of an Anarchical Realm

The ultras realm encompasses the highly apparent juxtaposition of hierarchies and anarchy: the diverse groups that coexist in this apparently lawless anarchical environment, governed by no central entity, are strictly hierarchical and meticulously organized. The first intricacy to be analyzed thus revolves around the interplay between the internal organization of ultras groups, that is their structure, composition, and interior dynamics, as opposed to what will be termed the “external” organization, meaning the governance of the realm itself, with regards to the codes of conduct which govern the relationships between the groups and the shared behavioral patterns.

#### 3.1.1 Internal Organization and Power Dynamics Within Ultras Groups

The performance of the ultras within the stadia is overwhelming and engaging. At first glance, a group may seem rather flexible and with fluid boundaries, given the fact that

any individual is welcome and even encouraged to form part in the stadium performance of the ultras, who themselves boast about their egalitarian values and openness to all (Jones, 2019). In reality, however, this egalitarianism is but a mere optical illusion, as behind closed doors the groups are strictly organized along hierarchical lines. Throughout the years, ultras groups have achieved a level of meticulous self-organization which can be compared to that of political organizations and military divisions. The names of many of the groups themselves are reminiscent of paramilitary organizations which operated especially during the period of the inception of the ultras movement, therefore denoting a clear attempt to replicate the operational structure of such groups. The clearly defined internal organizational structure thus enables the effective governance of the unruly behaving group of individuals itself, the administration of its finances, the relationship with actors outside the group, as well as the coordination of the stadium performance.

In this regard, Russo (2016) offers a comprehensive account on the internal distribution of power and attribution of roles within the groups. The author holds that the composition of groups varies according to factors such as territorial origin, family ties, and friendship networks, variables which can be decisive in terms of assuming charismatic roles, defining prestige within the group and any subgroups, and determining the dynamics of power distribution and exercise within the group. Belonging to a specific family and being rooted in a particular neighborhood therefore significantly shape the distribution of roles and functions of the social actors involved within the groupings, roles which apply to both inside and outside the stadium. In this way, established ultras groups and their individual leading figures with a certain social reputation exert an influence, even in a latent manner, on the overall direction and organization of the wider fanbase. The leaders within the groups, Russo (2016) adds, assume the role of charismatic figures towards their followers and gain power that allows them to determine the significance of tasks to be carried out. They delegate these tasks in a hierarchical manner, starting from members of less prestigious groups and gradually extending to the broader fanbase. The execution of these tasks and responsibilities establishes a specific organization within the ultras community, determining the arrangement of fans in different sections of the stands categorized as first, second, or third line. This organization influences the direction and arrangement of chants, choreographies, the dissemination of promotional materials, the display of



scarves, flags, barriers, or banners, as well as the use of smoke bombs. In each of these roles, every member holds a specific position and receives social recognition, which instills a sense of justification and empowerment when carrying out individual or collective actions.

The figure of the leader of the group, commonly referred to as “capo”, deserves further consideration. As outlined by Doidge, Kossakowski & Minert (2020), a capo assumes the role of a conductor, guiding the crowd's actions, with the responsibility to bring any member whose behavior deviates from the desired norms back in line. The capo, typically male and embodying a hypermasculine attitude, motivates and encourages the crowd to sing, jump, and clap. Unlike most football fans who face the pitch and players, the capo faces the ultras themselves, considering them the true performers rather than the players. This parallel with a conductor, the authors continue, extends to the capo's positioning, often standing on specially constructed scaffolding or at the edge of stairwells. This reinforces the ultras' legitimacy within the stadium, as congregating around stairwells or standing is typically restricted in all-seater stadia due to safety regulations. The result is a distinct dynamic where the ultras' performance often operates independently of the on-pitch performance, creating a unique atmosphere within the stadium, shaped by the leader, who blatantly manifests his indifference regarding the sportive action.

The role of the capo is then complemented by a committee of directors, an institution known as the “direttivo”, or “directive”, which represents the executive branch of the group and has specific functions: the definition of group policies, the choice of the supportive rituals of symbolic provocation of rivals, the deliverance of tickets, the organization of away travel, the sale of club memorabilia, the administration of the budget, the communication and negotiation with the representatives of the football club or law enforcement and the coordination of the performance within the stands (Dal Lago & De Biasi, 1994). Although open discussions and an exchange of viewpoints are promoted within the leading committee and the group as a whole at the regular assemblies at the headquarters, the decision making process is hardly democratic, as the capo commonly has the last say, while dissenting members of the executive, who might not share the visions and strategies of the group, are left with the options of falling into line, staging a coup or splitting from the group (Doidge, Kossakowski, & Mintert,

2020). The lowest level of the hierarchy then belongs to the foot soldiers, the ordinary members of the group, who have the task of executing the commands of their superiors and produce the desired stadium performance on every occasion. Active involvement in violent confrontations with rival groups is clearly a crucial aspect of these individuals' role, enabling foot soldiers to demonstrate their loyalty to the group and earn recognition from higher-ranking members, thus advancing within the ranks of the hierarchy, while an unwavering daily commitment to the cause is expected from all members, similar to that of a political militant (Louis, 2019).

### 3.1.2 External Organization: Laws and Behavioral Patterns

From its inception, the ultras movement instantly emerged as a powerful subculture. In a period of significant political turmoil, disaffected youths found a new avenue of self-expression, one where they could let their passion flow and possibly vent frustrations. This led to the emergence of a distinct youth subculture, which “refers to the process of aggregation and socialization among individuals of the same generation who share a set of behaviors, attitudes, rules, and lifestyles” (Spagnolo, 2017), which, in the context of the football ultras, leads to a “distinctive expression of belonging to a group, which has its own ethics (no dishonorable acts of infamy can be committed) and its own language, a behavioral code that revolves around the unconditional support for one's team and territory” (Masiello, 2010). The ultras' departure from mainstream culture is prominently demonstrated through their deliberate and active efforts to set themselves apart from the ordinary supporters and fan clubs, thus establishing a distinct divide in terms of behavior and positioning within stadia. Great importance is placed on congregating in the stands to affirm and protect this shared identity, while the confrontation with law enforcement often reinforces the group's identity as a counter to the established system, as the act of criminalizing their activities and emphasizing the existence of two separate cultural systems only serves to further accentuate this divide (Canale, 2022).

The sharp contrast between the ultras subculture and mainstream society, emphasized by ongoing conflicts with state institutions and the general public, progressively fostered a strong collective identity among individuals belonging to various groups within the ultras community. From its inception in Italy the ultras style transcended

borders and gained global traction, finding resonance among numerous groups worldwide who embraced the same mentality and values established by the pioneering Italian factions, leading to the emergence of a global subculture, making its mark in various countries regardless of their distinct cultural, social, and political contexts. As such, exhibiting behavioral patterns and ideals which set them apart from the wider culture, the ultras progressively constructed a realm based on its own social structures, as evidenced above, as well as self-established rules of conduct and their own shared moral codes and values, all the while expressing open disdain toward mainstream culture.

Consequently, having established its own system of values, the ultras commonly act according to unwritten, but generally accepted and shared, codes of conduct. The existence of these rules is vital to the survival of the movement itself, the effective functioning of the internal organizational structures of the groups, as well as in defining the behavior of its individual members toward the collective. These codes and models of behavior stem from the cardinal pillars of the “ultras mentality” and effectively represent the laws in this seemingly lawless sphere. Russo (2016) presents an exhaustive list of the fundamental principals of the ultras codes and what is expected from every member of a group: “Absolute loyalty and unwavering support for the team's colors; to always follow the team, both in home and away matches, through good times and bad; a complete organizational and directional autonomy of the groups, no contact or affiliation with ownership, the club itself, or other local and municipal entities, particularly from an economic standpoint; an absence of political colors and flags within organized fandom; indifference or a lack of attachment towards those who wear the jersey representing the ultras fanbase and the city's football team (players are often labeled as disrespectful mercenaries in ultras common language); a prohibition of granting interviews or providing comments to local and national television and radio networks, except in exceptional cases agreed upon in group assemblies; a loyalty to ultras codes during potential clashes with rival fan groups of opposing beliefs and football factions (rules are established to determine loyalty in physical confrontations); the absence of any form of compromise, especially with law enforcement; and an unwavering consistency towards one's ideals and the social representation of the ultras lifestyle (“Tough and pure”).” Besides this traditional model, which is widely applied in the ultras world, the author identifies further models of behavior which have emerged

over the years. The second model represents an ultras group, best exemplified by the Livorno and Lazio factions, which displays a higher level of politicization by blending their political ideologies with their dedication to team colors. This fusion of politics and fandom introduces a notable contradiction with the principles and core essence of ultras analyzed in the previous model. These ultras maintain a stable relationship with political groups, which strongly influences the modalities of adherence and recruitment of new members. The third model outlined is one where the ultras codes and behavioral patterns seamlessly merge with the social dynamics and street norms, best reflected by the Roma and Napoli groups. The focal point of this model lies in the ultras categories commonly referred to as the "cani sciolti", representing individuals who are not associated with any particular group. They embody the most fervent and rebellious faction within the ultras fanbase, characterized by their impulsive and unruly nature.

In addition to the internal codes of conduct within ultras groups, there exist widely acknowledged rules that dictate the nature of violent encounters. These rules of engagement, to some extent, are formalized through joint statements like the Genova meeting agreement mentioned above. As Balestri & Viganò (2004) outline, unlike within hooligan culture, violence within the ultras culture is not haphazardly carried out, but rather targeted and directed towards specific groups of ultras deemed as adversaries. The decision to engage in acts of violence rests with the directorate. Participation in fights is granted to younger members only after demonstrating both reliability in military aspects and organizational competence. Jones (2019) adds that according to the ethical code governing fights upheld by the ultras, clashes are to occur solely among ultras and excluding ordinary fans. It is expected that the numbers involved would be relatively balanced, and the incidents are not reported to the police, while the use of blades or other weapons is deemed inappropriate. When someone pleads for mercy, it is expected to be granted. Violent confrontations are accordingly to be genuine, reminiscent of a nineteenth-century duel and a representation of noble values. The group, the colors representing the history, territory, and traditions, are seen as a medieval or chivalrous concepts. Ultras, Jones (2019) continues, believe that the fights encompass values that should embody the dignity of every person, including loyalty, solidarity, confrontation, seriousness, humility, transparency, sincerity, territoriality, and tradition. Throughout the years, fights rarely exhibited overtly political motives, even when confrontations occurred between notoriously left-wing

and right-wing groups, where the expectation remained to show mercy and abide by the shared values of dignity. The ethical codes thus see forth a fair competition, where fights are pre-organized and not initiated following ambushes and after which a winning group emerges according to the damage done within the clash. The reward of a victorious outcome is further notoriety in the ultras world, which reinforces the reputation and standing of the group within the ultras community, while defeated groups are shamed. The ultimate defeat of a group is the loss of its herald during a confrontation. According to the established rules, there is a noble manner in which to seize an opponent's banner, as the act of theft is intended to occur in the presence of the rival group, allowing them to protect their most cherished possession (Louis, 2019). If a group loses its banner in such a combat, it must dissolve immediately. Evidently, despite the existence of such codes and the ultras' reiterated commitment at upholding these values, an array of incidents has evidenced an inconsistent application of these principles, especially considering the actions of "loose dogs".

The notion of morality within the ultras world is certainly paradoxical. What is deemed as blatantly immoral in wider society is embraced and celebrated in the ultras subculture, which relies on outdated values of nobility and honor. While behaviors like violence, confrontations with rival fans, and acts of vandalism are typically condemned, they hold a distinct meaning within the ultras world. The ultras have therefore constructed a highly unique and intricate moral framework, centered around loyalty, honor, and unwavering dedication to the group. Within a realm governed by self-established ethical codes and in the absence of any central institution which oversees the interaction among groups, the ultras themselves assume the role of moral judges, thus condemning or celebrating the acts of group members according to their interpretation of the codes and choosing punishments in the case of actions which are deemed inconsistent with the rules of engagement. These aspects also provide decisive insight into the nature of ultras violence. The previous sections have extensively covered the various instances of seemingly senseless violence that occurred in the evolution of the ultras movement. For while the vast majority of these violent events were caused by "loose dogs" that deviated from the behaviors socially accepted by the ultras, the codes of conduct listed here are clearly insightful with regard to the true nature of ultras violence. Contrary to hooliganism, the ultras view violence as a means rather than an end, a necessary step toward the protection of their territory, honor and

colors, the construction of a fearsome reputation and the assertion of dominance, as well as the protection of the ultras realm itself, especially so in the never-ending battle against law enforcement and the institutions. As such, while for hooligans violence is the central element of aggregation, an ultras group can also be peaceful and non-violent, if it does not deem violent acts as necessary in achieving their collective aims.

### 3.2. Social and Psychological Dynamics

Given the social dimension of football in Italy, from a sociological standpoint, the dynamics present in football stadia are highly intriguing. The stadium is a unique sphere, where social classes are irrelevant and where individuals exit their social bubbles and closely interact with other individuals of strongly differing socio-economic standings. Based on research conducted by Dal Lago & Moscati (1992), at the height of Italian football in the 1990s, the majority of football fans in Northern Italy, approximately 75.8%, were employed, with only 2.4% being unemployed, and 13% were students. Among the employed group, there was a significant presence of industrial workers (28.4%), employees (26%), shopkeepers (9.4%), craftsmen (7.6%), professionals (7%), and various other occupations. Dal Lago & De Biasi (1994) consequently affirm that while the makeup of football supporters in Italy differs across regions and cities, with specific social classes prevailing based on factors like city size and unemployment rates, the football culture in Italy transcends class divisions, political conflicts, and religious values, embodying a "cross-class culture". For the authors, football exists as a self-sustaining domain, free from external influences, yet with the power to impact and shape the social conduct of ordinary individuals. What follows is that, in contrast to other countries, Italy has seen a more flexible relationship between football and the working class, where the love for the sport transcends social and economic boundaries, a characteristic which extends to the ultras group as well, as their composition, unlike that of the hooligans, reflects a diverse mix of social classes, with a notable inclusion of women within their ranks (Balestri & Viganò, 2004). By adopting a sociological approach to the ultras phenomenon, one can identify the social and collective identity of ultras and highlight the prominent manifestations thereof, such as the display of rituals and symbols.

### 3.2.1 Individual and In-Group Identities

Deep senses of belonging are inherent to the world of football fandom, be it for ordinary fans or fanatical groups. The emotions experienced by fans are less rooted in football itself and are primarily influenced by individual psychology and societal factors shaping their ideologies, as the craving for belonging surpasses the need for self-esteem, making social connectedness a vital human necessity, often achieved through symbolic associations with others (Sarver Coombs & Osborne, 2022). This explains why thousands of fans convene in stadia regularly, engaging with strangers as if they share a profound personal bond. The team and the sportive event act as pretexts for this powerful form of social aggregation, which involves deep emotionality and an almost addictive feeling of unity. Achievements or failures are irrelevant to this feeling of irrational passion for one's team, which is rooted in the most basic psychological and social human needs, of acceptance and belonging. Ultras embody these socio-psychological elements to the extreme.

Notions of identity hold significant importance within the ultras culture, encompassing individual, in-group, and collective aspects. Becoming a part of this world entails a transformation of one's social identity, as individuals embrace the ultras mentality and lifestyle not only during matchdays, but also in their daily lives. Russo (2016) applies the interactionist thesis to the study of the social identity of ultras, a perspective according to which a social reality is the outcome of the interpretation and sense-making of symbols created from the very relationships among individuals themselves. Accordingly, his sociological study supports the idea that during festive and collective gatherings, like those in stadia, individuals break away from their usual social façades and adopt behaviors that might be considered morally unacceptable in other contexts. Russo's (2016) research therefore sheds light on the dynamics at play in stadia, especially in the "curva", where people discard their social masks and embrace a new persona that aligns with their role within the group and their internalized norms and codes. The ultras lifestyle therefore holds significant meaning for them, extending beyond merely attending Sunday matches, as being an ultra involves a distinctive behavioral style both inside and outside the stands in daily life. Additionally, the author continues, they continuously differentiate themselves within their group and in

interactions with other ultras groups, aiming to stand out individually in various social circles where their socialization and self-differentiation processes occur.

On the basis of these observations, one can conclude that the individual ultra possesses a dual identity, which involves navigating between their role in broader society and their place within the ultras subculture. In everyday life, these identities exist simultaneously, as ultras adhere to the norms of their subculture even in their interactions outside of it and pledge a daily commitment to the cause. The pronounced social identity of the ultra then breaks through on matchdays, definitively leaving the alternate identity behind, by exhibiting the ritualized performances and behaviors unique to the ultras subculture. Taking a deeper look, the main pillars of the cognitive model of an individual ultra can be outlined: they perceive themselves as essential team members, almost like players themselves; they claim ownership of the team, believing their actions, even violent ones, can sway the decisions of the sports club; they constantly sense threats from historical rivals, leading them to fiercely safeguard the group's honor; they closely monitor a private ranking system that evaluates fan groups based on their involvement in stadium conflicts and their overall distinction within the fan community (Canale, 2022).

It is evident that the ultras' actions, both violent and non-violent, gain more strength and effectiveness when executed as a group, as joining together enhances the impact of their actions, increasing the likelihood of achieving their common goal of asserting dominance over opposing fans (Maniglio, 2006). By adopting a social-psychological lens, a more profound understanding of the in-group dynamics in ultras groups can be achieved. The utilization of the “identity fusion theory” has proven to be a widely embraced method in explaining how such individuals coexist within these groupings. Identity fusion is a distinctive type of group alignment, characterized by a profound sense of unity and oneness with the group, leading to a more permeable boundary between an individual's personal and social selves, which in turn enhances the reciprocal influence of their personal identity on the group identity and vice versa: such highly fused individuals “not only see themselves as integral to their group ("My group membership is an essential aspect of my identity") but also view the group through the lens of their personal self ("I am a significant part of the group")” (Swann, Jetten, Gómez, & Whitehouse, 2012). Studies indicate that individuals with high levels of



identity fusion are particularly prone to resort to violence as a means of safeguarding and supporting their group, often expressing a strong urge for aggressive retaliation against adversaries in confrontational situations and a clear inclination to demonstrate their willingness to fight for the sake of their group, with some individuals even expressing a readiness to sacrifice their lives to protect the group's values and existence (Knijnik & Newson, 2020). In the ultras culture, the group itself is a superior entity, one of far greater significance than any individual, regardless of the member's social standing within the group's hierarchy, as no-one is above the group. The force of the group lies in the cohesion and the unwavering loyalty of its members to this entity, which is why the individual members dissolve their personal identity within the group, to prioritize the collective.

Internal cohesion and commitment are fundamental pillars of the ultras mentality. Applying the aforementioned theory, ultras groups therefore consist of highly fused individuals whose identity is deeply intertwined with the group itself. These individuals may go to extreme lengths to protect their group, which can lead to violent confrontations, as their identity relies heavily on the group's continuity. As such, they are distinguished by their strong bonds and unyielding camaraderie, motivating them to take both political and physical risks in support of their team and group, thus protecting their group from perceived outside threats, with these group ties becoming as, if not more, powerful than their family connections (Knijnik & Newson, 2020). These feelings are further strengthened by the highly competitive nature of the ultras world. In this regard Flocca (2005) notes that inherent antagonism among rival groups in the ultras realm makes it a significant space for collective identification, resulting in the emergence of both "in-groups" and "out-groups", where the idea of opposition becomes crucial, strengthening the group's sense of belonging. Feeling part of the "us" is amplified when confronted with the opposing team and its ultras groups, the "them", a dynamic which further enhances the strong emotional attachments to well-defined "in-groups" and equally powerful hostility towards clearly delineated "out-groups."

The desire to aggregate in ultras groups can consequently be affirmed to be of psychological and social nature. From a psychological perspective, as evidenced by Swann, Jetten, Gómez, & Whitehouse (2012), identity fusion enhances and strengthens the group by channeling the personal agency of highly fused individuals towards the

group's objectives, resulting in a more resilient and effective collective. This interplay also benefits the individuals themselves, as they align their actions with the group's shared meaning system, fulfilling crucial needs such as personal agency, affiliation, belongingness, and a sense of meaningfulness and certainty, leading to a more fulfilling and purposeful life. Consequently, the authors conclude, fusion may represent an asset which benefits both the individual and the collective. The pinnacle of euphoria and emotionality is achieved in the stadium performance, which cements this fusion. The intensity of these transformative experiences, shared among group members, serves as a powerful bonding agent that fuses fans' personal and social identities, as during these highly arousing moments, these individuals display their group's core cultural and social values with unparalleled intensity, surpassing even their everyday lives and familial connections (Knijnik & Newson, 2020). From a more social perspective, the construction of an alternate social identity by the individual ultra suggests that the affiliation to an ultras group represents an escape from the social reality and façade of everyday life and therefore a chance to assume a social standing only achievable for the individual in the ultras subculture and not in wider society. The mix of these socio-psychological factors are undoubtedly powerful, inducing the individual to protect this constructed identity at all costs.

Finally, there arises the need for a tangible reference point to guide this boundless passion, a common denominator around which the internal group cohesion can be built. As observed, to solely attribute this phenomenon to team support is simplistic, as the sporting action itself, the players or managers, play a secondary role. The converging point of group unity, what aggregates all the members, is territoriality. The fundamental element of each ultras group revolves around topophilia or "campanilismo" (attachment to one's local bell-tower), where they harbor profound devotion to their specific town, city, or neighborhood, fostering a strong sense of belonging and rootedness to their territory (Jones, 2019). "Campanilismo", defined as an excessive form of municipalism leading to an "exaggerated and biased attachment to one's native place" (Treccani, 2003), is a prevalent and pervasive aspect of Italian society, driven by historical factors like the late national unity, significant regional disparities, and the lack of a strong centralized state. In the world of football, the devotion to one's territory is commonly the decisive factor in the choice of what team to support. Ultras view their steadfast support of the team as a way of defending and promoting their territory, placing a

significant burden on the team to represent and uphold their territorial pride. Territorial concepts carry immense importance within the ultras subculture, whether it's tied to the city, the neighborhood where the group originated, or their designated section of the stadium stands, adding an emotional and nostalgic element to the socio-psychological factors of aggregation. The result is a deep emotional connection to the team's stadium, which they view as a sacred space of passion, identity, and nostalgia, evoking a sense of territorial belonging, while protecting their own venue goes hand in hand with disrespecting the opponent's place (Scalia, 2009). This lends yet another notion to the nature of ultras violence, that is the near military conception of territorial conquest and protection, or in the words of "Bocia", a leader of the "Curva Nord of Atalanta": "Violence, the desire to hit the enemy and defend the territory, is a passion that links the idea of hatred and violence to that of heart and emotion" (Masiello, 2010). The team and its colors embody the values, honor, and territorial sentiments, effectively representing the very essence of the ultra and his entire identity. In victory and defeat, the devotion to the team will therefore remain unchanged.

