RIGHT-WING RADICAL ORGANIZATIONS BETWEEN POLITICAL REPRESSION AND SOCIAL STIGMA: AN INTERNALIST APPROACH.

Rossella Borri
PhD Candidate
Centre for the Study of Political Change (CIRCaP)
University of Siena, Italy

borri3@unisi.it

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Abstract

Social movement scholars often focus on the so called *policing of protest* as a crucial aspect of state responses to radical collective action as well as a key factor related to either a favourable or unfavourable political opportunity structure for movements development and mobilization. The various strategies of state repression and the introduction of legal constraints are indeed seen as particularly influential in the adoption of a more or less radical behaviour (and attitudes) on the part of these unconventional political actors. This reasoning stems from the conception of movements as polity-oriented challengers. However, can we apply the same logic on a movement made up of organizations that are not all equally interested in accessing the polity?

Drawing on semi-structured in-depth interviews with leading representatives of 24 right-wing radical organizations from Italy and Spain, this article explores the experience of political repression and social and media stigmatization through the point of view of its “protagonists”. Building a bridge between macro-level exogenous factors and the organizational level, and going beyond the exclusive party organizational variant, the main purpose is to show how the experience of repression and stigmatization by different types of right-wing organizations (ranging from political parties and nostalgic movements to skinhead groups) is mediated by specific organizational characteristics as well as by the interactions within the movement’s alliance and conflict system. As it emerges from the stories told by our interview partners, the responses by the establishment to these radical actors are indeed differently perceived and elaborated, depending on specific cultural codes and identity traits, but also on the basis of the strategic dilemmas faced by organizations torn between identity and legitimacy.

Introduction

Concern about the demonstration of the extreme right.

“The authorities should deny permission”

Venice, Italy – On the one hand the high level of tension over possible clashes, on the other an appeal for the mobilization of the anti-fascist Venice. The situation gets heated for the event announced by the extreme right (Forza Nuova and Fiamma Tricolore) Saturday 29 in front of the station of Saint Lucia.

And with the social centers it is also mobilizing the anti-fascist Venice, with an appeal to the prefect and superintendent asking to deny authorization for the demonstration.

Il Gazzettino, 20 March 2014
This extract from an Italian local newspaper gives us an example of possible political and social responses to right-wing radical mobilization. In particular, we can highlight the appeal by the left-wing countermovements to local authorities asking to enact specific measures in order to prevent a demonstration of the radical right. Normatively speaking, the relevance of a study on right-wing radicalism has to be assessed in relation to two main aspects: history and liberal democracy. On the one hand, the relevance of the radical right in relation to “history” has to be found in its capacity to persist and reproduce itself in the course of the years. On the other, looking at the aspect of “liberal democracy”, what is most significant is the threat that right wing radical organizations pose to the fundamental democratic principles. Actually, radical right electoral breakthroughs do not necessarily lead to persistence (Mudde. 2007) and, with few exceptions, far right movements can still largely be seen as extreme fringes. However, the capacity of many of these political formations to establish themselves within their respective political systems and societies, together with their advances in getting their issues represented in the mainstream and their ability to appeal young generations and new social groups (Goodwin et al. 2012, p. 4) shows that the radical right threat is more than a marginal presence today. In fact, the political relevance of the phenomenon should not simply be evaluated according to the logic of numbers (either in terms of votes or members). What matters here is the “substance” of the threat that the radical right poses to some fundamental aspects of liberal democracy. But how to respond to this threat? Where are the boundaries of democratic practice of tolerance? And to what extent can the protective mechanisms of democracy be deployed? These questions often introduce works on political repression against extremist threats. To find an answer to these enduring questions would go beyond the scope of this short paper, which aim is to explore the phenomenon of social and state responses to right-wing radicalism from an often overlooked viewpoint. According to an “internalist” perspective, by relying on interviews with right-wing radical organizations in two countries, this paper seeks to offer an insight into the world of right-wing radicals, with a special focus on the way they perceive state and social reactions against them. A special emphasis is put on those organizational characteristics, cultural codes and
identity traits, which, together with the dynamics of each specific alliance and conflict system, are found to influence the organizations’ interpretation of reality.

The paper proceeds as follows: section one provides an overview of the literature on responses to extremist challenges; section two is devoted to theoretical issues; section three and four focus on data and method; section four presents the analysis and main findings, which are discussed in the final section of the paper.