### 3.3.2 Rituals, Symbols and Myths: Expressions of Group Identity

The parallelism between football fandom and religion is easily recognizable. In Italy, football emerged as a collective ritual, a liturgy, and the final remaining space for the sacred in a society that had undergone a complete secularization due to economic rationalization, as it revolved around the free and passionate emotions of fans who experience pure joy in victory and genuine despair in defeat, without any economic implications (Fini, 2011). To this, Spagnolo (2017) adds that for the fans and even more so for ultras the football team represents participation, dedication, devotion, and adherence, involving both joy and suffering, as well as physical, mental, and financial sacrifices, becoming an all-consuming commitment for some individuals. Slogans such as "Ultras 7 days a week," and "Before, during, and after" are widely used in Italy, capturing the essence of this mission and conveying profound meaning. Whether someone is an ultras or a non-radicalized supporter, Spagnolo (2017) continues, they embrace their fandom in an uncritical, faithful, instinctive, passionate, and spontaneous manner, often at a specific point in their life. Fandom represents a profound sense of

belonging, unwavering devotion, and almost religious-like faith to the divine entity that is the team. As in all areas analyzed thus far, the ultras push this faith to the extreme. The core manifestation of this near religious devotion are the rituals, symbols and myths that are integral to these groups and their group identity.

The highly ritualized behaviors of ultras are deeply rooted in the group's relationship with its own history. In this regard, the first aspect to be analyzed is the process of mystification of the group, based on historical recollections that constructed precise self-narratives. According to Maniglio (2006), the group's narrative structure, which represents the passage of time, serves to reinforce and enhance its shared beliefs and values. Similar to autobiographies, the group's history goes beyond a simple record of events, as it includes various occurrences, facts, and episodes, often times altered or mythologized, but always situated within specific periods of the group's existence, considered significant by individuals as they contribute to explaining the group's present state and identity. Similar to other groups with established rituals, ultras also have their own set of symbols, heroic narratives, and martyrs, stories that are transmitted by word of mouth, fanzines, or websites, often revolving around confrontations with rival fans (Foot, 2007).

The mystification of violent encounters and clashes with rivals is evidently central to the enhanced self-representation of the group and the preservation of the honor of its members. The group members that perished in these confrontations or in other fatal incidents become martyrs, near divine symbols which are constantly commemorated and figure prominently through graffiti and posters on the city walls, as well as on banners and flags within the "curva". The face of the late Lazio fan Gabriele Sandri can be seen to this day on numerous walls throughout Rome, while the "curva" of As Roma contains a giant flag figuring the face of Antonio De Falchi. Decades after these incidents took place, the fan groups of both sides vow revenge against those responsible for their death. The mythologization also extends to the collective battles of the ultras, who reinforce their opposition to "modern football" by invoking a nostalgic and semi-mythical past, when the purity of the game remained untainted by the influence of money (Montague, 2020). The construction of myths is thus an inherent aspect of the ultras world and its groups, serving as a means of an enhanced self-representation, a show of force, a source of meaning or a justification of their collective missions.

Doidge, Kossakowski, and Minert (2020) add further insight into the relationship between ultras groups and their history, which is constantly performed and reimagined. The ritualistic nature of football offers a regular meeting space for the groups, fostering continuity and tradition. However, as has also been evidenced above, football and the ultras world are relatively recent phenomena, the latter emerging in Italy during the late 1960s, making these traditions younger compared to those in other cultural domains. To explain the traditions inherent to the ultras groups, the authors apply Hobsbawm's concept of "invented tradition," defined as "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past". Accordingly, rituals and symbolic practices are of strong significance in fandom, as regular engagement ensures continuity over time. Thus, paraphernalia such as flags and banners, along with the narratives passed down within the group, become traditions through the forming of habits. The authors then demonstrate how group symbols are both revered and generated through regular practice, establishing a focus on invented traditions that sustain the group's existence. Through these rituals, the ultras group fosters a sense of unity, as symbols and memories are repeatedly enacted during matches. These invented traditions serve as a socializing force, guiding members on what to remember and what to forget, creating a mnemonic community where certain events are commemorated and ingrained into the collective memory of the group, which preserves the ultras' traditions. Furthermore, the authors highlight how history, in the context of the ultras' style of fandom, is also a performative element, as the choreographies, banners, and stories shared among members all contribute to how the group presents itself both to its members and to outsiders, leading to the group's identity being continually performed, and their historical narrative playing a crucial role in shaping the group's perception and self-presentation.

Having established the roots and origins of symbols and myths inherent to ultras groups, different categories and concrete examples of these ritualized behaviors can be identified. For Testa & Armstrong (2010), symbols serve as the most accessible representation of the ultras culture, conveying and promoting ideas while giving them a tangible form. These symbols, often associated with tradition, can take the form of words, gestures, and objects with specific significance, understood only by those who

share the same cultural understanding. For groups like the “Boys” of As Roma and the “Irriducibili” of Lazio, recurring symbols include brief phrases like "In alto i cuori" (keep high our hearts) as a way to conclude dialogues, or gestures such as Roman salutes, while symbols like the Celtic cross, the eagle (for the Irriducibili), and the sword are commonly used. Symbols therefore act as a powerful weapon for the ultras, wielded in their "battles," primarily against the modern world that seems to overlook and dismiss traditional values. A further manifestation of symbolism, Testa & Armstrong (2010) add, is therefore the ultras' style, their clothing, posture and gait. The clothing style, often coordinated and recognizable, given that individuals commonly dress in all black or in expensive and distinctive brands, is meant to convey impressions of toughness and unity. Lastly, the authors hold that among the most important rituals of ultras groups are the preparation of banners and choreographies for matchdays, where leaders choose the slogans, each high-ranking member of the groups has specific tasks and ordinary members prepare the banners themselves. Banners, which are commonly created at the ultras' headquarters or in rented warehouses, hold immense importance for the ultras, as the slogans not only champion the values and principles of their community but also act as cautions to outsiders, warning them about their territory and the potential consequences of crossing their boundaries.

A further central element of the ritualized behaviors of ultras are chants, perhaps the most visually and phonetically apparent rite within stadia. The leaders, acting as conductors, guide an almost concert-like performance of the groups, in which the different traditional and newer chants are recited at specific times within the match with the support of different musical tools, such as megaphones and drums. Certain songs have formed the core of the stadium performance for decades, while newer chants, often created spontaneously by groups, are prominently incorporated into the performance for a limited period of time, before slowly filtering out of the concert setlist. The timing of the chant recitals is predetermined and rarely reflects the performance of the team on the pitch. Commonly, after conceding a goal, ultras manifestly enhance the volume of their chants to symbolize their unwavering support of the team in contrast to the silence that engulfs the rest of the stadium. The chants are crafted by the groups using the melodies of a diverse range of songs, spanning from popular mainstream music to the melodies of national anthems. Despite the ultras' constant reiteration of their uniqueness, the melodies of the chants are recurrently used by diverse groups, albeit

with slightly changed words. What is sung ranges from banal incitements of the team, to insults to adversaries, rival groups and law enforcement, to outright love poems to the club. Bloodthirsty chants, which especially in the early years of the ultras movement constantly invoked the death of the enemy, reminiscent of chants in ancient Roman arenas (Jones, 2019), are seamlessly followed by heartwarming verses of unconditional love for the club. The main aims of these short songs are therefore the manifestation of team support, the amorous devotion to the club and the supreme force of the ultras, in a contradictory display of love and hate, expressed through common references to violence and death (Spagnolo, 2017). The originality of chants, the degree of their engagement in the whole stadium and the volume of the performance are further sources of pride of groups, as the ability to enact a visually and phonetically impressive performance is key to the overall image of the groups. The stadium performance of ultras is vital to the cementation of their standing within the ultras community and in the ever-lasting competition with other groups. The choreographies and chants are accordingly documented and spread on social media and further channels to underline the ability of the group to produce a visually more appealing performance than the rival groups. The quest for supremacy consumes the everyday life of the ultra, who commits daily to the creation of new material, both visual and acoustic, to incorporate into the ritualistic performance and gain an upper hand over the rival groups.

What has emerged is that the collective rituals, symbology and mystification of the groups' reality is a central and imperative element of the expression of a groups' identity. Various elements such as paintings, exhibits, flags, songs, dances, call and response chants, and more, all serve the purpose of creating a sense of unity and bringing the participants together in a highly emotional and tribal-like atmosphere during the group's rituals (Knijnik & Newson, 2020). The epitomal expression of the importance of these symbolisms and rituals, as mentioned in the previous section, are the individual group's heralds, historical banners containing the name of the group behind which the members assemble at matches, passed on through generations and guarded heavily, for these pieces of cloth contain the history, continuity and identity of the group. If it is lost in combat, the group loses its identity, its whole reason of being, and dissolves, along with the constructed identities of its members.

### 3.2.3 The Communitas: Collective Identity

Despite the distinct identity that characterizes each individual group, a subculture naturally involves a shared collective identity among its members, despite the significant variations between different factions. The collective of ultras can therefore be described as a “communitas”, whose members undergo a never-ending shared ordeal against the “others”, that being the state, the football institutions, the police and the media, an experience which strengthens the bonds and ties between strongly differing groups and which emphasizes group similarities over individual peculiarities (Testa & Armstrong, 2010). The deep sense of belonging toward the ultras world and its mentality itself activates the survival instincts of its members when this realm is threatened, leading to the unison between otherwise deeply rivalrous groups in times of crises, to defend their communitas. The most notable example of this was observed during the Genova meeting of 1995, where strongly opposing group leaders came together to discuss the state of their common realm and implement measures to ensure its continued existence. For while groups like to accentuate their uniqueness, the fundamental principals and behavioral patterns of the ultras are all the same. Therefore, just as the rituals create a communitas that enables non-contractual relationships to form beyond geographical limitations, fostering connections that endure over time and space within individual groups (Knijnik & Newson, 2020), the experience shared by all members pertaining to the ultras community equally forms a strong bond over time and space, which may be invisible to many, but emerges in the time of need.

Accordingly, Testa (2009) sees the ultras community as an outright social movement, based on a common foe and a common strategy of opposition, including supporters' strikes, where they refuse to support the teams during matches to express their discontent. In addition, the unity can be observed in their readiness for violence, the engagement in public protests, and the emergence of a recognizable organizations, such as most notably the “Ultras Italia”, a group formed to support the national team, seen as a representation of the homeland. The process of politicization within the ultras further marked the development of their collective identity, a crucial aspect of any social movement. This collective identity, according to the author, fosters a sense of "we" based on cohesion and solidarity, prompting collective action among its members. This leads to the highly peculiar situation in which even traditional rivalries among



different ultras groups can be set aside when they perceive a common threat or persecution from the state that challenges their way of life. Furthermore, from a more sociological perspective, the engagement with other ultras, most prominently in online forums, in bars and around stadia, inadvertently further strengthens the bonds of this community, thus creating “a broader understanding of themselves as a wider collective of ultras” (Doidge, Kossakowski, & Mintert, 2020). The existence of strong bonds of collective identity in the inherently antagonistic and competitive ultras sphere consequently represents yet another paradox intrinsic to this hypercomplex world. The glue that keeps these bonds together in such an unstable environment evidently is the common mentality, which the ultras collectively built throughout its evolution.

Having extensively addressed the conflict between ultras and state institutions, most notably law enforcement, the role of the media in fueling the divide between the ultras communitas and wider society, as well as shaping public opinion and influencing the emanation of anti-ultra measures, deserves further consideration. Since the 1980s, the Italian press has consistently portrayed fan groups as an ongoing menace to society, exaggerating their social threat despite the relatively few recorded incidents, while also depicting their violence as irrational and lawless, often drawing rhetorical comparisons to war or terrorism (Sibilio, 2020). The Italian media has been found to consistently disseminate “a bourgeois political meta-language that includes not only narratives of self but also the ability to define good and bad, victim and aggressor” (Dyal, 2012). The adoption of this moral approach gives the press, the public, and all parties involved a reassuring sense of righteousness, as they actively take part in preserving public order by neutralizing the “intimidating fan”, commonly branded as a criminal, through the endorsement and implementation of coercive measures (Bifulco, 2018). The media campaigns carried out by prominent Italian newspapers following significant incidents, like the deaths of inspector Raciti and Ciro Esposito, played a crucial role in shaping public opinion and fueling outrage towards the ultras phenomenon. These campaigns set the stage for legislative action, including the prompt issuance of the Amato decree following the Raciti incident.

For Armstrong & Testa (2010), the unfavorable depiction of the ultras by the mass media often stems from a lack of accurate understanding of the ultras' logic, as “the media coverage of events connected with these 21st-century ‘folk devils’ has often been

poorly researched, populist and without foundation”. The authors further present reasons for this confrontative approach. For one, the national newspapers' coverage is primarily based on the versions of events provided by powerful individuals or institutions, making them the "primary definers" of crucial issues due to their privileged access to information hidden from the public eye, leading to strongly one-sided views. Secondly, Italian media's “obsessive” focus on negative episodes involving ultras provides them with the “oxygen of publicity”, as it attracts more attention rather than the positive social initiatives of the groups. In the same vein, the authors continue, audiences may find more pleasure in crime stories due to the eternal battle between good and evil, through narratives typically involving heroes, here being the state, police, and media and villains, represented by the “mindless” football thugs.

Dyal (2012), in analyzing the triad of state, media and ultras, offers a further perspective on the ever-lasting conflict between ultras and mass media. For the author, the very nature of ultras violence and its practical expression give the state and the media the necessary rationale to destroy the phenomenon. Consequently, while the state’s monopoly on violence is mirrored by the media’s hegemony of information of violent groups, the state's physical repression through legislative action reflects the condemnation by the media, which presents information in highly moral language. Dyal (2012) further highlights how the state's own data shows a decline in violence between ultras and the police, which makes the aggressive measures and language used to marginalize the ultras after the deaths of Raciti and Sandri even more noticeable, as these incidents and the ultras' reactions were used as a pretext to suppress them, even going to the extent of labeling the violence as acts of terrorism aimed at overthrowing the government. These accusations were used to justify not only the crackdown on all forms of ultra activities, including harmless ones like displaying flags and team colors at stadia, but also the possible removal of the entire ultras scene from the world of football.

Given the negative portrayal, the opposition of ultras to mainstream media is unsurprising. Paradoxically, ultras may often benefit from figuring prominently in mainstream news, as this enhances their standing, notoriety and image in the ultras realm, while the widespread use of social media channels and online forums to spread their propaganda also evidences that ultras are not completely averse to media channels.

In essence, however, traditional and mainstream media outlets are commonly perceived by the ultras as a component of the state's arsenal of oppressive instruments against them and a decisive advocate of the institutions' mission to promote "modern football" (Dyal, 2012). In the ultras' view, the media's sensationalism and excessive media coverage of football events, on the pitch and off, serve to overestimate the degree of violence to cause alarmism and shape public opinion, while also perpetuating the stereotypes of violent and hooligan-like fans, with this depiction therefore merely being a social construction which emerged over time (Russo, 2016). Whether this strategy of the state and the media, based on the dissemination of inaccurate information and impactful language in the interest of public safety and at the cost of strictly factual information, is justified, is not within the scope of this analysis. It is, however, important to outline how the actions of ultras, which are often morally condemnable, are publicly represented, in order to grasp the ever-widening divide between the ultras subculture and wider society. The media, as an intermediary actor between the state and wider society, in this case capable of supporting the state's narrative and significantly influencing public opinion, is a primary example of what fuels and perpetuates the divide between the ultras subculture and mainstream society. Facing widespread aversion and condemnation from common enemies, the collective identity, mentality and unity of the ultras communitas is only strengthened.

#### 4. Political Ideologies: Distribution and Expression

Throughout its evolution, the ultras movement has consistently mirrored the political and societal developments in Italy. Initially, the ultras' politization reflected political extremisms during the "anni di piombo", subsequently the fragmentation of Italian society in the 80s, the loss of credibility of an entire political class in the 90s and, ultimately, the widespread opposition against globalization in the 2000s. This is a crucial aspect, as it evidences how the ultras world is inherently entrenched with the political dynamics within the country, changing its orientation and degree of politization dynamically according to socio-political developments. Critically, it further highlights how the ultras reflect the latent political undercurrents within Italian society, such as political extremisms which are tolerated, weakly contrasted or completely

ignored and which periodically resurface. Having thus acknowledged the interconnection between political events and political ideologies in ultras groups at a macro level, which led to the assimilation of politically extremist ideas in many groups, the following section will analyze in detail how regional and local factors influenced the assimilation and radicalization of political ideologies in these groups on a micro level. This will firstly be done by outlining a map of the distribution of extremist political ideologies of ultras groups within the Italian territory, by delving deeper into the specific local factors which influenced the political orientation of the groups. Consequently, the establishment of politically driven "twinning" relationships and alliances will be outlined. This section will conclude with an analysis of the explicit expression of extremist ideologies, namely blatant racism.

#### 4.1 Map of Politization: The Formation of “Red” and “Black” Curve

A census conducted during the 2017-2018 season by the “National Observatory on Sports Events (ONMS)” of the Ministry of the Interior, found that of the 328 active ultras groups comprising approximately 40,000 individuals, 151 were politically oriented, of which 40 were aligned with the far-right, 45 with the right-wing, 33 with the left-wing, and 21 with the radical left. In addition, the report explained the following: “right-wing fan bases are more politically active than the left-wing ones; they engage in online communication, focus on image and slogans, organize meetings on current issues, and consider themselves politically engaged. However, by "politically oriented," it doesn't merely mean displaying a banner or singing some chants. In certain areas, football and politics intertwine, and the leaders of fan groups and banner-wavers have close ties or are part of political parties and movements. On the right, the known groups include Forza Nuova, Casa Pound, Skinheads, but also Lega Nord and Fratelli d'Italia” (Messinetti, 2018). Closely exploring Italy’s more or lesser known “curve”, emerging within cities with distinct socio-economic dynamics and historical political identities, reveals the geographical distribution of the political allegiances of groups across Italy. The following mapping therefore addresses the politization of select “curve”, of both bigger and smaller teams, that evidence this aspect.

The journey starts in Milan, the city which produced the first ultras groups and which contains one of football's biggest rivalries, between AC Milan and Inter. The great rivalry on the field is complemented by the even more intense rivalry off the field between the Milan and Inter supporters, the former being historically called "cascavìt", which in the Milanese dialect translates to screwdriver, while the latter were labeled as "baùscia", meaning braggers. These terms were coined in the 1920s, in times of pronounced and deeply felt class differences, to highlight the socio-economic differences between the two supporter groups: the screwdriver symbolized the quintessential image of manual labor which characterized the lives of the predominantly working-class supporters of AC Milan, who lived in the suburbs and were excluded from the luxury of the life in the city center, while the term "baùscia" described how Inter fans belonged to the upper class of inner-city residents, who actively participated in the luxurious Milanese life and went to the stadium dressed in jackets and ties (Saviotti, 2021). Consequently, Milan fans have historically leaned towards the political left, while Inter fans have leaned towards the right. This political inclination was reflected in the formation of major ultras groups. Although not explicitly declared, the "Fossa dei Leoni" group was largely sympathetic to left-wing views, while the "Brigate Rossonere" openly embraced their hardcore left-wing ideology (Testa & Armstrong, 2010). Yet, even the sections of the stands that previously leaned toward the left were not immune from right wing infiltrations in the 1980s, with the "Curva Sud" of Milan being a primary example of the shift toward the right of many terraces. The immensely successful presidency of Silvio Berlusconi, leader of the right-wing "Forza Italia", who integrated the ultras into the legitimate football network, certainly played a significant part in nudging the political orientation of the supporters to the right (Messinetti, 2018). Albanese (2022), notes how the pivotal moment in the political orientation of Milan's "Curva Sud" occurred with the disappearance of the historic "Fossa dei Leoni" in 2005, which led to a void in the stands, traditionally occupied by left-leaning supporters. Individuals associated with the far-right and organized crime were quick to fill this void, some of them believed to be linked to groups such as the neo-nazi "Avanguardia Nazionale" and neo-fascist "Lealtà e Azione". In October 2008, Christian Abbiati, the fan-favorite goalkeeper of AC Milan and the Italian national team, who had been found to have connections with the Milan-based neo-fascist organization, Black Heart, stated: "I align with the ideals of patriotism, the Catholic religion, and the belief in maintaining social order" (Testa &

Armstrong, 2010). Despite these notable changes in a curva that has traditionally been associated with left-wing ideologies, the fundamental motto embraced by the entire terrace remains "Neither red, nor black, but only rossoneri (red and black)."