1. Literature review

All the different approaches to the study of contentious politics – either rational choice, normative or socio-psychological approaches (Koopmans 1997) – agree on the relevance of the various and heterogeneous forms of reaction to those that are identified as the enemies of the democratic establishment. In particular, both resource mobilization and political opportunity structure theories – the two major classical strain of research on social movements – put a special emphasis on the impact of such reactions on the attitudes and behaviour of target movements. These approaches tend to focus on two main aspects of the state control strategies as explanatory factors of both movements’ emergence and mobilization strategies: the first concerns the legal-judicial measures that can constrain the activity (and even the existence) of a movement; the second aspect concerns a short-term factor, that is the so called “policing of protest”, defined as “the police handling of protest events” (Della Porta and Reiter 1998, p. 1). As for the direction of the relationship between state strategies of control (either legal-judicial or policing strategies) and radicalization/deradicalization dynamics research has not come to uniform results. Whereas some studies indicate an escalation of radicalization dynamics as an effect of (direct or indirect) tactics or individual measures of control, others stress the opposite, i.e. a tendency towards increased moderation of the movement in question. In addition, as we will see below, other studies claim the existence of a U-curve or inverted U-curve shaped relationship between repression and radicalization (Koopmans 1997).
Resource mobilization approach see movements as rational actors that act according to cost and benefits calculations on the basis of their ability to mobilize resources (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Without these resources, which can be either material, such as members or financial resources, or non-material, such as in-group solidarity mechanisms, the movement cannot achieve its mobilization goals. Accordingly, the strategies adopted by the authorities to control challenging movements are understood as constraints that have a direct negative effect on available resources, thus raising the cost of mobilization and consequently leading to a deradicalization effect. In line with this hypothesis, we can mention a study by Susan Olzak, Maya Beasley, and Johan L. Olivier (2006) based on a history event analysis of the anti-apartheid mobilization in South Africa. They find indeed that government and police repression (measured by the annual number of persons officially detained), raising the costs of mobilization, decreased the rates of protest significantly for all the three movements under analysis. Similarly, a study on the anti-nuclear movement in West Germany carried out by Karl-Dieter Opp and Wolfgang Roehl (1990) shows that repression, representing a cost for movement mobilization, has a deterring effect. If for rational choice theorist the relationship between state repression and movement mobilization seems to be unidirectional, other studies, such as those centred on the political opportunity structure theory, make different and more ambivalent predictions about the impact of state responses to political threats.

The concept of political opportunity structures was developed within the field of social movement studies (e.g. Eisingers 1973, Tilly 1978, McAdam 1982, Tarrow 1989) to indicate the degree of “openness” of the political system towards specific movements (Arzheimer and Carter 2003, p. 23). The theory is primarily concerned with estimating the degree of variance in the periodicity, content, and outcomes of social movement activism across different contexts (Meyer 2004, p. 27). Unlike previous theoretical accounts on social movements, which mainly focussed on the agency of the actors, the POS approach emphasizes the exogenous conditions related to the environment in which the movement act. In a very synthetic way, the general notion is that the configuration of political opportunities – linked to objective “fixed” institutional features, together with short term
contextual factors (e.g. della Porta and Rucht 1995) – determines an overall favourable or unfavourable setting for collective mobilization. Even though there is little agreement about indicators (Koopmans and Olzac 2004, p. 201) factors such as legal and judicial measures as well as police tactics of control affecting political movements are usually mentioned as determinants of the structure of political opportunity for a movement. Whereas, a leading POS theorist, such as Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly interpret repression as a deterrent mechanism for social movement mobilization (McAdam et al. 2001, p. 34), Hanspeter Kriesi (1995, p. 83), one of the most prominent proponents of the same model, stresses the radicalization effect of state control strategies. He mentions the “informal procedures and strategies typically employed by the authorities with regard to challengers” as one of the main factors (in addition to the formal institutional structure of the state) that define the structure of political opportunity of state challengers, thus affecting their mobilization. According to this interpretation, state strategies towards its challengers may either be aimed at their exclusion or take a conciliatory form, thus giving precedence, respectively, to repressive or facilitative measures. Accordingly, Kriesi distinguishes state strategies towards the challengers as either “exclusive” (repressive), typical of southern European countries, or “integrating” (facilitating), typical of small Western European states (e.g. Switzerland, Austria). Combining the distinction between strong and weak states and these two different state strategies he finds that a situation of full exclusion (corresponding to a strong state and an exclusive, repressive state strategy) leads to the greatest degree of radicalization of state challengers. Similarly, Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani (2008, p. 207-210) stress that the repertoire of protest tend to be more moderate in the most inclusive political systems (those that are more open to the movements claims). Conversely, political systems where exclusionary strategies prevail (thus, hostile to the claims of social movements) tend to produce radical mobilization. With a specific focus on the policing of protest, they illustrate the radicalization effect that tough techniques of repression may generate, such as in the case of the global justice movement, which violent escalation was the effect of police violent interventions during the
movement demonstrations (Ibid., p. 201). A similar effect can be observed by looking at the Italian protest cycle of the 1970s. Indeed, an in depth comparative analysis of German and Italian protest movements from the 1960s to the 1990s carried out by della Porta (1995), shows that the use of harsh policing techniques of repression against left-wing protesters resulted in a radicalization of the left-wing movement, both in terms of attitudes towards the establishment (with an increased anti-establishment rhetoric and more radical claim making) and repertoire of action (della Porta 1995). Although the main focus of the author is on the changing police strategies, she stresses the importance of the national style of conflict resolution (made up of a cultural and a formal aspect) as a structural, “stable” factor that contributes to the explanation of political radicalization dynamics. Accordingly, national structures such as for example legal codes, the structure of the judiciary and the organization of the police as well as constitutional principles (such as the German principle of “partisan democracy” against radical threats) and the characteristics of the national democratic tradition (Ibid., p.193) are understood as fundamental explanatory factor of radical escalation during a protest cycle.