On the other side of the spectrum are the Inter ultras. During the 1960s, the numerous Inter supporters' clubs organised by Franco Servello, a representative of the "Movimento Sociale Italiano" and team manager of Inter, were so close to conservative ideas that the first ultras group of Inter was born out of the splitting up of a group of young supporters belonging to the MSI (Podaliri & Balestri, 1998). The first group formed was the "Boys – Furie Nerazzurre" in 1969, which would change their name to "Boys SAN" in 1979. The addition of the acronym "San", that stands for "Squadre d'azione nerazzurre" ("Black-and-Blue Action Squads"), modeled after the "Sam" ("Squadre d'azione Mussolini"), a terrorist group formed after World War II by former militants of the Italian Social Republic, certified the association Inter Milan's "Curva Nord" to the far-right, in stark contrast to the arch rivals Milan's "Curva Sud" (Camanzi, 2022). Most of the young boys who filled the second tier of San Siro on the Inter side in that period were influenced and shaped by the youth reality of the neo-fascist MSI, which had a distinct impact on the mindset of the group and the entire Inter supporters' section, with this ideological heritage ultimately embraced and continued by the notorious "Skins 88" group, formed in 1986 (Rocca, 2020). The neo-nazi group "Azione Skinhead", which brought together the Milanese members of the extra parliamentary extreme-right organization "Base Autonoma", was found to be closely linked to the "Skins" and later to the "Boys San", which is why it is no coincidence that one of the leaders of Inter's "Curva Nord" was Paolo Coliva (known as "The Armourer"), who was previously part of the leadership group of the skinhead action in Milan (Montrella, 2017). In recent times, a variety of incidents have positioned Milan's "Curva Nord" at the core of the neo-fascist sphere: these include the well-known misspelled tone used by Inter supporters to defend racist chants aimed at Inter's own player Romelu Lukaku by Cagliari fans in 2019, the racist howling directed at Napoli's defender Kalidou Koulibaly in 2018 and at Milan's Frank Kessié in 2020, and the displaying of banners in tribute to Daniele Belardinelli, the former leader of the extreme right group "Blood&Honour" from Varese, named after the English translation of the Hitler Youth motto (Albanese, 2022).

Notoriously, the Italian Northeast, specifically the “Triveneto” region, hosts the core of football fascism. The hardcore Udinese supporters, namely the “Hooligans Teddy Boys” (HTB) and the now disbanded “Nord Kaos” and “North Boys”, have historically become associated with extreme right-wing and pro-nazi ideologies, which were prominently expressed through openly racist and anti-Semitic murals, chants and banners (Albanese, 2022). The factions emerging from the cities of Trieste and Verona then serve as prime examples of how ultras groups reflect the deeply rooted political orientations of their respective cities, regions or neighborhoods of origin. Trieste, for one, played a massive role in fascist symbolism following the Great War. As recounted by Klabjan (2017), given the increasing Italian nationalism in Trieste in Habsburgian times, the acquisition of this territory was a central reason for Italy’s entry into World War I in May 1915 and declaration of war on Austria-Hungary. As such, Klabjan (2017) continues, “these pre-war “unredeemed territories”, with Trieste at their center, played a central role in the national symbolism of post-war Italy”, as “Trieste became the primary symbol of Italy’s military conquest and political importance”, built on the myth of the Great War and the “sacrifice of the Italian nation”. In Mussolini’s subsequent pursuit of a “fascistization” of the cultural landscape, which aimed to revive the glorious Roman past and employ architecture as a tool for visual engineering, Trieste was designated to be the “historical showpiece of the new provinces”. Klabjan (2017) concludes that the several ceremonies of commemoration of the Italian army’s efforts in World War I which were introduced, such as the ceremonies held at Redipuglia on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November to celebrate the Italian victory, became a significant center of civil religion for the local Italians following the war, signifying the Italian character of the region. From the 1950s onwards, it was integrated into the national ritual of Italian public memory, serving broader national purposes and reflecting the deep nationalism rooted in this territory. Emerging from such a political context, the “Curva Furlan” of US Triestina has been historically associated with right extremist ideologies. In 2019, a banner signed by the “Curva Furlan” was displayed near the Trieste “Nereo Rocco” stadium, showing support for Lazio ultras who had gathered at Piazzale Loreto to commemorate Mussolini on National Liberation Day, with the banner declaring their intent to “eliminate the celebration from the calendar”. The “Curva Furlan” is known to be one of the most politically active groups, by disseminating political fanzines, encouraging spectators to attend group gatherings, and propagating their ideologies (Cipriani, Mensurati, & Tonacci, 2014).

Undoubtedly, the Verona ultras stand out as the most extreme right-wing group in Italy. Once more, the political radicalism of these individuals accurately mirrors the prevailing fascist ideological influence in the city of Verona. Paolo Berizzi, an Italian journalist now under police protection due to repeated threats by the Verona ultras, presents an insightful account of the fascist history of the Venetian city and its connection to the fascist ideology of the ultras of Hellas Verona in his book “È gradita la camicia nera” (“Black shirt is welcome”), published in 2021. According to the author, the popular revindication of neo-fascists, who proudly state that “Verona is black”, is undoubtedly truthful. The fascist culture of Verona in fact finds its roots in times in which Italy was not yet a democratic republic and was reinforced progressively by the emergence of a “veronese rite”, composed of “a combination of interconnected elements: local patriotism, ethnic populism, traditionalism, identity disguised as folk custom, ultra-Catholicism, neo-fascism, neo-nazism.” In its ascendance, Mussolini’s “National Fascist Party” found fertile ground in Verona, a city plagued by unrest and conflicts, fueled by the political and business conflicts among leaders and tainted by corruption. Mussolini’s triumphant visit in 1938, Berizzi (2021) recounts, was met with a packed arena of fascist enthusiasts, with individuals wearing white shirts in the sea of black shirts forming the word “DUX”. Following September 8, 1943, Verona became a backdrop for establishing the “Italian Social Republic” and as such intertwined with the narrative of republican fascism, housing five ministries and important German commands. Subsequently, the city gained further significance through the renowned “Verona Trial”, wherein Galeazzo Ciano and fellow leaders were tried for allegedly plotting with Pietro Badoglio to detain Mussolini. In the years between 1943 and 1945, the author adds, the general command of the Gestapo established its Italian base in the Venetian city, suppressing the resistance against the German occupants. In the aftermath of World War II, Verona was distinguished by what Berizzi (2021) refers to a “fascistoid mentality”, based on the ideas of “God, homeland and family”, as well as a rejection of diversity, the cultivation of fear, the advocacy for protectionism and self-determination, the lack of tolerance and homophobia, elements which form trends which deeply influence the city and extend to a part of the province's social fabrics, leading to a fertile environment for the emergence of black terrorism during the 1970s. Ultimately, the author further holds, the Veronese territory became a hub for diverse neo-fascist groups, starting with organizations like General Amos Spiazzi's "Rosa dei Venti" and "Ordine Nuovo," followed by bloodthirsty factions like "Ludwig" and



Franco Freda's "Fronte Nazionale", succeeded by subsequent generations who continued the legacy of this "enterprise" in the mid-1980s, giving rise to groups such as "Veneto Fronte Skinheads", "Forza Nuova", "Casa Pound", and the most recent addition, the neo-nazi "Fortezza Europa".

Formed in 1971, the "Brigate Gialloblù" of Hellas Verona quickly rose to infamy given their fearsome reputation. The analysis of this specific group, Milazzo (2020) sustains, is especially interesting in view of how the group utilizes historical elements to enhance their link with their origins and tradition, communicates their political and nonconformist beliefs, establish a unique shared memory and assert a distinct imaginative perspective. The author observes that the emergence of a clear neo-fascist turn can be identified from the mid-1970s onward, during which Verona's "Bentegodi" stadium consistently showcased explicit allusions to the city's nazi-fascist history, prominently featuring hooked crosses, swastikas, and Celtic symbols. The involvement of politically inclined groups like "Verona Front", "Gioventù Scaligera" and "Inferno Gialloblu" in the "Curva Sud" starkly impacted this trend, as these groups actively expressed their ideologies through racist howling aimed at players of color. Following the disbandment of the "Brigate" in 1991, politics within the Veronese "curva" has progressively taken on a central role, eventually becoming a genuine identity factor, where grammar and symbolism of the stadium performance was rooted in fascist and nazi ideologies. The subsequent rise of the "Loma Gang", Milazzo (2020) outlines, "and the more pronounced fascistization of the terrace around symbols of extreme right-wing ideologies can also be interpreted as a response to the crisis within the Veronese ultras movement", which had fragmented following the dissolution of its most important group. The latest instances of overt nazi sympathies being publicly shown encompass the Verona ultras' chant "We are an amazing team... forming a swastika shape... how great it is... coached by Rudolf Hess...", the display of a banner that read "Free Priebeke," in reference to the nazi war criminal linked to the "Fosse Ardeatine" massacre, and frequent commemorations of Hitler within the stands.

Moving to Northwest Italy, the cases of Turin and Genoa are of interest. In Piemonte's capital the distinctions between Juventus and FC Torino fan groups were primarily based on socio-economic differences, as the Juventus fans represented the owners and managers of "Fiat", while Torino represented the factory workers (Doidge, 2015).

According to Tassinari (2008), while the initial organized groups of Juventus, “Venceremos” and “Autonomia bianconera” were far-left leaning, a shift occurred around 1976-77, with the emergence of “Fossa dei Campioni”, “Panthers”, and the more dominant “Fighters”, leading to a reversal in political alignment. The 1980s saw the creation of several right-leaning groups, culminating in the dissolution of the “Fighters” in 1987 in the aftermath of clashes in Florence. Following the unification of the stand, the short-lived “Black&White” supporters emerged, followed by “Arancia Meccanica” and then the “Drughi”, who gained control over ten thousand fans but disbanded in 1997, before reappearing in 2005. In 1993, Tassinari (2008) concludes, the “Fighters” made a comeback, then changing their name to “Tradizione bianconera”, characterized by a logo featuring a tricolor flame alongside a wrench and a helmet, explicit symbols of their violent tendencies and specific political affiliation. On the other side, the Torino ultras have never concealed their left-wing sympathies, exhibiting banners containing political slogans and violently confronting fascist meetings (Podaliri & Balestri, 1998). Despite the existence of neo-nazi ideologies within the “Curva Maratona”, most notably within the groups “Granata Korps” and “Vikings”, the hegemony on the “curva” is held by the moderate and left-leaning “Ultras Torino” group (Albanese, 2022).

In Genoa, the “Gradinata Sud” of the “Ferraris” stadium, occupied by the Sampdoria ultras, among which the historic “Ultras Tito Cucchiaroni”, is declaredly apolitical. Some minor groups, most notably the “Rude Boys and Girls”, have actively combated racism and discrimination in Italy, especially through the organization of anti-racism tournaments, run under the banner of “Love Samp, Hate Racism”, therefore linking Sampdoria to anti-racist campaigns and simultaneously creating a culture of understanding around racism, especially among schoolchildren (Doidge, 2015). The ultras of Genoa CFC then, more prominently composed by the large working-class population of the Ligurian city, historically had left-wing sympathies. Symbols of Che Guevara and Cuban flags figured prominently in the Genoan stands of the “Ferraris”, before a decisive turn toward fascist ideologies and the emergence of groupings linked to the skinheads (Albanese, 2022). Therefore, even in traditionally leftist terraces fascist ideas gained significant ground, the most notable example being the “Brigata Spelonia”, the most infamous group of Genoa CFC, whose leader, Massimo Leopizzi,

was known to the authorities for his links to the neo-fascist organization “Forza Nuova” (Tassinari, 2008).

Moving toward Italy’s center, the ultras of Bologna emerged in a city with a deeply rooted leftist political identity. According to a common stereotype that is still widespread, Bologna “has always been portrayed as the pride of the Communist Party and in any case as the national-popular emblem of well-governed socialist-inspired administration, the refined hub of progressive pragmatism, the wealthy and left-leaning city, educated and reformist” and as such, “the homeland of pragmatic socialism”, even in times of fading political passions (Berselli, 2009). As highlighted by Meloni (2023), during the 1970s, Bologna emerged as a focal point within a nation experiencing significant upheaval, serving as a prime arena for ideological and social clashes, a status amplified by its prominent university presence, inherently drawing a youthful demographic. The city had a vibrant atmosphere of impassioned engagement, which commonly transcended into fervent protests. Notable were the events of March '77, in which the police confronted certain factions of the non-parliamentary left, who had opposed a gathering organized by "Comunione e Liberazione". The clashes led to the death of Francesco Lorusso, an activist of the extreme-left organization “Lotta Continua”. As a prevailing theme, Meloni (2023) holds, the city's activities largely revolve around street events, an influence which extended to the fan base of Bologna. Yet, the initial decision was to keep politics separate, emphasizing the culture of unity and opposition against law enforcement, often viewed as a forefront of the state which was simultaneously confronted in the streets and squares. Protest chants were adapted for the stadium stands, while the central aim was to keep any political symbolism outside the stadium boundaries, assuming that diverse ideological individuals within the fan group must coexist. The shift towards apoliticism was aimed at achieving balance in response to the rise of right-wing groups challenging the historically leftist "curva," as reaffirmed by a collective statement signed by the "Forever Ultras," "Freak Boys," "Vecchia Guardia," "Controtendenza," and "Beata Gioventù" in 2015, which stated: “The groups of the Curva Andrea Costa [...] want to emphasize that the only colors they recognize are the red and blue, united, of our beloved team, and they do not adhere to any political demonstration, neither left nor right. Keep politics out of the stands!” (La Repubblica, 2015). Given its deeply rooted leftist past, the ultras of Bologna were immune to the forces of fascist infiltration which had overwhelmed

“curve” all over the country, thus choosing apoliticism rather than a shift toward extremisms. Nevertheless, the reputation of Bologna as a "red" city remains strong, leading to frequent confrontations between the communist “comrades” of Bologna and the fascist militants of right-extremist ultras factions (Meloni, 2023).

Profoundly “red” are, however, the ultras of US Livorno 1915. The city of Livorno was the birthplace of the "Partito comunista d'Italia," later known as the "Partito Comunista Italiano" (PCI), established on January 21, 1921, following a division within the Italian Socialist Party (PSI). On that day, due to irreconcilable divisions within the PSI and the need to separate the radical "revolutionary" and "reformist" factions, along with the Third International's directive to accelerate the establishment of communist parties globally, a minority delegation of the XVII Congress of the PSI left Livorno's "Goldoni" theater where the congress was occurring and convened at the nearby "San Marco" theater to form the new party (Agosti, 2012). According to Capitano (2021), Livorno's transformation during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was the result of its industrialization and the growing influence of the working class, a period marked by political and social unrest within left-wing circles, as Livorno transitioned from being a free port, which had historically attracted foreign merchants and hosted consulates and shipping companies, to an industrialized city. During the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the author further holds, Livorno's socialist movement embraced increasingly radical positions while retaining a political approach that fell short of being truly revolutionary, an aspect which evidently changed during the intense class conflict of the "Biennio Rosso", ultimately culminating in the emergence of Livornese communism and the establishment of the PCI.

In the city which gave Italy the largest communist party of Western Europe, the ultras of US Livorno 1915 reflected the political identity of its town. The historic “Brigate Autonome Livornesi” (BAL) group, for many years the leader of the Livornese “Curva Nord”, most evidently displayed their communist ideology. As described by Doidge (2013), the “Curva Nord” has consistently displayed flags featuring communist symbols, such as the red star and the hammer and sickle, along with a prominent presence of Che Guevara’s image, which can be found on numerous flags, banners, T-shirts, and scarves, while also adopting a guerilla style of clothing, comprising green military-style jackets and army-style caps, made famous by communist revolutionaries.

The ritualistic performance at games enhanced this political expression, as Livornese ultras enthusiastically sang partisan songs that reinforce their Communist identity, with the Communist anthem "Bandiera Rossa" ("Red Flag") and "Bella Ciao" being frequently chanted during matches, a tradition maintained at every home game. Notably, Doidge (2013) adds, upon their return to Serie A in 2004 the "BAL" orchestrated a remarkable choreography where the entire "Curva Nord" raised red cards and displayed an expansive banner spanning the length of the "curva", featuring a vivid depiction of a sun, in the middle of which was the hammer and sickle symbol, with a further banner underneath reading: "A long night is disappearing... at the horizon, our sun is rising." The word "our" was rendered in red, effectively reinforcing and solidifying the distinct Livornese political identity. Besides imageries and symbolisms within the stadium performance, the communist identity of the Livorno ultras extended to their wider actions, according to the ideal that being left-wing entails the demonstration of solidarity to the less fortunate and like-minded groups. As highlighted by the author, this led to the conspicuous presence of numerous Palestinian flags in the stands, explicit expressions of solidarity with the IRA and the organization of different fundraising initiatives, including support for the earthquake victims of the in Haiti and L'Aquila. Livorno can thus be seen as the epitomal example of the ultras' tendency to express local political identities, deeply rooted in the political and socio-economic history of the city of origin.

Rome then represents a case in which the intense rivalry between the city's two teams, AS Roma and SS Lazio, is strongly present in everyday social life. In the early years of football fandom, this rivalry was also political. Predominantly originating from the urban working-class, AS Roma supporters were traditionally left leaning. The most left-wing group within the Roman "Curva Sud" were the "Fedayn", openly communist, whose leader, Roberto Rulli, was a well-known extreme left activist. From 1977 to the late 90s, the "curva" of AS Roma was united in the "Commando Ultra Curva Sud" (CUCS), where groups and individuals of highly diverse political allegiances coexisted for the good of the team. However, during the 1990s, the Curva Sud experienced a significant shift in its orientation, with the CUCS relegated to a minority role, in favor of rising neo-fascist groups, among which the "Padroni di Casa", "Boys", "Giovinezza", "Opposta Fazione" and the "Ultras Roma Primavalle", which stood in opposition to the "Fedayn," who remained as the final defenders of anti-fascism within the "Olimpico"

(Albanese, 2022). The rise of the “Boys Roma” are a prominent illustration of this neo-fascist turn. Originating in 1972, the “Boys Roma” emerged as a fusion of devotion to AS Roma and neo-fascist ideology, eventually becoming a prominent presence within the “Curva Sud”, and despite enduring challenges from authorities, they persisted with their neo-fascist agenda to this day (Testa & Armstrong, 2008). On the other side of the “Tevere”, as a Roman saying goes, Lazio reflected conservatism of the region of the same name (Doidge, 2013). The first Lazio ultras faction emerged in 1971, adopting militaristic names like “Commandos Monteverde”, later changing to “Marines” and “Folgore”, and incorporating viking themes in the late 1970s through symbols like the double-blade axe and viking ship, leading to disagreements and clashes among the group due to differing opinions on the political connotations of these symbols (Testa & Armstrong, 2008). This led to the emergence of the “Irriducibili” in 1987 which assumed a hegemonic role in the “Curva Nord”. Although it can be argued that the Roma ultras are somewhat heterogeneous in their political affiliations, the ultras of SS Lazio and its leading group, the “Irriducibili”, are notoriously fascist and open about their extreme right-wing ideology. Along with the ultras of Hellas Verona, the “Curva Nord” of Lazio is considered the most extreme right-wing grouping of supporters. Over the years, the Lazio ultras have caused public outrage for repeated racist, anti-Semitic and overtly fascist banners, chants and manifestations. The idol of the “Curva Nord”, Lazio’s longtime captain Paolo di Canio, is declaredly fascist and has not hesitated to publicly show his devotion, with Roman salutes in the stadium and statements such as "I am a fascist, not a racist" (Montrella, 2017).

Moving further South, the degree of overt political extremist expressions by ultras fades compared to their Northern counterparts. The Napoli ultras, for instance, are more renowned for their association with the mafia organization "Camorra" than for their political affiliations, which became evident due to the notable presence of individuals like "Genny 'a Carogna," who received a 10-year prison sentence for international drug trafficking, and the mafia “capo” Lo Russo, often spotted in the stadium stands (Giambartolomei, 2017). In the deep Italian South, the anti-fascist ultras of Cosenza, who reflect the profoundly anti-fascist tradition of their city, are in the political minority (Jones, 2019). In fact, the presence of individuals linked to the “Skin 88” were found in numerous ultras groups in Puglia, such as the “Arditi” of Bari, the former “Regime Rossonero” of Foggia, the “Azione Diretta” of Taranto and the “Kaotici” of Lecce,

while neo-nazi infiltrations were found in the “curve” of Monopoli, Barletta, Trani, as well as in the regions of Basilicata and Calabria in Matera, Potenza, Lamezia Terme and Catanzaro and in the Sicilian Palermo, Messina, Siracusa, Gela and Arcireale (Montrella, 2017).

Considering the exploration of the political allegiances of some of the most influential and renowned ultras groups on the Italian territory, a clear picture emerges. Despite the presence of a few bulwarks of anti-fascism and left-wing groups in geographical areas of distinctly left-wing prevalence, the map of politization is overwhelmingly “black”. Even certain ultras groups which emerged with left-wing sympathies due to the socio-economic origin of their supporter bases have not been able to withstand the potent forces of fascist infiltrations, especially throughout the late 1980s and the 1990s. This highlights an interesting aspect, namely that the socio-economic origin of fan bases is a weak and unstable indicator of the political orientation of ultras groups, as political allegiances formed on the basis of socio-economic factors are not able to withstand fascist infiltration. Generally, therefore, a central affirmation is confirmed through the above analysis: in the overwhelming majority of the cases, the ultras mirror the deeply rooted political identity of the localities from which they emerged, actively performing this identity through overt expressions of political ideals and ideologies. The political ideologies of these groups form the substance of cohesion of the collective and are pronounced to such a degree as to influence the entirety of their actions and demeanors, both inside and outside the stadium, as well as the relationship to other groups. Political allegiances are also the primary, albeit not only, factor influencing the composition of the complex web of alliances and hostilities.

#### 4.2 “Twinning” and Rivalries

From its inception, the ultras movement has been characterized by the presence of alliances, which aligns with the overarching trait of adopting militarized elements. Equally, intense rivalries are a central element not only of the ultras world, but of Italian society as a whole. To understand the deeply rooted rivalries between fan groups one must therefore look back to the definitive unification of Italy in 1871, concluded with the capture of Rome. As pointed out by Montague (2020), the unification, known as

"Risorgimento", brought together a diverse collection of city-states and regions that had been engaged in conflicts or under the rule of different empires for many centuries, combining them despite the absence of a unified identity or commonly understood language. The vast diversity within the Italian peninsula was widely apparent, prompting Massimo d'Azeglio, a key figure in the Italian unification movement along with Giuseppe Mazzini and Giuseppe Garibaldi, to remark: "We have created Italy; now we must make Italians". This quote accurately describes how Italians felt a stronger devotion to their individual towns, cities and regions, a concept which would come to be known as "campanilismo". Given the strong territorial feelings that fans usually associate with their teams, the football clubs evolved into a continuation of their local pride, mirroring the historical rivalries between cities, towns, or regions, which may stem from a variety of different elements. For instance, Doidge (2015) notes how during the religious wars of the Middle Ages, cities siding with the Pope ("Guelphs"), were enemies of those supporting the Holy Roman Emperor ("Ghibellines"), an aspect which exacerbated the historically tense relationship between the cities of Pisa and Genoa, the former fearing the rise of the papacy and therefore supporting the Emperor, while the latter supported the Pope due to their rival cities' proximity to the Emperor. Because Pisa and Siena were engaged in political and commercial competition with Florence, Doidge (2015) further holds, Siena became Guelph.

These comparable patterns resurfaced in later centuries through political and urban rivalries. In the context of football fandom, rivalries were so deeply rooted that oftentimes the ultras themselves were unsure as to the reasons for the mutual hatred. In this regard, Roversi (1992) finds that the violence perpetrated among groups occurs almost like an "inescapable destiny, under a rule which is vaguely seen as greater as the individual, which must be obeyed". According to the author, however, the concrete reasons for the continuing animosities among historically rivalrous groups can be attributed to "a continuation of the consolidated tradition of fighting between older supporters", such as for instance the fans of Bologna against those of Fiorentina, Arezzo and Pisa, where fanatic fans naturally took as adversaries those who had fought against their fathers. In the early years of fanatic fandom, "these "natural enemies" were then joined by groups of fans with different political ideologies, since [...] contrasting political views overlapped with and fueled the behavior of young hooligans". Thirdly, the author concludes, a central reason lying behind friendships and animosities in the



ultras world is what has been called the “Bedouin syndrome”, a principle by which “a friend of my friend is a friend, a friend of an enemy is an enemy, an enemy of a friend is an enemy, and an enemy of an enemy is a friend”. This concept lies at the very basis of clashes between groups of supporters.

The emergence of profound rivalries naturally also led to alliances among groups, referred to in Italian as “gemellaggi”, which translates to “twinning”. This inherent element of the Italian ultras culture emerged throughout the rapid expansion of the ultras movement, where the proliferation of groups produced an intricate web of interconnections (Masiello, 2010). Italy's unparalleled "twinning" system therefore dictates the targets of violence, while during matches involving the "twinned" clubs, ultras typically fraternize with their allies (Foot, 2007). Practically, alliances are primarily based on the shared enthusiasm for clearly oriented political ideologies and arise through personal connections and direct contact made by the “direttivo” of a group, which subsequently conveys the creation of the “twinning” to the peripheral members of the group (Testa & Armstrong, 2013). These alliances typically originate from the principle of “rispetto” (respect), implying that only groups with a similar perspective or “logic” can attain such a status (Armstrong & Testa, 2011). Besides the traditional civic rivalries, political allegiances are therefore a decisive factor in the choice of friends and enemies. As ultras groups became increasingly prevalent, particularly across Europe, and with the formation of groups having distinct political affinities similar to those in Italy, the alliances started to transcend national boundaries. Over time, Cipriani, Mensurati, & Tonacci (2014) outline, this led to an outright “Ultras International”, where transnational alliances were formed among “black” groups and among “red” groups, all united against law enforcement, following old unwritten agreements. The crossroads of this “guerrilla traffic” is precisely in Italy, where “from all over the continent, on occasion, as if responding to a specific call, hundreds of clash professionals converge armed with bats and brass knuckles, laden with the well-known rhetoric of the stands, this time tinged with a touch of internationalism”. Consequently, the authors note that the fervent fan culture in Italy underwent a gradual reorganization, communicating with allies in English, journeying across the continent, and increasingly employing social media to showcase affiliations and conflicts, resulting in 88 Italian groups forming partnerships with ultras from various European regions as of 2014.

On the “red” side, several national and international alliances can be outlined. In the first period of the ultras’ evolution, the “Forever Ultras” of Bologna formed an alliance with “Fossa dei Leoni” of AC Milan, given their common left-wing ideology (Doidge, 2015). Further “twinning” were created with “Red and Black Brigades” of AC Milan, the Pescara “Rangers”, the Udinese “Teddy Boys”, the Padova “Ghetto” and the Sambenedettese “Onda d’Urto” (Roversi, 1991), while on the international plane, the “Forever Ultras” of Bologna are allied with the German left leaning “Ultras Bochum” (Cipriani, Mensurati, & Tonacci, 2014). Such alliances are, however, frequently put to the test and occasionally broken. A relevant example denoting the fragility of these pacts is the “twinning” between two right-wing groups of Bologna and AS Roma, “The Mods” and the “Boys” respectively, which broke after the two groups violently attacked eight immigrants, after which the Bologna fans identified the Roman ultras who had participated in the racist incident (Podaliri & Balestri, 1998). To this day, the ultras of Roma have not forgotten this act of “infamy”. The historic enemies of the Bologna factions include the Cesena “WSB”, the Fiorentina “Collettivo Viola”, the Ascoli “Settembre bianco-nero,” the Inter “Boys” and the Juventus “Fighters” (Roversi, 1991). Additional adversaries arose over time, like the rivalry with Verona, driven by evident political differences, resulting in frequent clashes, and the animosity with Lazio, stemming from both political reasons and Bologna's link to AS Roma (Meloni, 2023), in accordance with the principles of the “Bedouine Syndrome”. The mutual hatred between the Bologna and Fiorentina fans then evidence how historic civic factors influence the creation of rivalries. These animosities were born from local pride and the closeness between the cities, both being regional capitals, and were further fueled by repeated confrontations, such as the incident in 1989, where four Fiorentina fans threw a Molotov cocktail at a train carrying Bologna supporters passing through the “Rifredi” station in Florence, which led to significant injuries (Meloni, 2023).

Shifting focus to the radical left-leaning Livorno ultras, Doidge (2013) highlights their alliance with factions of Virtus Verona in Italy, as well as with the ultras of AEK Athens and Olympique Marseille, both sharing a left-wing ideology. This denotes “a pan-European anti-fascist network of fans who seek to present a unified resistance to the right”, resulting in supporters from clubs characterized by left-wing affiliations uniting within a European antifa alliance, leading followers of Livorno, AEK Athens, and Marseille, Istanbul's Besiktas, Glasgow Celtic, and Hamburg's St. Pauli, frequently

attending each other's games, especially when facing traditionally right-wing ultras. The “Curva Nord” of Livorno therefore attracts fans from all over Europe who share their political ideology, creating a cosmopolitan atmosphere within the stands of the Tuscan coastal city. Furthermore, Doidge (2013) notes how globalized technology was instrumental in the creation and maintenance of these transnational alliances, as social networks enabled the ultras to articulate their identity, exchange ideas, present themselves, as well as coordinate anti-fascist activities within the antifa network of the European ultras. However, in a political environment dominated by neo-fascism, Livorno evidently has many enemies. Naturally, the most extreme right-wing groups, such as those of Verona, Lazio and Inter are fierce rivals, while numerous further right-wing oriented groups are openly hostile toward the Livorno fans. The profound rivalry and open conflict with fans of Pisa, who are traditionally left-wing, is a further example of how politics will occasionally be put aside, favoring longstanding emotionally charged enmities between influential cities in Tuscany (Il Post, 2023), with friends of Pisa then becoming natural enemies of Livorno (Doidge, 2015), further extending the long list of enemies of the Livornese groups. An additional illustrative case is that of Atalanta and Ternana, where both fan groups lean left politically and maintain an exceptionally tight connection, often featuring representatives from the respective groups in the stands and sharing an animosity toward Brescia, who are bitter rivals of Atalanta (Passerini, 2020).

On the “black” side, Lazio, Inter and Verona form the most visible fascist alliances both on the national and international level. The "Irriducibili" of Lazio, for one, form a natural alliance with Inter's "Boys", born in the 80s to contrast the alliance between Milan and Roma factions, which subsequently dissolved (Passerini, 2020). The “Curva Nord” of Lazio additionally maintains alliances with Triestina, as well as with the notably Francoist "Ultras Sur" of Real Madrid, alongside supporter groups from West Ham, Chelsea, Werder Bremen, Leipzig, Wisla Cracovia and Espanyol, all of which share a prominently right-extremist ideology (Cipriani, Mensurati, & Tonacci, 2014). The supporters of both Inter and Lazio share friendly relations with Valencia and Nice, whereas the Lazio ultras hold a hostile stance towards the left-leaning Sevilla and Marseille fans, evidenced by the violent confrontations during the 2018 Marseille-Lazio match, wherein Lazio ultras were joined by Nice supporters in their aggressive altercation with Marseille fans (Il Post, 2023). The notorious “curva” of Hellas Verona

is allied in Italy with Fiorentina and Sampdoria, the former initially left-wing and then apolitical and the latter mostly apolitical from the start. Unusual alliances as such, in which an ideological extremist group is linked to an apolitical one, may arise for a variety of circumstances. For instance, the Fiorentina-Verona "twinning" is believed to have originated from the possibly mythologized account in which a Fiorentina ultra named Stefano Biagini, known as "Il Pompa," courageously entered the Veronese "Brigate Gialloblù" sector on a scooter, leading the Veronese supporters to admire his audacity and extend an act of reconciliation to their previous rivals (Passerini, 2020). On the European level, Verona factions are also allied with Real Madrid, certified by a nazi-sympathetic banner displayed by the "Ultras Sur" during Verona - Livorno on March 15, 2013, as well as with groups of Apoel Nicosia, Hamburg, Paris Saint-Germain, Chelsea, West-Ham and Millwall, some of the most extremist groups on the continental landscape (Cipriani, Mensurati, & Tonacci, 2014). Interestingly, despite an initial friendship between Inter and Verona fanatics, especially during the 80s given the prominent presence of "Skins" within both stands, the alliance was broken in 2001 following the disappearance of the "Skins" in the groups of Inter and the rise of the "Banda Loma" in the Veronese terrace, whom the Inter fans viewed as arrogant and presumptuous, leading to open conflict and violent clashes among the two factions (Politanò, 2012). Still along right-wing lines, the ultras of AS Roma maintain friendships with Palermo, Sambenedettese and Udinese in Italy and Panathinaikos and Atletico Madrid in Europe. The extremist "Drughi" of Juventus are twinned with Legia Warsaw and Ado Den Haag, the latter having been found as declaredly anti-Semitic (Messinetti, 2018), while the Milan ultras are most notably allied with Brescia and Partizan Belgrade (Cipriani, Mensurati, & Tonacci, 2014).

Lastly, a few more neutral yet highly significant alliances can be highlighted, in light of recent events. For one, the Napoli ultras are known to be "twinned" with the deeply nationalist ultras group "Delije" of Red Star Belgrade, which have long had the infamous war-criminal known as "Tiger Arkan" as its leader. Due to the deep and mutual enmity felt by Neapolitans towards AS Roma, who were former allies until the late 1980s, and with tensions heightened by the incident on the A1 highway on January 8, 2023, a subset of "Delije" members, including individuals from the mercenary "Wagner" group (Stefanini, 2023), stole the historical banner of one of Roma's prominent factions, the "Fedayn". The incident occurred on Rome's "Piazza Mancini,"

just a short distance from the Stadio Olimpico, after the Roma-Empoli match on February 4, 2023. The following week, while a Serbian flag appeared in the “Curva B” of Napoli, the “Delije” displayed and burned the stolen banners of the “Fedayn” in the “Marakana” stadium of Belgrade (meaning that, according to the ultras’ logic, the “Fedayn” had to dissolve), along with a further banner which stated: "You've chosen the wrong company", in reference to the twinning between “Fedayn” and the “Bad Blue Boys” of Dinamo Zagreb (Tuttosport, 2023). Similarly, when Eintracht Frankfurt hooligans were denied access to the “Maradona” stadium for the Champions League game against Napoli on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2023, their allies of Atalanta assisted them in reaching Naples, where they devastated the city in scenes of urban guerrilla which outraged the public (Slot, 2023).

Concluding, it can therefore be affirmed that “twinning” are an integral part of the ultras world. Although the web of rivalrous or amicable interconnections is dynamic and fluid, as traditional rivalries and alliances have broken up and been reconfigured over time, depending on the changing circumstances or significant incidents (Doidge, Kossakowski, & Mintert, 2020), numerous alliances between ultras, both on a national and international level, have prevailed over many years. Within such webs of alliances, “civic traditions become bound in with historical and political narratives and rivalries” (Doidge, 2015), leading to a peculiar mixture of political and civic elements which determine the formation of friendships and enmities. These "twinning" therefore not only stem from the unique political identity of the cities, mirrored by the political affiliations of their prominent ultras factions, but also reflect the deeply ingrained cultural and emotional civic customs of the regions from which the ultras originated. The combination of elements which are intrinsic to Italian society, namely the pervasive ideologization and politization of all areas of society, as well as potent civic and local sentiments, is also, as we will see, a dangerous recipe for the uncontained expression of extremist political ideologies, in the form of overt racism.

#### 4.3 Racism: Anti-Southern Sentiment, Xenophobia and anti-Semitism

In the press conference preceding her appearance at the Sanremo music festival, Italy’s biggest yearly television event, the star of the Italian volleyball national team, Paola

Egonu, stated: “Italy is a racist country”. Egonu, born in Cittadella to two Nigerian parents and gaining the Italian citizenship in 2014, decided to leave the national team after receiving increasing abuse during games. Her statement sparked public indignation, though it was hardly surprising. When faced with the same question about whether Italy is a racist nation, Bartoli (2012) answers with a firm “yes”, contending that although a substantial majority of the populace opposes racism, supports the marginalized and the Italian constitution upholds principles of equality, the country's racism is not primarily rooted in sporadic actions by a minority of individuals, but rather stems from widespread and deeply ingrained factors. Besides the obvious dark period of Fascism which displayed overt racism and anti-Semitism, these factors can primarily be attributed to migratory flows, both interregional and international.

Internal migrations from the Southern regions, known as the "Mezzogiorno", to the Northern regions have been ongoing since the country's unification and proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861, continuing steadily over the ensuing decades, notably picking up pace in the immediate aftermath of World War II. From its early stages in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, internal migrations quickly produced anti-Southern stereotyping, as Northerners considered Southern Italy as poor and ignorant (Hamm, 2012), which “foreshadowed the skin-colour and anti-Semitic biological racism of the Fascist regime of the 1930s” (Levy, 2015), thus giving rise to an increasingly widespread anti-Southern sentiment which came to be known as “anti-meridionalismo”. In tracing the anti-Southern prejudice it was found that discourses of race played a significant part in the marginalization and “inferiorization” of the inhabitants of the South, whereby Southerners were considered as a biological category which exhibited behavioral, biological and physical characteristics vastly different to the North, thereby creating a hierarchical divide and a tangible as well as symbolic distinction between the North and South of the Peninsula (Teti, 1993). Subsequently, the “Economic Miracle” in the immediate aftermath of the end of the Second World War initiated the second phase of significant interregional migration on the Italian peninsula. The causes for the massive migratory flows in the 1950s are primarily attributable to the crisis of the agricultural sector in the “Mezzogiorno” and the industrial development of the North-Eastern regions, leading migrants to be “drawn to the industrial development in the Northern regions, regardless of the actual presence of reception and employment opportunities in the destination areas” (Panichella, 2012).

Heightened international migratory flows fueled by the rise of globalization then added new flammable elements. From the 1970s, Italy transformed from a nation traditionally exporting immigrants worldwide to an immigrant-receiving nation, thus becoming increasingly multicultural (Levy, 2015). In this period, as outlined by Bocca in his 1988 work “Gli italiani sono razzisti?” (“Are Italians racist?”), amid the ongoing tensions of a nation grappling with immigration after decades of constant emigration, racism resurfaced in its xenophobic form, displaying a distinct aversion to foreigners and adopting a somewhat paranoid stance, based on the fear of infiltration and contamination of one's own communities by individuals spread potentially everywhere but hard to pinpoint due to their irregular, clandestine, and hidden status (Bercella, 2018). In fact, Levy (2015) notes, the rising proportion of the population of foreign origin challenged traditional notions, as the “default position of many Italians was to self-identify Italy as white and catholic”. The unprecedented rise of the regionalist “Lega Nord”, which advocated for a secession of the Northern regions, in the midst of heightened migratory waves in the 1980s and 1990s was instrumental in the exacerbation of the already hostile atmosphere, through the promotion of anti-Southern rhetoric which “slide easily into xenophobic reactions to asylum seekers, refugees, Roma, and immigrants from the Global South and East”. In this period, Levy (2015) holds, racial discourse became prevalent due to the widespread media presence of the “Lega Nord”, whereas at the turn of the century, its leader Umberto Bossi, “was the kingmaker and regicide of Italian national politics and his anti-Southern and xenophobic pronouncements became commonplace, acceptable parts of the discourse of politics and social life in Italy”. The Southern “Other” thus served as a framework for projecting the fears of Northern Italians onto various other marginalized groups, where concerns about crime were mixed with apprehensions about newcomers from Albania, Romania, North Africa, or China, while media imagery propagated the idea of Italians being overwhelmed by immigrants, resulting in a significant spread of “unconscious reflex racism” and notable electoral success for the “Lega Nord”. Under the leadership of Matteo Salvini, the “Lega” elevated xenophobia and Islamophobia as its main mobilization factors (Bercella, 2018) amid the migration crisis of recent years, reaching an astonishing 34,3% in the European elections of 2019. Similarly, the extreme right-wing “Fratelli d’Italia” of Giorgia Meloni, has “chosen to represent a racist Italy that shields itself behind exasperation and claims a supremacist Italian

identity” (Raimo, 2022), by constructing a consensus machine based on populist rhetoric and campaigns primarily aimed at immigrants, tainted by racist and xenophobic elements, which propelled the party to the victory at the national elections of 2022 with little over 26% of the votes.

In recent years, the problem of racism in Italian football has become as apparent as ever. In light of the above historical contextualization of racism in Italy, the instances of racism by ultras factions can be categorized into anti-Southern, xenophobic and anti-Semitic acts. Local racism, for one, was prominent in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the Northern Italian “curve”, where “the growth of an anti-Southern feeling in stadia preceded and accompanied the birth and development of an openly xenophobic and separatist movement such as the “Lega Nord”, also acting as booster in the strengthening of identity based on ethnic differences: “Bergamo is a Nation, all the rest is South” was a common chant of the Atalanta ultras and “Bossi save us, Brescia to the people from Brescia” was a banner exhibited in 1991, before the local elections to be held in Brescia” (Podaliri & Balestri, 1998). The political fragmentation within ultras groups in the 1990s, which led to the growth of extreme right ideologies in the “curve”, coincided with an increasing entrenchment of localism, as “the liminal space of the curva became an apposite location to perform the new forms of politics emerging in Italy” (Doidge, 2015), transforming the terraces, as mentioned above, into small “mother countries”, a concept close to extreme-right values, which facilitates behavioral patterns of racist and xenophobic character within the stadia (Podaliri & Balestri, 1998).

Countless manifestations of interregional racism could be observed over the years. As recounted by Foot (2007), the infamously racist Verona ultras displayed a banner during a Napoli-Verona match, which said “Vesuvio facci sognare” (“Help us dream, Vesuvius”), invoking the volcano, which towers over Napoli, to erupt. To this, the Neapolitans would later respond with “Juliet is a slag!”, referencing Romeo and Juliet which is set in Verona. Further similar acts followed in 1991, as a banner of Milan fans held “Give us a present: another Pompeii”, while Verona fans displaying their “Forza Etna” banner invoked the Sicilian Etna volcano during their away game against Catania. The ideologies of the “Lega Nord”, Foot (2007) notes, exacerbated such regionalist sentiments, leading to Milan fans producing a banner which read “Garibaldi infamone”,



thus labeling the man who had united Italy a disgrace. In the same vein, in 1995, Verona ultras, who commonly referenced to Southerners as “Those with Cholera” or “Earthquakers”, displayed a banner saying “Welcome to Italy”, when Napoli fans visited. Similar sentiments are commonly expressed by Roma fans, who frequently sing “Milan in flames”, to which Milan’s fans ironically replied “Milan in Flames? Where will you work?”. The list of such interregional racist “attacks”, which have come to be known as acts of “territorial discrimination”, often termed “goliardic” and coated in irony, is endless.

In the “Seria A”, the city of Napoli and the fans of its team are the primary targets of “territorial discrimination”. Napoli is a unique city in Italy, with an even more unique local culture, as Neapolitans speak a dialect almost impossible to understand for outsiders, which has been recognized as a language of its own (Hamm, 2012). Chants and banners, hoping for the eruption of the Vesuvius volcano, such as the most widespread “Lavali col fuoco” (“Wash them with fire”), are sung practically at every Napoli away game. The leader of the “Lega Nord” Matteo Salvini, who in recent years has rediscovered himself as a nationalist despite leading a historically separatist party, was filmed singing a popular anti-Napoli chant in 2009. Consequent to the incessant attacks, Neapolitans have started to ironically sing the anti-Napoli chants themselves, a notable example being the chant “Vesuvio erutta, tutta Napoli è distrutta” (“Vesuvius erupt, all of Naples is destroyed”). Given their uniqueness and the widespread hate against them, many Neapolitans do not see themselves as Italians. When Napoli won their third national championship in 2023, the fans displayed a choreography in which the tricolor symbol of the “scudetto” was flipped on its head, with a banner reading “Campioni in Italia” (“Champions in Italy”), as opposed to the common phrase “Campioni d’Italia” (“Italian champions”), while another read “Bottino di Guerra” (“Spoils of War”), depicting their victory as a military conquest in a foreign territory.