If social movement studies on the topic tend to focus for the most part on short-term contextual factors such as the policing styles, Ruud Koopmans (1997) compares the effect of institutional more stable factors and situational forms of repression on the mobilization of German radical-right movement both diachronically (over a ten years time span) and across the German Landern. He comes to diverging findings: whereas situational police intervention at extreme right event is found to have an escalating effect, institutional measures (e.g. organization bans, court proceedings, etc.) tend to produce a deterrent effect.

As anticipated above, there are different models that attempt to summarize these different, contrasting effects of state control strategies on social movement mobilization. According to social-constructivist theorists the relationship between state control strategies and movements’ responses has to be evaluated also according to specific cultural and strategic circumstances (Goodwin and Jasper 1999, p.38). This may produce a U-curve relationship. For instance, in the case of radical
movements deeply rooted in a Manichean “Us vs. Them” rhetoric, repressive tactics might have a
deterring effect beyond a certain level. However, over a specific threshold, high levels of repression
may contribute to create a widespread sense of injustice (Gamson, Fireman and Rytina 1982 in
della Porta 1995, 79), which, reinforcing in-group solidarity, may stimulate a radical escalation both
in terms of anti-system attitudes and potential violent behaviour (Goldstein 1983, 340). Stemming
from a similar reasoning, other perspectives reach the opposite conclusion, hypothesising an
“inverted U-curve” shaped relationship between repression and radicalization. According to this
interpretation, radicalism would be high at middling levels of repression and low at the lowest and
highest levels (Goodwin and Jasper 2012, p 29, Tarrow 1994, Koopmans 1997). Despite the
opposite shape of these models, these perspectives share a common main understanding: first,
repression has not necessarily to be seen as cost, given that it can be an instrument for reinforcing
the movement collective identity; second, the increased openness of the political system does not
necessarily translate to an opportunity for mobilization, given that certain movements “seem to
respond more to threat than to opportunity (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996, p. 1634). In this regard,
concerning the impact of state repression on right-wing radicalism Michael Minkenberg stresses
that “repression can have the effect of stimulating in its victims a tendency towards ghetto-
formation, which can lead to the creation of clandestine networks and the hardening of radical-right
positions” (Minkenberg 2006, 43). Moreover, he adds that each attempt of tough repression, both in
terms of legal measures and policing, may set in motion a chain of events (involving the radical
right together with various institutional actors, such as the courts and the police), which can be
interpreted as a success by the radical right, thus contributing to a further radicalization of its
position (Ibid., p. 43).