Interregional hatred goes hand in hand with xenophobia within the stadia. The instances in which players of color have been racially abused within the stadia and outside are countless. Although racist abuse is targeted at many ethnic groups, predominantly African footballers have become subjected to abuse from rival supporters (Doidge, 2013). At almost every game, single individuals in the stands can be heard directing racist howls, known as “ululati” in Italy, toward black players, sounds which are

drowned in the noise of the stadium and often do not reach the pitch. On different occasions, though, entire "curva" collectively produce racist howls, ensuring their unmistakable audibility. The latest incident occurred on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2023, when Romelu Lukaku was subjected to such abuse during the semifinal of the Coppa Italia between Juventus and Inter when the Belgian was stepping up to shoot a penalty. As a reaction to the racist abuse, after having scored the penalty, Lukaku demonstratively celebrated under the "curva" of Juventus, a gesture which earned him a second yellow card. As a result of the public outcry that ensued from this incident, 171 individuals located in the Juventus "curva" had the "Daspo" issued to them, having been identified through stadium cameras and videos shared on social media (Famà, 2023). A similar incident occurred on the 26<sup>th</sup> of December 2018 during Inter-Napoli, when Kalidou Koulibaly of Napoli was racially abused by a large part of the Milanese stadium, to which the Senegalese defender responded by sarcastically applauding. Rather than stopping the match, as the anti-racism protocol suggests, the referee sent Koulibaly off. Likewise, in 1996, Paul Ince, an Inter player who remained popular with fans despite the Inter ultras' evident racist stance and who was subjected to racist abuse across stadia in Italy, received a yellow card for reacting to racist taunts from the crowd, while in 2000, Bari's coach Fascetti described the saliva of Torino player Diawara's as infected and a year later, the Verona president declared the decision not to sign center-forward Mboma due to the fans' racist behavior (Tassinari, 2008). The Verona fans, unsurprisingly, produced one of the most infamous racist demonstrations against one of their own players, the black Dutch player Maickel Ferrier, in 1996. The yellow-blue fans, among which exponents of the MSI, disguised as members of the Ku Klux Klan, expressed their dissent by displaying a hanged mannequin alongside some emblematic banners: "They gave you the black guy, make him clean the stadium" (Strada, 2016).

Racist abuse is not restricted solely to players of color, as players of Slavic origin, such as for instance Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Dejan Stankovic and the late Sinisa Mihajlovic have been consistently branded as "zingari" (gypsies), throughout their long careers in Italian football. In a recent post-match interview with the Serbian forward Dusan Vlahovic from Juventus, distinct chants of "Sei uno zingaro" ("You are a gypsie") were audible from the Atalanta "curva," leading to a one-match ban for the entire terrace. Commonly, football and state authorities respond to such incidents with individual stadium bans, hefty fines and the closure of whole sections of the stadium for several matches. Given

the growing occurrence of racist abuse linked to extreme political ideologies in stadia since the 1990s, football events have increasingly drawn the attention of the DIGOS, an Italian law enforcement agency investigating political matters, which operates a special "Supporters Teams" division, which aims at surveiling organized groups and preempting any potential disturbances at or near Italian football stadia (Testa & Armstrong, 2011). However, these measures and investigations have not produced any significant results, as racism within Italian stadia is still a prevailing problem.

For many years, Mario Balotelli was the symbol of Italian racism in football. Born in Palermo from Ghanaian parents and fostered by an Italian family in Brescia in the Italian North, Balotelli gained the Italian citizenship on his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday by virtue of the Italian citizenship law "ius soli" and decided to represent the Italian national team. Hailed as one of Italy's most promising talents, Balotelli endured racism in Italy for the entirety of his career. For Doidge (2013), Balotelli, who speaks in a distinct accent from Brescia and represents a new generation of non-white Italians, challenged some fans' acceptance of Italy's increasingly multi-ethnic population. As a result, the author reports a number of racist chants directed at Balotelli during his time at Inter, specifically during the "Derby of Italy", in which sections of the Juventus crowd sang "If you jump up and down, Balotelli dies", while other chants included the words "black shit", "monkey" and "there are no black Italians". Such abuse became custom, as fans of other clubs, as well as of the national team, began booing Balotelli on every occasion. In an international match against Romania, Balotelli was booed by both sets of fans, while the Italian fans produced a banner which read "no to a multi-ethnic national team". Balotelli's controversial character certainly contributed to the hostility against him, as he frequently attracted media attention for his actions off the field, such as setting his house on fire, fighting with teammates and his perceived lazy attitude. Doidge (2013) additionally argues that due to the utilization of racial and national distinctions by fans to set themselves apart from opponents in the ritualistic context of stadium performances, along with the influence of the idea of a racially uniform nation on fan groups' self-perception, the chants, banners, and messages asserting "there are no black Italians" strike a direct link between skin color and nationality. As such, "as a black Italian, he challenges assumptions about the ethnically homogenous Italian nation" and therefore "constitutes a threat to rival supporters who have constructed him a symbol of otherness and un-Italian". During his final Serie A season in 2019-2020

while playing for Brescia, Balotelli faced severe racist taunts when handling the ball near Verona's "curva". In response, he paused the game, kicked the ball towards the howling fans and threatened to abandon the match. It was on this note, that the top flight of Italian football bid farewell to perhaps the biggest unexploited talent of a generation.

Lastly, episodes of anti-Semitism have significantly tainted the Italian "curve" over the years. In July 1989, Udinese were close to signing Israeli midfielder Ronny Rosenthal from Standard Liege. However, during that summer, the city's walls were defaced with antisemitic messages by different ultras groups, including slogans like "Rosenthal Go Home" and "Jews out of Friuli", leading to the club not finalizing the transfer, due to concerns about conflicting with their own ultras (Jones, 2019). More recently, the ultras of Lazio have overtly demonstrated their anti-Semitism, through infamous banners such as "Auschwitz your homeland, the ovens your homes", "Team of blacks, curve of Jews" or "Curva Sud full, Synagogues empty", directed toward arch-rivals AS Roma, whom they associate with the city's small Jewish population, although there is no real link justification for such a link apart from the fact that Roma had been run by Jewish presidents in the past (Foot, 2007). On the 30<sup>th</sup> of January 2006 during Roma-Livorno, the "Curva Sud" of Roma, which by this point was also clearly right-wing oriented, exhibited swastikas and an anti-Semitic banner which read "Lazio-Livorno. Same initial, same oven," while just below, another obscene sign contained the words "Gott mit Uns" ("God is with us"), the infamous inscription that Hitler's soldiers wore on their belts (Caccia, 2006). In 2017, Lazio fans attached stickers depicting Anna Frank with a Roma jersey in the "Curva Sud" normally occupied by the Roma ultras. The gesture outraged the public and gained enormous media attention. For the subsequent games of the Serie A, the Italian football federation mandated that a page out of Anna Frank's diary be read before kick-off. Lazio's president Claudio Lotito, along with two of Lazio's players of color, visited the Roman synagogue in solidarity and condemnation of the acts of the Lazio ultras. Nothing changed, however, as one of the Lazio ultras' most popular chants during derby's says: "In sinagoga vai a pregare, ti farò sempre scappare" ("You go to pray in the synagogue, I'll always make you run away"). In 2022, some Juventus supporters directed the chant "They're not Italians, they're a mass of Jews" against Fiorentina, while during the Milan derby, some Inter fans sang "The champions of Italy are Jews" (Demetrio, 2023).

In light of these considerations and accounts, it is clearly observable how the ultras, once again, accurately reflect socio-cultural factors deeply embedded within Italian society. In its interregional hatred the Northern ultras' racist actions mirror the anti-Southern stereotyped rhetoric which emerged when heightened migratory flows combined individuals originating from the impoverished South and the populations of the industrialized North, which also highlighted the vast disparities on the Italian territory, both in terms of cultural differences and socio-economic status. Xenophobia, which engulfed a large part of the "curve", which displayed overt racism especially toward players of color, reflects the difficulty of Italian society and the state itself, to come to terms with the heightened immigration flows and the emergence of a multicultural society within a country still functioning along traditional notions. The explosive combination of internal racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism, was further fueled by the emergence of xenophobic political parties which instrumentalized the latent and slowly emerging fear of the "other", thus further exacerbating the hostile atmosphere, charged by racial notions, which in turn led to the production of overt racism in the stadium stands, which is weakly and inefficiently contrasted by state and football authorities. As such, once more, historical narratives, namely discourses on race relating to Southerners or foreigners, are perpetuated through an active enactment of contemporary political sentiment, which is the protection of national identity from the threatening "other".

## 5. Remembering a Dark Past

The Italian Fascist regime fell in 1943. Eight decades later, a post-fascist party with distinct neo-fascist roots is elected as the primary political force in Italy. In between are decades of political struggles, marked by the inability to adequately come to terms with the fascist "Ventennio". This aspect will be explored in the following. Initially, the examination will focus on the downfall of the Fascist regime, the Civil War, and the subsequent formation of historical narratives that emerged alongside the establishment of the "First Republic." This will be studied in relation to the formation of memory narratives concerning the era of Fascism. Based on this, the unobstructed rise of neo-fascist organizations and parties will be analyzed, while the subsequent section will address the role and significance of the physical remnants of the Fascist regime in the

contemporary political context. This then provides a framework within which the underlying fascist beliefs of ultras groups, the overt display of neo-fascist ideologies in the stadia and the seamless manner in which neo-fascist elements manage to penetrate these groups can be better comprehended.

### 5.1 The Fall of Fascism and Civil War

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of July 1943, the Grand Council of Fascism convened in the Roman Palazzo Venezia. After a 10-hour-long session, a majority decision was reached at 2:30 AM on July 25<sup>th</sup>, resulting in a vote of no confidence against Mussolini, who was subsequently arrested at 5:30 PM on the same day after an audience with the king (Gentile, 2018). On the morning of the arrest, monarch Vittorio Emanuele III conferred onto general Pietro Badoglio the task to form a new government. With Mussolini's arrest, the Fascist regime fell. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of September 1943, Badoglio proclaimed the entry into force of an armistice with the Allies. For Arthurs (2015), the 45-day period between the 25<sup>th</sup> of July and 8<sup>th</sup> September of 1943, which "brought to an end the political order forged by the nineteenth-century Risorgimento, and ushered in a new conflict (now waged between the Resistance and Nazi-Fascism) that would ultimately give birth to the postwar Republic", proved to be crucial, as Italians were for the first time given the chance to confront the legacies of the "Ventennio Nero". Although Mussolini's fall, Arthurs (2015) adds, an intensely emotional event which unleashed difficult memories, was initially met with uncontrollable enthusiasm and joyous senses of liberation, the subsequent period was characterized by profound uncertainty, a "liminal phase for Italian society, marked by a social order shaken to its core and an instability of values", producing "ruptures" which provided "particularly potent spaces for the production, framing and contestation of narratives about a society's past, present, and future". Therefore, the downfall of the regime served as the initial phase in laying the groundwork for the creation of dominating narratives and the construction of a collective memory.

The way in which the regime fell was instrumental in the establishment of such narratives. At the moment of the collapse of Fascism, "the effort it had expended in expanding its social influence left considerable traces in the Italian collective memory", while "the way in which Fascism was extinguished contributed to the protraction of its

posthumous influence on Italian society” (Tarchi, 2010). In fact, “the collapse of the Fascist regime was not a “revolution”, in the sense of popular mobilization against a ruling elite; nor did it result in a fundamental transformation of Italy’s social and political order”, as “the putsch against Mussolini was engineered entirely “from above” by disillusioned fascists, the monarchy, and the military”, in a desperate act of self-preservation (Arthurs, 2015). Despite the fact that the establishment of a military government had already been envisaged in a planned coup by the military, independently of the decision of the Grand Council, military action was rendered unnecessary, as stated by Badoglio himself: "Fascism was not overthrown by us: by His Majesty or by me. Fascism fell not due to external force, but due to its internal crisis: it could no longer hold on. The same members of the Grand Council brought it down. The members of the Grand Council voted, on the evening of July 24th, by majority against Mussolini. And they marked its end. Finally!" (Gentile, 2018). Rather than a liberation from a foreign power, Italy had disposed of the tyrannical government itself, or so the narrative would go. In reality, however, as Arthurs (2015) shows, as “uniforms were torn off; statues were toppled; and some of the most notorious gerarchì placed behind bars”, significant doubts arose on whether a substantial change had occurred, most notably due to the composition of the Badoglio government, which largely comprised officials of the previous regime, while “contemporaries were struck by the ease with which so many Italians were able to ‘change colors’ overnight”. Euphoria quickly faded when it became apparent that Italy was to continue its wartime struggles alongside Germany.

The armistice of the 8<sup>th</sup> of September 1943 ultimately propelled Italy into its most brutal phase of World War II. Following the proclamation, Germany launched “Operation Axis”, invading Italy and occupying the Central-Northern territories, while Badoglio and king Vittorio Emanuele III fled to the South. Mussolini was soon thereafter, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 1943, reinstated at the head of the “Repubblica Sociale Italiana” or “Repubblica di Salò”, which comprised the German occupied territories in Italy. Concomitant with the German occupation and Italy’s division, a Resistance movement was formed, operating predominantly in Central and Northern Italy under the direction of the “National Liberation Committee” (CLN), which brought together the reconstituted anti-fascist parties and monarchist factions. From a military standpoint, the partisan groups were active not only in mountainous regions but also within urban

areas, engaging in activities such as sabotage, attacks, guerrilla maneuvers, territorial control, distribution of clandestine publications, and strikes, while the zenith of the Resistance movement occurred during the insurrections and liberation of major northern cities in April 1945, in some instances preceding the arrival of allied forces (Dizionario di Storia, 2011). During the period from 1943 to 1945, Northern Italy was overrun by a civil war that concluded with the liberation of Italy by the Allies, with support from the partisan forces, symbolically marked on April 25, 1945, and followed by the German surrender on April 29, 1945.

The experiences of the of the war between the years 43' and 45' produced two distinct collective memories: “there is the memory of 1943–45 as the heroic period of “la Resistenza”, the Resistance as a second “Risorgimento”, versus the memory of 1943–45 as a “civil war”, or even as “la morte della patria”, the “death of the fatherland” (Ventresca, 2006). The Italian national identity had been shattered by the experiences of the Fascist regime and the civil war, producing a profoundly fragmented society. Mussolini’s fall, which was followed by a wave of retribution against fascists and their symbols, and the events of the 8<sup>th</sup> of September, which in turn led to fascist militiamen and squads assaulting civilians, reinstating their symbolisms and reimposing their ideology (Arthurs, 2015), inevitably produced profound antagonisms within the Italian population. The moral dilemma the Italian population was therefore faced with concerned the concept of betrayal, as all opposing factions pointed fingers at each other for treachery: nobody wanted to be labeled a traitor, yet there was a widespread belief that traitors indeed existed and should be punished harshly, preferably through death (Pavone, 2006). Views on the Resistance itself, vital in the country’s liberation, were also contrasting. Recollection show that survivors of massacres attributed responsibility to the partisans, associating them with the initiation of German violence either through their actions or mere presence, therefore allowing communities in the Italian Social Republic “devasted by these nazi-fascist attacks to identify a scapegoat, a clearly identifiable and comprehensible local reference point”, with this complex relationship between the civil population and the partisans continuously “resurfacing in persistent and structured antagonism towards the Resistance” (Pezzino, 2005).

Nevertheless, following the end of the war, the need arose to reconstruct the Italian national identity and confer legitimacy upon the newly emerging democratic Republic:



the experience of the Resistance was to be the source of this legitimacy. As Ventresca (2006) shows, in the spring of 1945, as the Resistance came closer to defeating Nazi-Fascism, Mussolini seemed convinced he could escape the arm of justice by negotiating with the Resistance leaders. This proved to be a grave misapprehension, as Italy's political rebirth relied fundamentally on a complete dissociation from Mussolini, the man and the constructed myth, and his complete removal from the political scene, which ultimately occurred through his arrest and summary execution. As such, the author underlines, for the Resistance "there was more than retribution at stake; there was also the declared need to break decisively with the fascist past, to lay the foundations for the political, economic and moral reconstruction of Italy after two decades of dictatorship". For Miller (1999), besides the liberation of various cities, a central achievement of the Resistance was the "forced cohabitation of mutually hostile political formations", as the struggle against a common enemy produced a "mutual comprehension" among the leaders. The leaders of the Resistance which then became the founders of Italy's democracy "expanded the definition of "Resistance" to include not only those who fought, but also those who in any way supported the struggle against Fascism, either actively or passively, or had simply suffered from the regime's actions", thus making the Resistance "a true national experience". Anti-fascism became the founding pillar of the democratic Republic of Italy and the anti-fascist spirit the basis of the Italian constitution.

## 5.2. The "Missed Italian Nürnberg" and the "Good Italian"

Relief for the end of the war coincided with the need of national reconciliation and an internal reckoning with the dark period of the Fascist regime. For Cento Bull (2008) national reconciliation following a period of intense internal division which produced a violent conflict can, for one, be approached through retributive justice, "whereby the violent crimes are persecuted through the courts and the rule of law is upheld and applied". Yet, for both moral and practical reasons such an approach may be inappropriate for transitional processes: morally, the adversarial nature of retributive justice may exacerbate conflictual situations and reopen violent confrontations, while practically, it is difficult to ensure justice "through the criminal courts when the old elites retain power in the new regime or there are no clear winners emerging from the

collapse of the old regime, but there is instead a relatively equal balance of power”, whereas where “the state has played a part in the political violence of the past, it is also very difficult to achieve justice through the courts, because of its determination to deny the truth and cover it up”. A further approach, outlined by Cento Bull (2008), is “based on a collective public amnesia, often accompanied by amnesty, which is predicated on the need to ensure a peaceful transition to democracy, building new political institutions and guaranteeing the respect of civil and human rights”, which could “be put in jeopardy through any well-intentioned but misplaced pursuit of retributive justice or a public search for truth and redress in relation to past violence”. A third strategy involves “restorative justice”, which “focuses on achieving reconciliation through a process of confronting the past, revealing and acknowledging the truth about past violent acts and violations of human rights, offering reparations and apologies to the victims, where possible also constructing a shared narrative of the conflictual history of the past”. The decision regarding the strategy to be adopted, that is the manner in which justice is applied or neglected, and events are remembered or willingly suppressed, entails a critical choice between achieving a successful political transition and a profound and durable acknowledgment of a troubling historical period. Accordingly, the judgement and interpretation of the numerous immoralities carried out by the Fascist regime and its military, both within the country and internationally, or more importantly, the absence of such judgment on the international stage, became another significant factor in shaping post-war narratives in Italy.

The marginalization of the Italian Jews by means of the racial laws and their consequent persecution and deportation, especially during the time of the German occupation and the Italian Social Republic, is well known and widely acknowledged. Furthermore, extensive documentation evidences the atrocities carried out by regular Italian military personnel during colonial wars and occupations in regions including Libya, Ethiopia, Yugoslavia, Greece, and Albania, which have been well-documented through investigations by the “United Nations War Crimes Commission” and extradition records presented by the governments of Yugoslavia and Ethiopia, which were repeatedly submitted to Allied governments without achieving success (Petrusewicz, 2004). For while both Germany and Japan were compelled to grapple with the aftermath of the war and issues related to collective guilt or responsibility, due to their complete defeat in war and subsequent prolonged occupation by the Allied forces (Ventresca,

2006), in the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials, no such judicial proceeding occurred in Italy. According to Battini (2004), the potential for an “Italian Nuremberg” was viable between August 1945 and April 1946. However, three arguments emerged that gradually led the British to abandon the idea of a trial. The initial concern revolved around the potential for a trial to worsen Anglo-American relations by intensifying anti-fascist sentiment amidst political uncertainty; the favorable outcome for socialists and communists in the first post-war elections, alongside the monarchy's defeat in the institutional referendum, further substantiated fears of a significant radical political shift to the left in Italy. The second reason stemmed from stark disparities between the USA and the Soviet Union regarding the jurisdiction for war criminal trials: the USA supported an international body, whereas the Soviets demanded trials to occur in the countries where crimes were committed, overseen by local judicial authorities. The third factor, the Battini (2004) states, involved the Allies, the Italian and Yugoslav governments, disagreeing on who should try Italian soldiers accused of Balkan war crimes. The escape of General Roatta in March 1944 had aroused suspicions, and Italy's government, having claimed its authority to prosecute Nazi war criminals due to its status as a co-belligerent nation, eventually recognized that pushing too strongly in this direction would only validate Yugoslavia's plea to hold Italian military accountable for war crimes.

According to Focardi & Klinkhammer (2004), Italy's challenging international situation made it difficult to bring war criminals to justice. Although there were initial attempts to prosecute war criminals, most notably by the Bonomi government, the left-wing efforts to try criminals were met with resistance especially by the military and moderate anti-fascist parties supported by the British government, while also clashing with the need to protect national interests. The punitive intentions of the Allies toward Italian war criminals waned following early trials in Anglo-Saxon military courts, including the trial and execution of General Bellomo, and as the Cold War progressed. Yugoslav extradition requests for generals accused of serious war crimes, like Taddeo Orlando and Achille Marazza, who held significant government roles at the time, were ignored. From 1945 to 1948, Italians firmly opposed foreign requests to prosecute war criminals due to the perceived threat to national interests. Ultimately, the authors hold, the absence of an "Italian Nuremberg" trial against Italians responsible for fascist war crimes was primarily attributed to Italy's self-liberation from the Fascist regime and

governance under an anti-fascist government, a narrative which framed Italy as morally capable of judging its citizens for human rights abuses.

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, Italy was therefore not held accountable for the numerous atrocities and war crimes of the Fascist regime. This would have long-lasting effects. In fact, the “cancellation of the “Italian Nuremberg” produced grave consequences, first on judiciary grounds and later regarding the assessment of historical truth” (Battini, 2004), as Italians showed a readiness and willingness to downplay their own role in relation to the Fascist regime and its oppressive actions, both domestically and internationally, with the construction of such a narrative made possible by their involvement in Mussolini's downfall and the subsequent democratic transformation of the country, resulting in an institutionally promoted “collective amnesia” (Ventresca, 2006). Explanatory frameworks which emerged from a propitious climate following the end of the war “shifted culpability away from ordinary Italians, facilitating the nation's collective self-absolution” (Ben-Ghiat, 1999). At the basis of such a mythologization of Italy's involvement was evidently the dissociation from Mussolini himself, soon portrayed as the sole responsible for the war of aggression and the consequent atrocities. As it would turn out, Churchill's famous appeal to the Italian people on the microphones of Radio London on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December 1940, in which he affirmed that the war fought by the Italians was desired by “one man, and one man alone”, proved to be an anticipation of the “narrative outline that later would relieve Italy and the Italians of the responsibilities they had assumed as part of the Axis's war” (Santarelli, 2004).