The divergent findings of all these studies, either centred on the political opportunity structure,
resource mobilization, or social-constructivist approach, are also probably linked to the different
approaches to state control strategies and heterogeneous definition of the different forms it can take.
Indeed, although the two main line of research can easily be identified in the legal-judicial and
policing of protest approaches, there are fundamental conceptual and operational differences. For instance, Donatella Della Porta and Olivier Fillieule (2004) define the protest of policing style according to the combination of repressive forms based on eight main dimensions (e.g. the degree of force used, the timing of police intervention). Among the studies on the state responses to right-wing extremism, Minkenberg (2006) distinguishes different forms of repression, according to four main dimensions: (1) on the basis of the main objectives (repression of ideas vs. repression of action); (2) on the basis of the means (from a publication ban to a demonstration or even association ban); (3) on the basis of the potential effects of repression (e.g. moderation vs. radicalization); (4) on the basis of the actors involved (e.g. the police, the courts, the Ministry of Interior) as well as its targets (e.g. right-wing radical groups, individuals, publications, etc.).

Particularly relevant for the aim of this study is the aforementioned distinction operated by Ruud Koopmans (1997) “between the institutional, formal, more general, less direct, and usually legally sanctioned repressive measures taken by higher-level state authorities, such as governments or the judiciary, and the situational, informal actions of lower-level state agents, most importantly, the police” (Ibid., p. 154). Ami Pedahzur (2003), drawing on Horowits and Lissak (1990) definition of the “defending democracy”, adds the social level to these political–institutional dimensions.

As a matter of fact, the problem of scarcity of research on (and lack of a widely shared approach to) responses to radical political threats is amplified when it comes to the analysis of right-wing radical movements. Husbands (2001), for example, stresses the lack of uniform and effective instruments for evaluating the impact of social and state measures against right-wing radicalization. Within the field of studies on political extremism the literature explores mainly the legal aspect of state control strategies against the radical right (e.g. Fennema 2000), neglecting other possible responses (Minkenberg, 2006). In addition, as for the field of social movement studies, theoretical approaches to this phenomenon have been developed and are still mainly focussed on the analysis of left-wing and civil rights movements (mainly, movements excluded from full political participation fighting for civil and political rights) (Goodwin and Jasper, 2012). The literature focussed specifically on
responses to radical-right movements is very scarce so far. Moreover, despite the recent “proliferation” (Kitschelt, 2007 pp. 1176) of studies on right-wing radicalism, there is a prevailing tendency to address the issue according to one dominant perspective. This perspective is aimed at solving one main puzzle, that is explaining people’s demand for radical right politics. The majority of empirical studies on the radical right focus, indeed, on those factors or processes that lead people to sympathize, adhere or vote for radical right party organizations. Consequently, the impact of political, social and media responses to the phenomenon is generally evaluated in terms of success or lost at the polls. This has two main implications: firstly, there is an overfocus on one organizational variant of the radical right, that is political parties, whereas social movement organizations are neglected. Secondly, there is a prevalence of “externalist” approaches, which take into account factors that are exogenous to the organizations, while the viewpoint of the organization itself is overlooked. Various scholars, point to the lack of studies on the internal characteristics, mechanisms, and dynamics of radical right organizations and agree on the necessity to bring organizations back at the centre of research (see, for example, Cas Mudde 2007 and Matthew Goodwin 2006). More specifically, according to William Gamson and David Meyer (1996) the impact of political opportunities on movement mobilization is mediated by the way these opportunities are perceived. Moreover, della Porta (1995) observes that repressive strategies have a strong impact on the way collective actors perceive state reaction to them. Accordingly, the exploration of the way political challengers interpret the protective mechanisms of democracy against them is highly salient in order to understand the behaviour of this political actors and how democracy should respond to these challenges.

To sum up we can assess that, on the one hand the exploration of responses to right-wing radicalism, in all its different forms, suffers of a glaring lack of empirical analysis. On the other hand, it is also limited by the lack of an encompassing approach, which would examine the different (but interdependent) organizational forms that right-wing radicalism can assume (from institutionalized political parties to expressive subcultural movements) taking into account the
viewpoint of these actors.