This, in turn, paved the way for the construction of myths which were incorporated in the hegemonic memory discourse, in which the Italian case was consistently compared with the German one, in what has been referred to as the “demon of analogy” (Focardi, 2022). The primary product of such a comparison was the widely promoted myth of the “good Italians” (“brava gente”), as opposed to the “bad Germans”. The self-acquitting portrayal of the “bad German” as a ruthless warrior was juxtaposed with that of the “good Italian”, who reluctantly entered a disastrous war, showed compassion for occupied peoples and shielded them from the brutality of the German, even rescuing numerous Jews from German persecution, was a construction “which over the years became an authentic identifying myth”, thus making “the country impermeable to a

sincere examination of conscience regarding its own responsibilities” (Focardi & Klinkhammer, 2004). The employment of such an “artificial history”, based on a “manipulated memory”, facilitated the preservation of the myth of the “good Italian” (Mammone, 2006). The Italian strategy of national reconciliation and confrontation of its dark past was therefore based on a “collective amnesia”, where the “black pages are indeed hidden deep in the national subconscious, entirely removed from the country’s culture”, as “Italians quickly absolved themselves of any crime, and the narrative paradigm of Italiani brava gente settled deep into the national self-representation” (Petrušewicz, 2004). This view was perpetuated by all parties involved and dominated collective memory until it came under intense scrutiny some 60 years after the end of the war (Foot, 2009), when the dangers of not coming to terms with the fascist past became increasingly apparent.

### 5.3 Rise of Neo-Fascism

In a 2019 speech, Silvio Berlusconi proudly proclaimed: "In '94, we decided to take the field with the right, namely with the “Lega” and with the fascists, whom the other parties – the “Pentapartito” that had governed Italy since the beginning of the Republic – had kept out of what was called the constitutional arc: they had never allowed the “Lega” and fascism to enter the government. We let them in ourselves in '94, we legitimized them, we constitutionalized them!". Reference was to the government coalition formed by Berlusconi following the 1994 elections, which included not only the "Lega Nord" but also the post-fascist "Alleanza Nazionale," a party formed by Gianfranco Fini, the leader of the neo-fascist "Movimento Sociale Italiano". With the formation of this political alliance and the entry into government of a party with distinct neo-fascist roots, Berlusconi entered the history books as the man who had legitimized fascism. Half a century after the downfall of the Fascist regime and the establishment of an anti-fascist constitution, marked by the enactment of the "Scelba Law" in 1952 which forbids the "reorganization, in any form, of the dissolved fascist party" and criminalizes acts of glorifying fascism, fascists found themselves back in positions of power within the government. Having lingered and operated for decades in the shadows of politics and society, fascism had resurfaced. It had, of course, never fully

disappeared, as the fall of the Fascist regime promptly gave rise to neo-fascist organizations and parties.

The "Movimento Sociale Italiano" (MSI) was founded as a political party in 1946, upon the initiative of fascists who had been active in the Italian Social Republic and under the leadership of Giorgio Almirante, gaining 2% of the votes in the 1948 elections. For Campani (2016) the founders of the MSI aimed to unite the diverse aspects of the fascist movement and regime: the radical, revolutionary, anti-capitalist, anti-American, anti-Semitic aspect representing the early and late phases of Fascism (1919-1928); and the conservative, traditionalist aspect advocating order and authority during the Fascist government (1928-1943). By merging these aspects, they aimed to rejuvenate Mussolini's fascism, questioning the prevailing democracy and seeking to restore an authoritarian state, while using the parliamentary system to shift the country's political orientation towards the right. Over time, Campani (2016) recounts, the compromises between these two "souls" grew increasingly difficult, leading to the MSI adopting a more moderate approach in 1956 in its quest to enter Parliament, while dissenters split from the party and formed the "Centro Studi Ordine Nuovo" ("New Order"). The "Ordine Nuovo" emerged as a hub for neo-fascist extremism which "enhanced the anti-parliamentarian tone, launched a process of redefinition of the fascist doctrine and supported a campaign of assaults and provocation against individual opponents and organisations". In 1960, the author further highlights, a division within the "Ordine Nuovo" led to the formation of the "Avanguardia Nazionale" (National Vanguard), which embraced distinct symbols reminiscent of the Third Reich's flag. Thereafter, neo-nazi elements such as the Odal and the Celtic cross, symbolic of an SS division, started to attract the attention of the younger faction of Italian neo-fascism in the subsequent decades.

The fractionalization of the primary neo-fascist party and the consequent multiplication of extra-parliamentarian neo-fascist groupings significantly enhanced the already tense atmosphere of social conflict following the student and workers protests in 1968. With the decline of the MSI's exclusive representation of fascist sympathizers, diverse neo-fascist groups were able to engage distinct segments of the population, as older MSI members, valuing the stability the fascist state provided to the lower-middle class, endorsed the "law and order" approach, while younger individuals drawn to the

rebellious spirit of the 1968 movements gravitated towards non-parliamentary militancy (Campani, 2016). Furthermore, according to Caciagli (1988), exploiting the turbulent conflicts within Italian society and the crisis within center-left parties, Almirante successfully reinstated the MSI's prominence in the early 1970s on the Italian political stage. This was achieved by employing a two-fold approach: endorsing and inciting street violence on one hand, while seeking validation as a party of "law and order" on the other. As a result, Caciagli (1988) further holds, the MSI attracted radical elements that had left in preceding decades, including notable figures like Pino Rauti, the founder of "Ordine Nuovo". The MSI further defended the violent activities of young groups and uprisings in the "Mezzogiorno", while also maintaining connections with elements of "black terrorism" and organizations both within and outside the state that were involved in planning potential coups. Although Parliament granted permission to legally proceed against Almirante for the act of reviving the Fascist party, the legitimization of the MSI persisted through the amalgamation of the MSI and the monarchists, resulting in the formation of the party "Movimento Sociale Italiano-Destra Nazionale" (MSI-DN).

Simultaneous to these developments, violence perpetrated by neo-fascists reached new heights. In response to the formation of the "Red Brigades", Weinberg (1995) notes, neo-fascists mobilized, leading to thousands of violent confrontations between neo-fascist groupings and youthful leftist groups. The wave of terror incidents and massacres executed by neo-fascists from 1969 to 1974 evidenced this escalation of violence. Based on a number of accounts, Weinberg (1995) points out, the infamous bombing of Piazza Fontana had been orchestrated by the neo-fascists Franco Freda and Giovanni Ventura, collaborating with Pino Rauti among others, while journalists and magistrates discovered proof indicating that the police were involved in a complex neo-fascist plot to organize a succession of provocative bombings with the intention of swaying public opinion against leftist revolutionaries, a scheme which came to be known as the "strategy of tension". Ultimately, the author notes, "hope was that, if the pot could be kept boiling, the public could be made to accept a coup d'état by elements in the military acting in conjunction with the neo-fascists". Two attempts to stage such a coup were uncovered, resulting in overdue legal actions against numerous militant neo-fascists in 1974 and the dissolution of several neo-fascist factions like "Fronte Nazionale," "Ordine Nuovo," and "Avanguardia Nazionale," which were deemed pro-

fascist and unconstitutional. It appeared that violent neo-fascism might fade, but a different path unfolded: while leftist revolutionary groups dominated political terrorism in Italy in the late 1970s, new violent neo-fascist factions emerged within a reevaluation of the political landscape, with a new postwar phase of neo-fascist violence beginning, as, following the events in 1974-75, the state was deemed irreparable. The peak of this new wave of neo-fascist violence was reached with the massacre at the Bologna railway station in 1980, an act attributed to neo-fascist militants and members of the “Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari” and which resulted in the police disbanding the largest extra-parliamentary neo-fascist groups, causing many militants to enter a phase of exile or assuming a low profile (Campani, 2016).

The end of the Cold War and the events of the early 1990s produced groundbreaking political changes. According to Dechezelles (2013), these developments stemmed from the gradual breakdown of the voter support for pivotal parties that formed the foundation of the “First Republic” (1948–92), along with the significant erosion of credibility among the political leaders entangled in the “Tangentopoli” corruption scandal. The breakdown of the dominating parties and the delegitimization of an entire political class provided the optimal opportunity for opposition forces to gain political power and the democratic legitimacy they had lacked up to that point. A significant outcome of these turbulent times was the electoral triumph of the initial short-lived coalition, led by Silvio Berlusconi in 1994, which comprised “Forza Italia”, certain former Christian Democrats, “Alleanza Nazionale” (AN) under Gianfranco Fini's leadership, and the influential Lega Nord (LN) headed by Umberto Bossi. Beyond Berlusconi's controversial role and his party's ascent, what truly stood out was the electoral achievements of two parties categorized as “extreme right” by prominent scholars of Italian political dynamics: the successor to neo-fascism, “Alleanza Nazionale”, which had been consistently excluded from governmental positions since the inaugural democratic elections in 1948, and the regionalist, anti-Southern, and xenophobic “Lega Nord”. The “Alleanza Nazionale” was constituted in 1994 and officially established in 1995, upon the initiative of the MSI's secretary Gianfranco Fini, who had urged delegates to “fully accept liberal democracy, to renounce to the old project of remaining faithful to the fascist legacy and to become a modern European democratic right” (Campani, 2016). This led to the transformation of the MSI to the AN, a decision which was not approved by many MSI activists, such as notably Pino



Rauti, who considered Fini a traitor and founded the “Fiamma Tricolore”, which sought to represent the true neo-fascists. While positioning themselves as a “new” form of right-wing parties, with AN sometimes labeled as a post-fascist party and LN as a populist one, the two entities bear resemblances in their influences and principles to historical fascist and neo-fascist movements (Dechezelles, 2013).

The legitimization of formerly neo-fascist and now post-fascist parties, which revised their ideologies by abandoning the purely fascist doctrine and its inherent quest for totalitarianism, produced a significant revision of Italy’s fascist and anti-fascist history. After 1989, as held by Mammone (2006), “revisionism became more prominent due to major modifications of the historical and ideological context: The fall of the Berlin Wall; the transformation of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) into a party of the more moderate left; the reshaping of the traditional contours of Italian politics (the end of the “First Republic”) after the corruption scandals; the appearance of new political actors (Forza Italia and the Lega Nord), which considered the Resistance an obsolete vestige of the past; and the presence of the post-neo-fascists in government—all of these factors tended to weaken anti-fascism”. As a consequence, the constitutive element of the constitution, the Resistance paradigm, suffered greatly under the crisis of the “First Republic”, as the delegitimization of the Resistance had “the effect, in a two-dimensional way, of de-legitimizing pre-1990s Italy”. For Mammone (2006), anti-fascism itself, according to the revisionist reading, became “an awkward set of useless values and myths to be disregarded”, while the remembrance of the Resistance was entangled in a conflict over the formation of new identities and ideological convictions. As such, with the disappearance of the Resistance generation, the anti-fascist paradigm entered into a deep crisis: both the left and right adopted anti-anti-fascist stances, efforts were undertaken to emphasize wartime incidents that challenged the prevailing narrative of the Resistance, primarily focusing on events occurring in the periphery of Italy, such as the “foibe” massacres and the postwar “resa dei conti” (“settling of accounts”), while plaques were substituted and rival days of memory and remembrance were instituted (Foot, 2009).

The establishment of the “Day of Remembrance” for the “foibe” massacres, aimed at complementing Holocaust remembrance and the comparisons between different atrocities perpetrated by nations in World War II proved crucial for the establishment

of neo-fascist narratives. In fact, Pezzino (2020) holds that “in a broader political context that has questioned anti-fascism, strategically discussing reconciliation and shared memory, “Salò boys” and the “death of the homeland”, the establishment of the “Day of Remembrance” without a critical reflection on the responsibilities of Italians in those lands (the myth of the “good Italian” persists) has allowed the diffusion of neo-fascist interpretations on a broader scale and has provided an institutional platform for the spread of right-wing ideas and their project of a shared memory based on the omission of fascist crimes” (Pezzino, 2020). What is more, the political and personal narratives propagated by “Alleanza Nazionale” members and followers reveal a robust practice of counter-memory regarding the nation's political past and the neo-fascist role during the “First Republic”, often depicting neo-fascists as a courageous yet victimized “community” unfairly targeted by malevolent forces, criminalized by the government, and consistently under assault from the far-left (Cento Bull, 2008). In essence, the revision of historical narratives and the legitimization of neo-fascists, concealed within post-fascist political entities, shook the Italian state, built on anti-fascism, to its very core.

The new millennium confirmed the sensations of a fundamental shift within the Italian states’ very foundation, as well as in the remembrance of Fascism and the enduring fascist legacy. For Cammelli (2018), through the transition marked by the evolution of the MSI into the AN, the legacy of Fascism experienced a new phase of change and restructuring that ultimately culminated in the emergence of a movement and political party explicitly identifying as the successor of that heritage, adopting the distinct designation of “third millennium fascists”. Said party was “Casa Pound”, founded in 2003 and explicitly linking itself to the history of the MSI and the legacy of Mussolini. The name has a dual meaning: “Casa”, signifying “house” in Italian, addresses the party's focus on housing issues, while “Pound” alludes to the American poet Ezra Pound, who wrote against usury in his poetry, thus reflecting the party's stance against the global financial system and privatized banking. Originating as a youth group linked with the “Fiamma Tricolore” party, “Casa Pound” later evolved into an independent registered association named “Casa Pound Italia” (CPI) by 2008. This status granted CPI certain benefits like receiving pre-tax donations and public recognition. In 2013, CPI transformed into a standalone political party, achieving a notable 0.69% of votes in Lazio during local elections. By 2014, informal ties formed between “Casa Pound

Italia” and “Lega Nord”, leading to a broader alliance with a newly established political entity called “Sovranità” in 2015, supporting Lega Nord's leader Matteo Salvini. By 2016, the author adds, running as an independent party, “Casa Pound” gained 1.14% of the vote in Rome, approximately 14,000 votes, nearly twice the tally from three years earlier. This is significant, in light of the party’s overtly fascist ideology. As noted by Cammelli (2018), this “third millennium fascism” updates Mussolini's political program, reconfiguring 1920s-1930s themes while preserving core values like nationalism, private property, and gender roles, therefore drawing on Fascism's legacy and aligning the movement with a historical continuum. This, for the author, showcases the “prominent place that fascism holds in contemporary Italy”, as “fascism is revealed as a still powerful mythology with the capacity to renew its principle values and keep abreast of developments in today’s political arena.”

No case better reflects this point than the exponential rise of the post-fascist “Fratelli d’Italia” party. The “Fratelli d’Italia-Centrodestra Nazionale” was founded in 2012 by Giorgia Meloni, Ignazio Larussa and Guido Crosetto as a breakaway from the mainstream center-right “Popolo della Libertà” (P.d.L.) party, which consolidated various right-wing forces into a single party headed by Silvio Berlusconi. In 2014 the party changed its name to “Fratelli d’Italia-Alleanza Nazionale”, before adopting the current name in 2017. Meloni, who assumed the party presidency at its inception, became a militant in the “Fronte della Gioventù”, the youth wing of the MSI, in 1992, before entering the AN in 1994 as head of the student movement. Given her past in neo-fascist organizations, she never concealed her fascist sympathies. In a famous interview given to the French TV program “Soir 3” in 1996, a 19-year-old Meloni states: “I believe that Mussolini was a good politician; what he did, he did it for Italy.” Ignazio Benito Larussa, who also began his political career in the youth wing of the MSI, is known to possess an extensive collection of fascist memorabilia in his home, including photos, medals and a statue of Mussolini (Giuffrida, 2022). Matteo Salvini, who is arguably one of Meloni's closest political partners, maintains a complex connection to fascism himself, as indicated by his comments regarding the significance of Liberation Day on April 25th, which he characterized as a simple "derby between communists and fascists." While this could be seen as rhetoric to attract support from those nostalgic for fascism, it also underscores the Italian far-rights’ evident resistance to distancing themselves from fascism.

As highlighted by Donà (2022), the FdI has been described as “post-fascist”, the “new radical right” and the “heir to the old fascist party”. In its relatively short history, the party’s ideology shifted from being conservative in its early years to radical right after 2017, due to the unstable and volatile Italian political system and the recurrent crises within the European Union (EU) over the past decade. In the 2017 party congress, the acronym A.N. was dropped, but the distinct emblem of the MSI which figured in the FdI’s party symbol, was retained, with Meloni clarifying in an interview that the flame symbol represents both the past and the future of the party. The maintenance of this symbol sparked public debate, as the flame emblem, widely used by neo-fascist groups, has been found to symbolize “the fascist spirit that rises from the tomb of the regime”, as the flame, in its original design employed by the MSI, is depicted above a trapezoid which represents Mussolini’s coffin (De Luca, 2022). Since then, Donà (2022) holds, the FdI has maintained ambiguous positions regarding its fascist legacy, leaving open the question of whether it should be labeled as neo-fascist or post-fascist. Meanwhile, the party’s ideology shifted from its original conservatism to the radical right, introducing “elements of nationalism, nativism and authoritarianism with the adoption of anti-EU stances to exploit the electoral opportunities resulting from the ongoing Italian political instability and the misconducting of the European economic and immigration crises.” Consequent to the decline of “Forza Italia” and the “Lega” who collaborated in the Draghi government, the author further highlights, the decision of the FdI to stay in the opposition and continue pursuing its radical right political agenda was instrumental to the rapid rise in its electoral support. This ultimately led to the remarkable triumph in the 2022 political elections, in which the party became the leading force in the country with 26% of the vote. It garnered around 44% of the votes through its alliance with the center-right coalition, comprising “Forza Italia”, “Lega”, and “Noi moderati”, which allowed them to secure a majority in Parliament and form the Meloni government. With the post-fascist FdI becoming the biggest Italian party, the primary representative of the neo-fascists had come to rule the country, while anti-fascist rhetoric, discrediting Italy’s anti-fascist history, was promoted by key political figures in the government cabinet. This marked the end of a distinct process. From the fall of the Fascist regime and the early construction of inadequate historical narratives and memory discourses, to the looming presence of weakly contrasted neo-fascist groups throughout the “First Republic”, the emergence of neo-fascist turned post-fascist parties in the wake of the “Second Republic”, the revision of Italy’s anti-

fascist history and the victory of the post-fascists with distinct and undeniable neo-fascist roots, fascism has resurfaced once again after decades in the shadows.

#### 5.4 Dealing with a “Difficult Heritage”

Italy’s widely acknowledged failure to come to terms with its fascist past is materially symbolized by the architectural fascist heritage in the Italian urban landscape. Numerous buildings and monuments constructed by the Fascist regime, with overtly propagandistic inscriptions, in its distinct Roman architectural style, have remained untouched to this day. In fact, despite the initial “popular iconoclasm” following Mussolini's fall from power in Italy in July 1943, as well as subsequent limited efforts by the Allies and the Italian government to “defascistise” Italy during 1944-46, numerous monumental structures, statues, mosaics, murals, and other artifacts with ideological significance managed to endure into the post-war republican era, illustrating an incomplete shift from dictatorship to democracy (Carter, 2020). The presence of such material remnants of the fascist past has been described as a “difficult heritage”: this refers to a historically significant past, embodied in a series of physical sites of all varieties, that holds relevance in the present, yet is also a source of contention and discomfort when it comes to integrating it into a positive and self-affirming modern identity, with this past therefore having the potential to resurface disruptively, leading to social divisions and creating a challenge for reconciliation (Macdonald, 2009).

The way in which such monuments are maintained and presented in the urban landscape is crucial both for the framing of collective memory and national identity, which ultimately confers the democratic post-totalitarian government its legitimacy. For Hökerberg (2017), the assimilation of these controversial ideologically charged physical sites, erected as a propaganda instrument to manifest and spread a political agenda, to democratic society, entail an interaction between the temporary political trends of the past and the present political and cultural circumstances. This is highly significant, as the interplay between the present and the past heightens the complexity of historic knowledge. This then permits the design of a “usable past” and a collective memory, or forgetfulness, of this past, which in turn can be used as a source of the “desired identity” and “self-legitimation”. In view of this, the author proposes various

possible approaches to address such a “difficult heritage”. The first approach is “conservation”, meaning the maintenance of the monuments and fascist symbols as they were initially constructed. A second approach relates to “adapted re-use”, by which the enormous fascist public institutions are readapted to the post-totalitarian democracy as public institutions, such as police or administrative offices, an act which may both symbolize a sort of conquest and superiority of democratic ideals, while also possibly being symptomatic of a reluctance to confront a dark past. Thirdly, “desacralization” refers to a contextualization of the monument and the detested ideology it contains and a disarmament of its “aggressive ideological connotations”, while “mutilation” is an approach whereby the fascist symbolism contained on the monuments are removed. “Neglect” then entails a deliberate disregard of the maintenance of a physical site, to produce a historic distance to the monument, as well as to prevent a sacralization, where such a site becomes a shrine for extremist political groups, whereas “amnesia” relates to the practice of removing monuments from their original place and re-erecting them elsewhere, thus depriving them from their political and historical context. Lastly, “demolition”, the author concludes, although seemingly the simplest solution, may prove controversial or provocative to the public, as it may be interpreted as a forceful imposition of ideology and an attempt to erase history. Consequently, various strategies can be employed to address the legacy of the fascist past, embodied by physical remnants of propaganda sites. This evidently depends both on the political post-totalitarian political context, as well as the dominant discourses of memory which have emerged following the demise of the regime.