2. A framework for analysis

Drawing from the literature briefly reviewed above, this short exploratory research approaches responses to right-wing radicalism according to a comparative perspective. The focus is on state and social reactions to the radical right movement in two countries: Italy and Spain. Adopting an “internalist” approach the focus is on the way these responses are perceived and interpreted by the right-wing radical organizations themselves. Here, the “objectivity” of either opportunities or costs and benefits calculation about resources gives way to a mediating factor, that is the interpretative process through which organizations can give meaning to reality and, eventually, redress their grievances (Roots 1999, p. 10; McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996, p.8). Goodwin and Jasper stress the necessity to take into account the fact that in any case opportunities are interpreted through cultural filters. Accordingly, in their view, the behaviour of social movement organizations should be seen as strictly bound to such perceptions, regardless objective opportunities (Ibid. p.33). When we talk about “classical” political opportunity dimensions such as the mechanisms of state protection as well as the availability of political allies or the obstacles posed by political or social foes, we cannot neglect the fact that, in an interactive environment, such factors automatically imply interpretation and evaluation by the actors at stake, and that interpretation and evaluation necessarily involve culture. So, organizations’ political culture (and its related values, beliefs, attitudes, and behavioural patterns) acquires a key role in the interpretation of opportunities or constraints. More specifically, right-wing radical actors are assumed to perceive and interpret reality according to strategic dilemmas which involve both the structures and the context in which these actors are embedded (with their social and political interactions) and their political culture (or subculture).

Radical right organizations are conceived as part of a movement characterized by both a strong expressive/identity dimension and an instrumental dimension which, however, should not be seen as standing in antithesis. Inner and outer realities (and objectives) are in fact considered
as coexisting within this movement. It should be taken into consideration that we are mostly talking of highly stigmatized groups, either socially or politically, which survival is constantly at risk. This requires a great strategic effort on the part of these groups, that are often confronted with important strategic dilemmas about whether to favour the goals of (political or societal) influence or satisfy the internal needs of self-maintenance. This brings us, for instance, to the so-called “paradox of the illegitimate identity” (Chiarini 1991) leading radical right organizations to downgrade identity when they pursue the goal of political legitimacy and, on the contrary, to renounce to political legitimacy when facing the need to reinforce their identity (see also Ferraresi 1995). These dynamics are expected to exert an influence on the way right-wing radical organizations perceive state reactions against them. According to this logic, such reactions have not necessarily to be seen as a cost, given that they might represent an instrument to reinforce collective identity. So, for example, in a situation where access to the polity is not the goal and, at the same time, survival is at risk, the movement might resort to the deployment of identity, through the reinforcement of the “us” vs. “them” rhetoric. Accordingly, as stressed by Koopmans, “rather than being evaded as a cost, from these movements’ perspective, repression embodies the very message that they seek to convey to their adherents and to the larger public, namely, that of a repressive political system that is in need of revolutionary change” (Koopmans 1995: 32-35).

As mentioned above, this research tackles different aspects of state and social strategies against the right-wing radical threat. First of all, on the base of the subject, I will distinguish between responses by the society and the media (e.g. civil society organizations’ counterstrategies and access to media coverage) and responses by the political establishment, i.e. the legal constraints posed to the movements’ mobilizations and policing strategies. In addition, in this regard, as suggested by Pedahzur (Ibid.), I will take into account informal and “covert” strategies of the establishment or the society against right-wing radicals.
Secondly, drawing on Koopmans (1997) and Pedahzur (2003), I will focus on the timing of the response, thus distinguishing between “long-term” vs. “short-term” situational responses. Thirdly, the difference between preventive vs. reactive responses will be evaluated.

To sum up, assuming that (1) access to the polity is not necessarily the ultimate goal of all right-wing radical organizations; that (2) negative state or social responses are not necessarily a cost for these kind of organizations, I hypothesize that the experience of state repression and stigmatization is mediated by specific organizational characteristics (structure, cultural codes and identity traits) as well by the interactions within the movement’s alliance and conflict system.

3. Case selection and unit of analysis

The choice to compare state and social reactions to right-wing radicalism in Italy and Spain stems from the fact that both countries are advanced parliamentary democracies, they both experienced a late industrialization and now have similar socio-economic development and labour market. Moreover, the socio-cultural environment of these two Mediterranean Catholic countries shows considerable similarities. In addition to this, there are considerable similarities as regards to factors that are particularly salient to the study of right-wing radicalism and that set Italy and Spain somewhat apart from other European countries. First of all, they share the common legacy of a fascist regime. Moreover, they have undergone a profound transformation over the last two decades, signing the shift from being emigration to immigration countries. Their geographical position at the borders of Europe, is favouring an intense flux of legal and illegal immigration and the saliency of the matter, both in the social and political discourse, is unprecedented.

Despite these similarities, the radical right milieu in the two countries shows great differences. Spanish radical right parties have always been considerably weak, in a status of permanent exclusion from national institutions (none of these parties have ever entered the Parliament nor has ever received support from mainstream centre right parties – Casals 2012). The milieu is characterized by a the presence of a constellation of small neo-falangist “nostalgie” and
“nationalist” formations (parties and movements), which, however, (also according to the viewpoint of the organization representatives interviewed) can be referred to the same area: the so-called *mundillo patriota*, “patriot” world. There are very few parties and movement organizations that can be ascribed to the area of the new right. The subcultural milieu, composed by small very “fluid” not-formalized organizations and lone-wolves is closer to the area of Spanish hooliganism than to the area of politics (Buttner, 2011). Differently, the Italian radical right have always had a greater degree of “success” in term of opportunity to access the political system. As commented by Chiarini (2011, p. 141) Italy “is the only Western democracy in which a political force that unmistakably harks back to fascism can be observed in the institutions of the state”. For instance, since the mid of 1990th Italian right-wing radical formations have often been accepted as coalitional partners by the main centre-right parties (Koopmans and Statham 1999, 227). Moreover, from the cultural point of view, the milieu appears as more dynamic (but also more fragmented and internally contentious) than in Spain. As an example, we can mention the recent (and successful) creation of right-wing radical social-centres, an unprecedented form of right-wing mobilization, which draw directly on the left-wing experience. Accordingly, we can assess that whereas Italian right-wing radicalism has considerably evolved and transformed over the past years (under the strong influence of the French Nouvelle Droite in the past and of the European populist new right-wing movement today), conversely, in Spain, the right-wing radical movement has been not able to “renew itself through the acquisition of the so-called New Right values” (Rodriguez Jimenez, 2008).

The choice to focus on both organizational types is motivated by the need to tackle the radical right beyond the exclusive electoral perspective. This political area is indeed characterized by both party and non party formations, both with a strong subcultural component and deeply interconnected among themselves. Whilst at the country level the comparison is between Italy and Spain, at the organizational meso-level the focus is on the different organizations clustered according to the organizational form they take (political parties and political movement organizations). Given that
factors such as identity traits, cultural codes, as well as the availability and type of resources and interaction strategies might change from one organizational variant to another, I assume that also the organizations’ reactions to institutional and social strategies against challengers might be different.

4. Research method and sampling strategy

The data were collected through qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with organization leaders who were asked to answer according to the official viewpoint of the organization. Fourteen interviews were completed for the Italian case and ten were collected in Spain. All the interviews were conducted face to face and they were digitally recorded. The interviews length ranged from two hours and a half to fifty minutes. The interview trace was standardized. I always posed the questions in the same order and the phrasing of the questionnaire was strictly respected. These interviews are part of a wider project on the drivers of right-wing radicalism and the semi-structured questionnaire was constructed to focus on several aspects related to the characteristics, strategies, norms and positions of the organizations. For the scope of this article I relied on responses to “open” questions on the main problems of the different organizations according to the perceptions of their representatives and on their alliance and conflict interactions.

As stressed above, the analysis focuses on both radical right parties and non-party organizations. The sample tries to encompass in both countries the most heterogeneous types of far right organizations, and not the “modal instance” or “average” ones within the two organizational variants. On the basis of sources of different kinds (academic literature, electoral data, reports from democratic observatories), and by applying a “snowball” technique, I could reach a total of 24 organization in the two countries.