Italy’s urban landscape is filled with fascist architecture and symbolism. In an article published on the “New Yorker” that sparked public debate, Ben-Ghiat (2017) asks why Italy has allowed fascist monuments to survive unquestioned. One factor could be the significant quantity of artifacts created by Mussolini with the intention of imprinting the fascist ideology on the landscape, making their destruction, as occurred in Germany, unfeasible and politically unwise for the Allies, who were primarily focused on stabilizing the tumultuous nation and curbing the influence of the Communist party. Subsequently, as noted by Ben-Ghiat (2017), the Christian Democrats in power, which included several former fascists, did not perceive the extensive physical remnants of the regime as an issue, and thus, no active measures were taken to address this matter. Upon Berlusconi's ascent to power and his collaboration with the MSI, the reevaluation

of fascism was facilitated through an established network of pilgrimage sites and memorials, notably exemplified by Mussolini's birthplace in Predappio. Consequently, locations like Predappio experienced a surge in popularity, leading preservationists of various political orientations to form partnerships with the empowered right-wing groups in order to safeguard the fascist monuments that were increasingly regarded as an essential component of Italy's cultural legacy. This, for Ben-Ghiat (2017), represents a significant risk, as when “monuments are treated merely as depoliticized aesthetic objects, then the far-right can harness the ugly ideology while everyone else becomes inured”. Several physical sites stand out in this regard. The "Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana," referred to as the "Square Colosseum," which stands in Rome with its sleek rectangular design, featuring an abstract arch-decorated front and neoclassical statues at the base and bearing an inscription from Mussolini's 1935 speech announcing the invasion of Ethiopia, is understood by Ben-Ghiat as “a relic of abhorrent fascist aggression”. The most emblematic example is, however, the famous Mussolini obelisk in Rome, whose conservation and image in public discourse accurately reflects Italy's approach to the remnants of fascist legacy.

At the entrance of the “Foro Italico” in Rome, a sport complex ideated by the Fascist regime, which contains Italy's national stadium, the “Stadio Olimpico”, towers a marble obelisk. Vertically on it are the inscriptions “Mussolini” and “DVX”, the latter being the latin term for “duce”, Mussolini's self-attributed propagandistic title of “commander” of the nation. Established with the aim of creating a structure symbolizing triumph and highlighting the magnificence of fascist architecture, the monument's cost amounted to 2,343,792 lire, plus an additional half a million lire for the pure gold pinnacle, which was subsequently lost after the fall of Fascism and was unveiled on October 29, 1932, on the tenth anniversary of the March on Rome (Adnkronos, 2015). It was found that under the obelisk, Mussolini had buried a hidden message deep within the granite blocks, known as the “Codex Fori Mussolini”. The message, which curiously was meant to be deciphered only if the obelisk was to be demolished following the regime's collapse, consisted of three parts: an outline of the genesis and achievements of Fascism, Mussolini's ascent, and a portrayal of Italy's rescue from post-World War I turmoil through Mussolini's resolute determination and extraordinary insights (La Repubblica, 2016). As such, in both the external inscriptions and internal elements, the obelisk represents the epitomal expression of the

propagandistic glorification of Mussolini. Passing the entrance to the “Foro Italico”, a series of marble plates contain inscriptions celebrating the milestones of Fascism and fascist slogans, such as “*molti nemici, molto onore*” (“Many enemies, much honor”) and “*Duce a noi*”. Despite the absence of a physical representation of Mussolini himself, he “is present in every component of the iconographic programme of the mosaics” (Hökerberg, 2017) and his myth looms over the entire complex.

Over the years, various calls to demolish or contextualize Mussolini’s obelisk have encountered stark resistance. Most recently, the former President of the “*Camera dei Deputati*”, Laura Boldrini, suggested that rather than demolishing the monument, only the inscription should be removed. The suggestion caused public outcry, while politicians from across the political spectrum condemned the idea. The public discourse, almost unanimously, strongly rejected any modification or elimination of these monuments, reflecting the depoliticized nature of contemporary Italian perceptions of fascist heritage, as, irrespective of individuals' political orientations, these monuments are considered integral to the broader cultural heritage legacy of Italy (Bartolini, 2020). In an almost astonishing cohesion, both the public and prominent political figures, of both the left and the right, argued in favor of the conservation of the monument. For one, the commissioner of the “PD” (Democratic Party) in Rome and national president of the Democratic Party, Matteo Orfini, stated: “I would leave that inscription there. We are an anti-fascist country, the principles of the anti-fascist struggle are enshrined in our Constitution. We don't need to erase our memory, even if at times it's dramatic. I believe, that *damnatio memoriae* is a sign of weakness rather than strength for those who exercise it.”; while Stefano Pedica of the PD added: “Memory, for better or for worse, cannot be erased. Removing the inscription ‘*Dux*’ from the obelisk in the Foro Italico is a senseless proposal. If Boldrini wants to erase the history of Fascism, should she also ask to demolish the entire EUR neighborhood?” (Corriere della Sera, 2015). As such, apart from the considerations of the artistic value of such monuments, arguments for the conservation of the obelisk and its inscription commonly hold that aspects of Italian history, of which Fascism was a part, should not be erased through the removal of its physical sites, which society is able to accurately contextualize by virtue of its inherently anti-fascist nature. As we have seen, further viewpoints equate the explicitly propagandistic and glorifying monuments to the extensive array of buildings constructed by the fascists in their unique architectural



manner, arguing that dismantling sites associated with Fascism would entail the destruction of entire neighborhoods established under the regime's influence.

Every year, millions pass the Mussolini obelisk to enter the “Foro Italico” complex. Many of the usual visitors, accustomed to the sight, pay little to no attention to the monument. Foreign visitors can, however, hardly remain indifferent when faced with such a glorification of Mussolini. At face value, the presence of conserved and uncontextualized fascist propagandistic sites within the context of a democratic society founded on the principles of anti-fascism is hardly justifiable. The messages contained on such monuments are in direct and unequivocal conflict with the founding principle of the post-totalitarian constitution. Leaving such monuments and their inscriptions without appropriate contextualization entails a normalization of the messages contained on these sites, in which the dark legacy of Fascism is softened. The “contemporary heritage of the dictatorship” and the process with which this heritagization has occurred over the years reflects the challenges of grappling with history for some, while simultaneously fueling neo-fascist propaganda in others (Arthurs, 2010). Unquestioning conservation and aestheticization of buildings and sites containing and communicating fascist values inadvertently empower the far-right, as the process of turning something into heritage can bestow a degree of legitimacy upon it, while “far right groups will also inevitably applaud and seek to make political capital from measures that safeguard what they see as “their” heritage” (Carter, 2020). The controversies surrounding the proposal to turn the “Casa del Fascio” in Predappio into a museum, where the function of the museum was heavily debated, as it was interpreted more as celebratory rather than informative, in a locality which has consistently been a pilgrimage site for fascist nostalgics, “foreground the perception of a weak sense of national identity, which a museum devoted to Fascism would threaten and undermine” (Storchi, 2019). To the extent to which “heritage is always the result of a selection of what is worth remembering or forgetting and is never a neutral selection of a “true past”, the material legacies of Fascism “reflect not just a national struggle in questioning and confronting the past, but possibly also a worrying sense of fascist pride” (Bartolini, 2020), as evidenced by the role these sites have assumed for neo-fascist groupings.

## 5.5 Ultras Groups as Breeding Grounds for Fascism

Extensive literature has brought to light the neo-fascist convictions of many ultras groups. The neo-fascist infiltration in these factions has been thoroughly covered in the above sections. As we have seen, direct links between neo-fascist organizations and ultras groups emerged throughout the 1980s and 1990s. This process was facilitated by the emergence of xenophobic political factions like the “Lega Nord”, “Alleanza Nazionale”, “Lega Lombarda”, and “Fiamma Tricolore”, in addition to the expansion of skinhead and other far-right associations during that period, resulting in the subsequent establishment of links between these right-wing parties and ultras factions (King, 2003). The expressions of such radical beliefs can be seen each week through overt racism, xenophobia and fascist symbolisms. Consequently, ultras groups became what has been referred to as a part of the “non-party sector of the radical right” (Veugelers & Menard, 2018). While the phenomenon of neo-fascism within the ultras world is widely apparent, limited literature deals with the question as to why ultras groups provide such a fertile ground for fascism and what specific elements make these factions so prone to neo-fascist infiltration. Drawing on the analyses made thus far, a few considerations can be made regarding this fundamental question.

As a starting point, the findings of Testa & Armstrong (2008) are insightful. In examining the display of neo-fascist ideology in contemporary Italian football stadia and how the neo-fascist ideology manifests in the contemporary political milieu, the authors hypothesize “that the neo-fascist’s tenets manifested by the ideologically-oriented “ultras” fan groups, may be understood as both a consequence of, and a resistance against the dominant socio-cultural and political values of contemporary Italy”. To support this thesis, the authors commence by explaining the nationalistic dimension of Mussolini’s fascism, which can be understood as a combination of state and romantic nationalism. Here, “state nationalism projected the nation as a community composed of individuals contributing to the state’s maintenance and strength”, while in “romantic nationalism - a particular strain of nationalism that originated as a resistance to the universalism and rationalism of the Enlightenment - linguistic, cultural and historical factors are considered the most important “glue” to national identity and specific territory”. The development of romantic nationalism and its “anti-rationalistic traits” is crucial to the understanding to the “revolutionary nationalism” of Italian neo-

fascists. In fact, “according to neo-fascists, the “Italia” of false patriots is an entity based on commercialization and capitalism, which neglects both regional identities and the expressions of glorious local traditions”, with neo-fascists therefore seeing “their battles primarily against the “modern” world which neglects traditions”. What is more “the Italian state’s inability thus far in assimilating the long-term presence of immigrants creates a climate of social anxiety which can rapidly assume an aversion to notions of diversity and functions to reinforce the sense of group identity”. In this context, the fundamental convictions of ultras groups can be contextualized. As evidenced by the authors, opposed to globalization and “dismissive of the games materialistic pursuits of efficiency, profit and productivity they are willing to search for the abstract qualities the game provides be it faith, courage and the figure of the hero/warrior”. In their actions “they are knowingly deviant from their peers”, as they “consider violence instrumental and essential for the affirmation of their rights and values”, while having “a sense of belonging expressed most evidently within a quasi-military organization wherein authority, charisma and personal style of command are crucial”. Having constructed an ideology according to which they see themselves as “pure and uncompromised, they seek to fight an Italian football system based on the deleterious power of money and its concomitant corruption, and an Italian political system which manifests the same traits”. In this view, inspired by the “revolutionary nationalism” of neo-fascism, which in turn stems from the concepts of nationalism promoted by Mussolini, the creed of neo-fascist ultras groups can be characterized as “resistance ideologies”, with “intrinsic revolutionary value”. What thus emerges from this analysis is that the conceptions of nationalism inherent to the neo-fascist ideology, based on the “traditional” as opposed to the “modern”, fits perfectly with the fundamental pillars upon which the ultras’ ideology is formed. The adoption by ultras groups of neo-fascist nationalism, in its most extreme expressions, was consequently a coherent trajectory.

A social and socio-psychological dimension is certainly inherent to such considerations. The adoption of militarized hierarchical structures at the very inception of the ultras world, inspired by the “red” and “black” terror organizations wreaking havoc in the 1970s, has led to the creation of a set of values primarily based on group cohesion, loyalty, honor, solidarity and territoriality. Such values were crucial to the construction of group cohesion, as it provided a framework for the interaction of

rebellious and anti-conformist individuals and are most evidently reflected in the behavioral guidelines set up by the ultras to govern their seemingly anarchical world, which rely on outdated codes of honor in combat. Essential to the existence of this world are notions of identity, which represent the very essence of the ultras' being. In-group collective identities, both within ultras groups themselves and within the ultras *communitas*, are imperative, as they shape the individual identity of the single ultra. Without the collective, the ultra loses his whole reason of being. The protection of the collective is therefore a vital matter. Similarly, Testa & Armstrong (2008) point out, "neo-fascists exist in the collective", as adherents promote the "subordination of the ego to the collective", with such doctrines seeking a "reevaluation of the idea of nation considering it as an organic community of people, which exists in opposition to a liberal, hyper-individualistic society". It follows that "for ultras groups the *curva* is the one locale of the city where values of loyalty, courage, honour and fidelity find fertile ground". The assimilation of such values translated to the behavioral patterns of these fanatics. In the inherently antagonistic ultras world, characterized by the perception of constant threat, the manifestation of force and toughness became essential factors to the ultras. The models of hypermasculinity and virility propagated first by the fascists and then adopted by neo-fascist militants evidently spoke to the anti-conformist ultras, which sought to make a name for themselves in their anarchical world. From this perspective, the neo-fascist symbols conspicuously presented within the "curve" can be interpreted as objects that attract young people due to the defiance they symbolize, aligning with the youths' aspiration for virility and masculinity (Roversi, 1992). Therefore, viewed through a socio-psychological lens, the core principles that underlie the actions of ultras and their internal and external dynamics, essential for maintaining unity within the groups, become an additional element that welcome the infiltration of neo-fascist ideologies.

A further crucial aspect relates to the role of the stadium itself, which can be interpreted as a "a liminal arena for the public performance of stigmatised behaviours" and thus a "21<sup>st</sup> century social *Agorá*, where political opinions—otherwise ghettoized in society can be freely expressed in pursuit of a wider consensus" (Testa & Armstrong, 2008). Evidently, in light of the unconstitutionality of the glorification of fascism in wider society, the "liberated" space of the stadium represents the ideal platform for neo-fascists not only for the manifestation of the neo-fascist ideologies, but also for the

recruitment of new militants. For Podaliri & Balestri (1998), this was most evident in the third phase of the ultras' evolution in the late 1980s. Within this period, concomitant to the rising presence of neo-fascist groups in "curve" and the increasing adhesion to a reactionary and xenophobic view of politics, which translated into many young ultras supporting right-wing parties such as AN, the "Lega Lombarda" and the neo-fascist "Tricolour Flame", these neo-fascist parties conducted systematic recruitment campaigns of young militants and political activists. For the authors, the clear blending of right-wing politics and football could most aptly be seen in the various professional prospects presented to certain ultras leaders due to their capacity to secure votes and generate support among the youth in the stadia. Notably, there are instances of Parliamentary Members affiliated with AN who originate from the Verona "curva", while it was particularly within local governments that the presence of such individuals associated with xenophobic and racist movements became apparent. For instance, during the November 1993 administrative elections in Rome, a combined thirteen elected representatives were linked to right-wing factions stemming from the Roma and Lazio "curve". This represents a further crucial point, namely the fact that besides the assimilation of neo-fascist ideologies by ultras groups given the affinity between their own principles and the values inherent to neo-fascism, neo-fascist parties actively recruited young individuals within the stadium stands, given the ability to overtly manifest neo-fascist convictions within this liminal space.

To understand the emergence of the football stadium as a sphere where social masks are thrown away and otherwise socially and politically unacceptable behaviors are exhibited, one has to, once again, draw on the socio-cultural significance of football. Centuries ago, ball games of various sorts primarily served the lower social classes as a means to vent the frustrations of everyday life. The violence which surrounded these games diverted the focus from more significant political issues. Consequently, given the immense social dimension of these games, political entities throughout Italian history have sought to promote them for political consensus, whether it was the Medici family and their support for "Calcio Fiorentino," or Mussolini's promotion of football. Throughout the development of football, the enormous passion of the masses for the sport led to instances of violence and actions that would be considered socially unacceptable beyond the confines of the stadium. Yet, these behavioral tendencies remained unopposed due to the increasing significance of the sport. With the sport's

exponential elevation within Italian society, it became ever more difficult to regulate the insides of the stadia. The advent of the ultras and their occupation of clearly designated parts of the stadium then enhanced this aspect. Despite attempts to introduce laws that would curb the ultras' hegemony over the stadium stands, the insufficient reaction from state authorities to the ultras' actions leads to the inference that the state has tacitly acknowledged the stadium as lawless sphere. As a consequence, unconstitutional behaviors, such as the overt glorification of fascism, are largely ignored. The adoption by ultras groups of the political ideological aspects of nationalism and socio-psychological factors of aggregation and cohesion inherent to neo-fascism, coupled with the neo-fascist infiltration and recruitment within the liberated spaces of stadia, led to the Italian "curve" being effectively turned into breeding grounds for fascism.

## **Conclusion**

The fascist convictions of ultras groups are overtly displayed and widely acknowledged, yet insufficiently explained. Numerous studies have highlighted neo-fascist infiltration in ultras groups, without however dealing with the specific elements which make ultras groups a breeding ground for fascism. To understand the complexities of this phenomenon, one must firstly adopt a socio-cultural lens to analyze the role of football and its stadia in Italy, a political perspective to trace the politization of ultras groups throughout the evolution of the movement and a historical outlook to comprehend Italy's relationship with its dark fascist path. Only such a wide and exhaustive approach can accurately explain the highly complex phenomenon of neo-fascist ideologies in ultras groups and their expression in the Italian "curve".

Deeply rooted in Italian culture, given the prominence of ball games throughout history, no other sport or form of entertainment has captivated the masses to such a degree and reached a similar level of social importance as football. Throughout its evolution, football transformed into an environment where social hierarchies became insignificant, while as a symbol of freedom and peace, the game prevailed in the most unlikely circumstances of wars and political turmoil, forcefully kept alive by the

population and authorities, given its role as a vital carefree pastime. Political authorities, recognizing the power that lay in the world of football, thus consistently undertook to fuel its evolution, be it as an instrument of consensus or to appease the masses. Given these combined elements, from its precursors to the modern version, football has consistently been characterized by profound and perhaps irrational senses of passion, which commonly transcended into violent behavior. This irrationality was exacerbated by the deep emotionality which came to fill the stadia, as fans developed profound senses of belonging to their teams and the community supporting it, while the moments of ecstasy and despair lived within the arenas further fueled the emotional attachment to both their clubs and the game of football itself. In this context, football stadia emerged as liberated spaces, almost lawless spheres of unrestrained expression, in which otherwise socially condemnable behaviors of unruliness and excessive demonstrations of passion became the norm. Authorities have scarcely attempted to curb such behaviors, as not even the Fascist regime and its advocacy for order and discipline, was able to contain the behaviors of the masses attending the matches. In light of the manifestations of extremist political ideologies, a sociological understanding of the role of these arenas is crucial.

Anti-conformist and rebellious, in the tumultuous period of the “Sessantotto”, young fans brought the ultras movement into motion. From its inception, the ultras subculture had a peculiar characteristic, namely the capacity to consistently mirror political developments and the social evolution in Italy: in its pioneering phase, ultras adopted the organizational and operational characteristics of the terror groups of the “anni di piombo”, with their names denoting their “red” or “black” political allegiances; in the 1980s, the peak of the ultras movement, the groups which either moved toward apoliticism or toward right extremism mirrored the fragmentation of political identities, the rise of individualism in Italian society and the effects of globalization on Italy; in the 1990s, in which the movement underwent a significant crisis, the Italian society’s disillusionment with politics motivated by the discreditation of an entire political class by the “Tangentopoli” scandal, was reflected by the ultras in their adhesion to the extremist ideologies propagated by rising neo-fascist organizations and right-wing parties which represented the political renewal, which translated to an increase in racism and anti-Southern discrimination; in the new millennium, the exacerbation of anti-globalization sentiment within Italian society was mirrored in the stadia by

increasing anti-immigrant and xenophobic manifestations, as neo-fascist ideals of nationalism gained further traction in the ultras world which was now in a fierce conflict with state and law enforcement, which in their view were the primary promoters of “modern football”. Mapping the political allegiances of Italian ultras a clear picture emerges. Besides the existence of a few bulwarks of anti-fascism and groups with declaredly communist ideologies, the overwhelming majority of ultras factions are right or extreme right oriented. Overall, an examination of political affiliations of these groups reveals that the socio-economic origins of the different fan bases are a weak indicator compared to the historical political allegiances of the territories from which these groups emerged from, as only groups stemming from traditionally leftist geographical areas were able to withstand neo-fascist infiltration. In this sense, the ultras became an extension of their cities’ politics, reflecting the political ideological convictions deeply rooted within their territories. In the same vein, in the establishment of the web of rivalries and alliances inherent to the ultras world, the ultras echo the inter-city rivalries deeply rooted in historical civic enmities, while also reflecting the highly characteristic element of Italian society that is “campanilismo”.

To understand the normalization of openly fascist expressions in public spaces such as football stadia, a historical excursus is necessary, to grasp the relationship of Italy with its fascist past. As has been demonstrated, the fall of Fascism and the transition toward a democratic republic was accompanied by the construction of narratives of self-absolution based on a collective amnesia of the atrocities of the Fascist regime, leading to memory discourses which downplay Italy’s role and responsibilities in World War II. The absence of an “Italian Nuremberg” was instrumental to the propagation of the image of the „good Italian”, as opposed to the “bad German”, paving the way for an inadequate construction of collective memory. Despite the fact that the Italian constitution is based on anti-fascism and prohibits manifestations of fascist glorification, Italy’s inability to come to terms with its dark past has facilitated the emergence and unobstructed rise of neo-fascist terrorist groups, organizations and parties, the latter being able to progressively move out of the political shadows and closer toward democratic legitimization without any resistance. In 1994, the government integration of neo-fascists set the stage for the swift rise of post-fascist parties like the FdI, which currently stands as the predominant political power in Italy. Today, Italy’s difficult and ambiguous relationship with fascism is physically embodied



by propagandistic monuments of fascist glorification, such as the Mussolini obelisk in Rome, which stand uncontextualized in the urban landscapes, in clear contradiction with the anti-fascist values upon which the democratic society was built.

It is based on these considerations that the elements which make ultras groups a breeding ground for fascism can be inferred. For one, equal to neo-fascist organizations, the socio-psychological factors of aggregation inherent to ultras groups, as well as notions of collective identity, foster a sense of potent internal cohesion. The value system and a conception of morality which act as a framework for the interaction of ultras, centered around unity, loyalty, honor, masculinity and territorial attachment, can equally be assimilated to the core values of neo-fascist groups, thus making ultras factions vulnerable to the adoption of neo-fascist models of behavior. Secondly, it has been illustrated how the ideology of neo-fascist ultras, influenced by the principles of "revolutionary nationalism" rooted in neo-fascism and originally stemming from Mussolini's nationalist ideals, can be characterized as resistance ideologies, stemming from the opposition to the "modern" and the protection of the "traditional". The neo-fascist nationalist belief system thus aligns seamlessly with the core convictions of ultras factions, making its adoption a coherent trajectory. Lastly, besides the integration of neo-fascist ideologies by the ultras themselves, it has been shown how neo-fascists, both militants and political figures, have systematically infiltrated ultras factions. Given the near to unrestricted liberty of expression within stadia, neo-fascists have thus used ultras factions to spread and openly manifest their ideologies, while simultaneously actively recruiting new militants. It can thus be concluded that Italy's ambiguous relationship with its fascist past is reflected both in its minimization and outright ignorance of the evident problematic of overt manifestation of fascist ideologies in the stadia, despite the unconstitutionality of this behavior, as well as in the unobstructed rise of neofascist parties and organizations, which found in ultras groups the efficient amplifiers of their political ideologies.

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## **Executive Summary**

### Introduction

The underlying dissertation aims at exploring the intricate world of ultras and how ultras factions have gradually evolved into a breeding ground for fascism. The argument put forth contends that the ultras subculture, which from its inception had the peculiar characteristic of consistently mirroring Italy's socio-political developments, also serves as a reflection of the nation's struggle to confront its fascist history. This exploration will be conducted in two distinct parts. In the initial section, the dissertation will delineate the socio-cultural dimension of football, with particular emphasis on the evolving societal role assumed by football stadia as the sport gained prominence in Italian society. Following this, the study will detail the ascent of the ultras movement, highlighting its core characteristics, the increasing politicization within ultras factions, and the ways in which these political ideologies are expressed. The second part of the dissertation will engage in a historical examination aimed at uncovering Italy's inadequate reckoning with its fascist history. This will involve tracing the process that led to the distorted depiction of the "Ventennio" in the collective memory following World War II, and how this distortion has contributed to the rapid rise of neo-fascist groups and parties. Ultimately, these analyses will shed light on the factors that facilitated the transformation of ultras groups into breeding grounds for fascism, while also addressing the question of why this phenomenon remains largely unaddressed.

### The Birth of Italian Football and Early Fandom

Italian football was born in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Inspired by the British model of "Association Football", the first Italian football clubs were formed at the turn of the century. Throughout its evolution, football assumed an immense importance in Italy. Deeply rooted in Italian culture, given the prominence of ball games played on the Italian Peninsula throughout history, no other sport or form of entertainment has captivated the masses to such a degree and reached a similar level of social importance, as football emerged as the game of the people, of the working-class and to a certain extent represented a revenge against the higher classes and elites. Over time, the game transformed into an environment where social hierarchies became insignificant and were disregarded. Whether on the field or in the stands, for 90 minutes everyone was

equal, an aspect which clearly enhanced the significance of this sport to many. Spectator numbers rose almost exponentially as the sport's popularity continued to reach new heights. As a symbol of freedom and peace, football prevailed in the most unlikely circumstances of wars and political turmoil, forcefully kept alive by the population and authorities, given its role as a vital carefree pastime. Political authorities recognized the power that lay in the world of football and thus consistently undertook to fuel its evolution, be it as an instrument of consensus or to appease the masses. Given these combined elements, from its precursors to the modern version, football has consistently been characterized by profound and perhaps irrational senses of passion, which commonly transcended into violent behavior. Violence and unruliness within this context, however, became socially accepted and the norm at matches. Football teams emerged as sources of local pride, which accentuated already existing rivalries between towns, cities and regions. The stadium progressively became a space to feel part of a community united by a common passion and live an experience of intense emotions. Moments of complete ecstasy were followed by moments of deep sorrow and disappointment, with many also venting their frustrations in ways which would be unacceptable outside the "safe" and almost lawless walls of the football theaters. The deep emotions and societal importance connected to it thus elevate football beyond the simple notion of merely being a game. An understanding of the role of football within Italian culture and society is therefore crucial in establishing the basis for the analysis of the "ultras" phenomenon.

#### Ultras: History and Characteristics

The word "ultra," originating from the Latin term for "beyond," was initially employed to characterize the "ultra-révolutionnaires" during the French Revolution and subsequently applied to the "ultra-royalistes" during the Bourbon restoration. The word "ultras" thus describes an array of differing single individuals, groupings or movements who primarily share one common trait: an intense advocacy for extremist principles that significantly surpasses the initial boundaries and objectives upon which the movement or group was founded. The term then found a new application when young football fans began forming supporter groups which exhibited fervent manifestations of passion for their football clubs within the stadia on a weekly basis. The first such extravagant and rebellious youth fan groupings emerged in 1968, with these individuals

distinguishing themselves through their non-conformist behaviors and their eagerness to gain attention and recognition. This was evident through their innovative and diverse fan customs, which included the display of large banners bearing their group's name, the presence of huge flags, the beginnings of choreographed performances, and their continuous vocal support through chants, drums, trumpets, and more. Additionally, they adopted a militant and assertive appearance, often wearing various team-related merchandise like scarves, hats, jerseys, and badges, among other items. Crucially, the early ultras were significantly shaped by the political ideologies and events of that notable period marked by substantial socio-political upheaval and growing radicalization. This resulted in these groups being deeply politicized right from their establishment. Essentially, the ultras movement, from its very outset, possessed a key trait: the capacity to mirror the prevailing socio-political shifts in Italy.

In the first phase (1968-1980) of the ultras movements' evolution, characterized by a rapid proliferation of ultras factions, the ultras were first influenced by the leftist organizations that emerged in the midst of the student and worker protests of the "Sessantotto", from which they borrowed their political language, while later adopting the organizational and operational characteristics of the terror groups operating during the "anni di piombo", with the names of the ultras factions once again denoting their political allegiances. During this initial phase of heightened political conflict in Italian society, ultras groups, comprising individuals from diverse social backgrounds, many of whom had been involved in political violence, aligned themselves with the prevalent left and right extremist ideologies, which they expressed overtly within the stadia. In the second phase (1980s), the peak of the ultras movement, the groups grew considerably in size, leading to ever more spectacular choreographies and stadium performances. Simultaneously, as political movements waned in Italy, ultras groups turned their attention to regional and more localized identities. These changes were influenced by the broader socio-political shifts in Italy during this period, driven by globalization, which led to increased mobility, demographic shifts, and changes in media landscapes, challenging traditional societal norms. Consequently, there was a rise in racist chants and banners in football stadia, while ultras groups moved toward apoliticism or more extreme ideologies, reflecting the wider fragmentation of political identities in Italian society during the 1980s, which celebrated individualism, self-indulgence and ostentation. This also fueled the rise of a new generation of ultras which

came to be known as “loose dogs”, boundary-braking individuals who disregarded the traditional models of behavior of the ultras and caused a rapid increase in violent incidents among different groups, which produced various fatalities. In the third phase (1990s), the movement faced a significant crisis due to the challenging generational shift from the "old guard" to the "loose dogs" and the state's repressive measures in response to escalating violence. Simultaneously, the Italian society's disillusionment with politics motivated by the discreditation of an entire political class by the “Tangentopoli” scandal, was reflected by the ultras in their adhesion to the extremist ideologies propagated by rising neo-fascist organizations and parties such as the right-wing “Forza Italia” and “Lega Nord”, which represented Italy's political renewal. Similar to the widespread social opposition to globalization which in the eyes of many represented a threat to Italian identity and longstanding traditions, the modernization of football with the advent of pay-TV represented a shift from the “traditional” to the “modern” which ultras vehemently opposed. The controversies surrounding the G8 meeting in Genova confirm this prevailing sentiment at the turn of the millennium, which was now more overtly expressed within the stadia through widespread anti-immigrant and xenophobic manifestations. Throughout the fourth phase (2000s), this sentiment rose in tandem with the rise of right-wing parties, leading to increasing anti-immigrant and xenophobic manifestations, as neo-fascist ideals of nationalism gained further traction within the “curve”. This last period was marked by the intense conflict between the unified ultras movement against the state and law enforcement, which progressively enhanced repressive measures and which the ultras viewed as the primary promoters of their vehemently opposed concept of “modern football”.

At the culmination of this process, a clear picture emerged: aside from a few bastions of anti-fascism and groups openly aligned with communist ideologies, the vast majority of ultras factions lean toward the political right or extreme right. These extremist convictions are expressed on a weekly basis through openly fascist, racist, anti-Semitic, anti-Southern and xenophobic manifestations, which have become the norm at Italian football matches. When analyzing the political ties of the groups, it was demonstrated how the fan bases' socio-economic backgrounds are less significant than the historical political affiliations of the regions they originate from. Only groups originating from traditionally leftist geographic areas have been able to resist neo-fascist influence. In this context, ultras groups effectively represent an extension of their cities' political

landscapes, embodying the deeply rooted political ideologies of their regions. Additionally, the intricate network of rivalries and alliances inherent to the ultras culture is influenced by both the political convictions of the different groups, as well as the historical civic hostilities between cities, whereby the distinctive Italian trait of “campanilismo” (local pride) plays a significant role.

To add to the political aspect of the ultras world, a few further complexities inherent to the ultras world deserve attention, namely the organizational structures, the socio-psychological factors of aggregation and the ritualized stadium performances. For one, it was emphasized how, influenced by the organizational frameworks of political militant organizations, ultras factions have increasingly incorporated rigid hierarchical systems and military-style chains of authority, headed by a "capo" (leader) and governed by an executive body known as the "direttivo," with regular members serving as the foot soldiers. Externally, the seemingly anarchical and lawless ultras subculture is governed by rules and moral codes established by the ultras themselves, based on the core pillars of the ultras mentality, which shape the models of behavior of the individual ultras. This moral framework is especially apparent in the laws established for violent encounters, which rely on values such as loyalty, territoriality, sincerity and tradition, according to outdated codes of nobility and honor in combat. Evidently, there are potent sociological and socio-psychological factors inherent to such behaviors. Adopting a sociological lens, the dynamics and notions of identity within ultras factions and the ultras subculture as a whole represent highly intricate phenomena. On an individual level, the stadium represents a sphere where the ultra casts aside his conventional social persona, embracing behaviors that might be deemed ethically unacceptable in different settings. Within the stadium dynamics, particularly in the "curva," individuals thus shed their societal facades, adopting a new identity aligned with their role in the group and their internalized norms. Consequently, the ultras identity holds profound significance, extending beyond Sunday matches, encompassing a distinct behavioral style that permeates both their presence within the stands and their daily lives. On a collective level, given the vital importance of internal cohesion and unwavering commitment within the groups, a socio-psychological analysis based on the “identity fusion theory” reveals decisive insight. Accordingly, rooted in the most basic human needs of acceptance and belonging, individual ultras willingly fuse and intertwine their identity with that of the group, thus producing a unique form of group association, marked by a



deep feeling of unity and complete alignment with the group, resulting in a more fluid boundary between the individual's personal and social identities. This increased fluidity, in turn, strengthens the mutual influence of an individual's personal identity on the group identity and vice versa. Highly fused individuals not only consider themselves an essential part of the group ("My group membership is a crucial aspect of my identity") but they also perceive the group through the lens of their personal self, affirming ("I am a significant part of the group"). In the ultras culture, the group itself is a superior entity, one of far greater significance than any individual, regardless of the member's social standing within the group's hierarchy, as no-one is above the group. Rooted in emotionally charged notions of territoriality which represents the tangible reference point for the internal cohesion, individuals therefore dissolve their personal identity within the group to prioritize the collective and are willing to protect the group at any cost to ensure the group's continuity and by extension the preservation of their own constructed identity. The practical manifestations of group identities can be observed in the almost religion-like devotion to their groups and their football teams, expressed in their stadium performances. Therefore, be it the ritualized stadium chants, the distinct clothing styles, symbolisms on paraphernalia, the veneration of martyrs or the mystification of the group's history, the consistent performance of the "invented traditions" of the different factions guarantee the historical continuity of the group's identities, serving as a powerful socializing force. Lastly, rather paradoxically, despite the deeply adversarial nature of the ultras world, it could be observed how individual ultras also exhibit a profound sense of belonging to the ultras "communitas" as a whole, as evidenced by the cohesion of all ultras groups against entities that threaten the existence of their subculture.

### Italy's Unresolved Fascist Past and Neo-Fascist Infiltration in Ultras Groups

The fall of Fascism in Italy and the transition toward a democratic republic was accompanied by the construction of narratives of self-absolution based on a collective amnesia of the atrocities of the Fascist regime, leading to memory discourses which downplayed Italy's role and responsibilities in World War II. In the early aftermath of the collapse of the Fascist regime on July 25, 1945, marked by the arrest of Benito Mussolini, the period spanning 45 days from July 25 to September 8, 1945, when the armistice with the Allies was enacted, emerged as the initial pivotal phase in Italy's

reckoning with the events of the "Ventennio." During this time, significant opportunities arose for the creation and shaping of narratives concerning both the past and the future of Italian society. Crucially, the fact that rather than a liberation from a foreign power, Italy had disposed of the tyrannical government itself, proved to be the foundational pillar for the construction of such narratives. The second imperative stage in shaping post-war memory narratives revolved around the German occupation and the Civil War in the Italian Social Republic that took place from 1943 to 1945. The Resistance played a crucial part in freeing Italy from German occupation and uniting normally opposing political factions, which was pivotal in shaping a post-war national identity for the fragmented country. This also bestowed legitimacy upon the emerging democratic republic, rooted in the anti-fascist ideals of the Resistance. The blend of what was seen as a self-emancipation from the Fascist regime and the establishment of an inherently anti-fascist republic facilitated a widespread disassociation from a regime which until its downfall had still enjoyed widespread consensus and which was not toppled by a revolution.

In the immediate aftermath of WWII, as massive trials in Nuremberg and Tokyo brought war criminals of the Axis powers to justice, no such judicial proceedings occurred in Italy, despite the well documented atrocities perpetrated by the Fascist regime in terms of the marginalization and persecution of Italian Jews, as well as in the colonial wars and occupations in regions including Libya, Ethiopia, Yugoslavia, Greece, and Albania. Despite an initial conviction to carry out an "Italian Nuremberg", considering Italy's challenging international situation, the risk of political radicalization and disagreements regarding the framework of such proceedings, the Allies decided not to bring Italian war criminals to justice. Ultimately, the absence of an "Italian Nuremberg" trial against Italians responsible for war crimes was primarily attributed to Italy's self-liberation from Fascism and governance under an anti-fascist government, a narrative which framed Italy as morally capable of judging its citizens for human rights abuses. This had enduring repercussions in terms of the pursuit of historical accuracy, as Italians displayed a readiness to minimize their own involvement in the Fascist regime's oppressive actions, both within Italy and on the international stage. This narrative construction was facilitated by their role in Mussolini's downfall and the subsequent democratic transformation of the country, ultimately resulting in an institutionally endorsed "collective amnesia". The explanatory frameworks that

emerged in this favorable climate after the war redirected blame away from regular Italians, facilitating narratives of self-absolution. This in turn paved the way for the self-acquitting myth of the “good Italian”, as opposed to the “bad German”, where Italy was portrayed as a nation that reluctantly joined a disastrous war, demonstrated compassion towards occupied populations, shielded them from German brutality, and even saved many Jews from German persecution. This narrative became an authentic identifying myth, making it difficult for the country to engage in an honest self-examination of its own responsibilities.

Italy’s failure to come to terms with its fascist past can most aptly be observed by the unobstructed rise of neo-fascist organizations and parties throughout the post-war period of the First Republic. Founded in 1946 the neo-fascist “Movimento Sociale Italiano” rose continuously in the Italian political sphere, gradually emerging from the political shadows without any resistance, while individuals splitting from the MSI formed militant neo-fascist organizations responsible for some of the most significant terror attacks during the “anni di piombo”. In 1994, in the midst of the political crisis inaugurated by the “Tangentopoli” scandal, the “Alleanza Nazionale” (AN), the direct successor of the MSI, was included in the Berlusconi government, thus legitimizing neo-fascist turned post-fascist parties, whose revision of history significantly weakened the Resistance paradigm and sought to delegitimize Italy’s anti-fascist post-war history. This paved the way for the significant growth of the post-fascist party "Fratelli d'Italia" (Fdi), a direct successor of the AN, whose leaders Giorgia Meloni and Ignazio Larussa have openly expressed their sympathies for fascism. In the 2022 elections, the Fdi emerged as Italy's leading political party, garnering 26% of the vote. This marked the end of a distinct process. From the fall of the Fascist regime and the early construction of inadequate historical narratives and memory discourses, to the looming presence of weakly contrasted neo-fascist groups throughout the First Republic, the emergence of neo-fascist turned post-fascist parties in the wake of the Second Republic, the revision of Italy’s anti-fascist history and the victory of the post-fascists with distinct and undeniable neo-fascist roots, fascism has resurfaced once again after decades in the shadows.

Today, Italy’s inability to come to terms with its fascist past is materially symbolized by the propagandistic fascist monuments in the urban landscapes of the Italian cities,

such as most prominently the Mussolini obelisk in the “Foro Italico”. At face value, the presence of conserved and uncontextualized fascist propagandistic sites within the context of a democratic society founded on the principles of anti-fascism is hardly justifiable. The messages contained on such monuments are in direct and unequivocal conflict with the founding principle of the post-totalitarian constitution. Unquestioning conservation and aestheticization of buildings and sites containing and communicating fascist values inadvertently empower the far-right, as the process of turning something into heritage can bestow a degree of legitimacy upon it, while the normalization of the messages contained on these monuments soften the dark legacy of Fascism. The remarkable cohesion of public opinion and politicians from across the political spectrum in arguing for the conservation of fascist monuments is indicative of the inadequate collective memory of the “Ventennio”. In this sense, the material legacies of Fascism not only represent the national struggle in addressing and reckoning with the past but may also signify a troubling sense of pride in fascism, exemplified by the significance these locations hold for neo-fascist organizations.

It is in this socio-historical context that the emergence of ultras groups as breeding grounds for fascism can be understood. For one, the neo-fascist beliefs expressed by ideologically driven ultras groups can be understood as both a result of and a form of opposition to the prevailing socio-cultural and political norms in modern Italy. Rooted in a combination of state nationalism and romantic nationalism propagated by Mussolini during the “Ventennio”, the neo-fascist revolutionary nationalism, which seeks to protect Italian traditions from the modern world which neglects the “traditional” in favor of the “modern”, speaks to ultras factions given their own battle against modernity, exemplified by their opposition to “modern football”. Ultras oppose globalization and reject the materialistic pursuits of efficiency and profit in the game, instead searching for abstract qualities like faith, courage, and heroism, while knowingly deviating from their peers and considering violence crucial to asserting their rights and values. Furthermore, neo-fascist ultras have constructed an ideology where they view themselves as pure and uncompromised, aiming to combat both the corrupting influence of money in Italian football and the Italian political system which in their eyes exhibits the same traits, with their creed therefore containing “resistance ideologies”, with intrinsic revolutionary value. In this view, the adoption of neo-fascist ideals of nationalism was a coherent trajectory for these ultras groups. Secondly,

viewed through a socio-psychological lens, the aforementioned process of identity fusion, aimed at subordinating the individual ego in favor of the collective in order to achieve a potent internal cohesion, is akin to the internal dynamics of neo-fascist organizations, thus representing a further element for which neo-fascism finds fertile ground in the “curve”. The value system and a conception of morality which act as a framework for the interaction of ultras, built on values such as loyalty, toughness, masculinity, honor, virility and courage, can equally be assimilated to the core values of neo-fascist groups, therefore making ultras factions vulnerable to the adoption of neo-fascist models of behavior. Consequently, in view of the football stadia’s role as liberated spheres of free expression, where political viewpoints that are typically marginalized in society can be openly voiced with the aim of garnering broader support, prominent neo-fascist functionaries have effectively infiltrated ultras factions to gain consensus, openly express their neo-fascist ideologies on a significant public stage and recruit new members to their neo-fascist organizations. As such, through the adoption by ultras groups of the neo-fascist political ideological aspects of nationalism, the assimilation of organizational structures and socio-psychological factors of aggregation and cohesion inherent to neo-fascism, coupled with the neo-fascist infiltration and recruitment within the liberated spaces of stadia, the Italian “curve” being effectively turned into breeding grounds for fascism.

### Conclusion

The overt display of fascist beliefs within ultras groups is widely acknowledged but not thoroughly explored. Many studies have noted neo-fascist influence in ultras groups without delving into the specific factors that make ultras a fertile ground for fascism. To comprehend this intricate phenomenon, one must adopt a multifaceted approach, including a socio-cultural analysis of football's role in Italian society, a political examination of the politicization of ultras groups over time, and a historical perspective on Italy's relationship with its fascist past. Only such a comprehensive approach can provide an accurate understanding of neo-fascist ideologies and their manifestation in the Italian "curve."

It has been demonstrated how the ultras movements' capacity to faithfully reflect Italy's socio-political shifts has also revealed the deeply rooted and latent fascist undercurrent within Italian society, which has persisted due to the nation's failure to adequately

address its fascist history. Today, the overwhelming majority of factions within the ultras world are of declaredly neo-fascist convictions, having assimilated neo-fascist models of internal cohesion, values and ideals of nationalism which strongly appealed to them. Despite the unconstitutionality of such actions, acts of overt fascist glorification, as well as manifestations of racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia by neo-fascist ultras have become commonplace in Italian stadia and met with little to no repercussions. Given the near to unrestricted freedom of expression within stadia, which throughout the rapid rise of Italian football became liberated spaces of fervent expressions of passion, neo-fascists have thus used ultras factions to spread and openly manifest their ideologies, while simultaneously actively recruiting new militants. It can thus be concluded that Italy's ambiguous relationship with its fascist past is reflected both in its minimization and outright ignorance of the evident problematic of overt manifestation of fascist ideologies in the stadia, despite the unconstitutionality of this behavior, as well as in the unobstructed rise of neofascist parties and organizations, which found in ultras groups the efficient amplifiers of their political ideologies.