Table 1. Information about the sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N.</th>
<th>Name of the Organization</th>
<th>Type of organization*</th>
<th>Role of the interviewee</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>SEU Sindicato Espanol</td>
<td>PM</td>
<td>Spokesperson</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. A comparison of Italy and Spain

5.1 The Spanish case

5.1.1 Legal constraints and state repression

In the case of Spain, the interviews reveal a high degree of homogeneity with regard to the answers of the interviewees, who frequently express similar perceptions of state counteraction strategies.
against them. Indeed, all the interview partners (with only one exception) perceived constraints from the establishment as a problem for the activity of their respective organizations. However, they did not frequently mention specific anti-extremist law measures, whereas they claimed the existence of less explicit strategies against them, often more “subtle” (Int. 7). Indeed, Spanish interviewees, often stressed that on the legal level the Spanish system is quite permissive (“not as tough as the German legislation” – Int. 10) and “the degree of freedom is high” (Ibid.). However, as one of the interviewees said: “in theory there are no restrictions, but in practice there are!” (Int. 8). In this regard, they claimed that the problem is the method of implementation of some legislative or administrative provisions (es. Int. n. 2, 6, 7, 8). The representative of the Spanish Frente Nacional claimed: “one thing is the official interpretation (that is how they see the matter) and another is how they use the law” (Int. 7).

In particular, the interviews reveal the diffuse perception of a covert hostility by the authorities towards their organizations. The majority of the interviewees, in this regard, mentioned the difficulty in obtaining authorizations for public acts and events of their organizations (Int. 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8). According to this view, the many procedural obstacles to the granting of the event permissions (posed by the city police or local representatives of the government) are in fact, aimed at preventing any kind of public activity of this political area. The representative of the Hermandad de la Vieja Guardia, a nostalgic falangist movement, reported as an example that “when you ask for the authorization for any kind of act on the street, they tell you that it would disturb the traffic flow, or that it is not possible during the requested time slot… they also fine us for anything we do!” (Ibid.). Similarly, the representative of Falange Española, said that even though they are a legalized organization “every time they pose more complications when we ask permissions for our events. They require us more documents…they hinder us” (Int. 2). Another interviewee, in this respect also claims that in case of negative answer to a request of authorization, the authorities sometimes reply “just a couple of days before the event, so that you do not have enough time to make a formal complain” (Int. 7).
If the public activities of radical right-wing organizations are, according to the views of the interviewees, obstructed by covert strategies of the authorities, part of the Spanish interviewees express a similar perception with regard to the access to more institutionalized forms of political participation. Some of the leading representatives of Spanish right-wing radical parties interviewed mention, indeed, the Spanish electoral law as a hard restrictions aimed at the eradication of any dissent coming from their political area. This is perceived as a major obstacle to the political activity of their organizations. Above all, interviewees referred to the procedural norm that ask political parties to collect a specific number of signatures in order to be admitted to take part to the elections. Spanish Organic Law 2/2011, requires parties that have not been represented in any of the two chambers in the previous election, to collect at least 0.1% of signatures of the voters registered in the electoral constituency in order to be admitted to the electoral competition. According to the viewpoint of the interview partners, this mechanism would prevent their participation, being the public collection of a high number of signatures particularly difficult for parties that are highly stigmatized. This interviewees explains this as follows:

*I do not know if you know the Spanish context. However, if we go out on the street, a left-wing group passes by, and we say that we are falangists, they surely beat us up!* (Int. 9)

In addition, as reflected in the extract below, the same interviewees describes this electoral law provision as a form of control by the authorities on the organization:

*If we want to run for election in the constituency of Madrid – which, with its 6 millions residents, counts a very high number of voters – they require us to collect 0.1% signatures with the identity document of the person, their personal data…This is a way to control who supports the party. Thus, people are reluctant to sign. […] It is really hard, that people would sign, unless you are talking of someone already very compromised and who knows you since a long time. This is because they are afraid of feeling stigmatized like us* (Int. 9).
Moreover, two of the Spanish party representatives (Int. 3 and 9) stressed the existence of an additional protective mechanism of the government against them within Spanish policy of gender equality. It concerns the Spanish Equality Law, passed in 2007, and, more specifically, the provision which requires political parties to choose roughly equal numbers of men and women in candidate lists (respecting a share of no more than 60% and no less than 40% of either sex on candidate lists in each group of five candidates). The interviewees, perceived this provision (exactly as it is in the case of the collection of signatures in the electoral law) as an additional attempt to limit the right to run for office. As emphasized by one of them: “They are going to deny it! It will disappear!”(Int. 9). Indeed, according to their point of view, this law negatively affects especially small and stigmatized parties, for which it is particularly difficult to find people disposed to run for office. In this regard, the representative of the Falange Española de las JONS commented: “It is not worthwhile for the institutions that a real alternative do exists and the facts confirm this: equality law, 0.1%...What do they want? Two parties? A plain two-party system?!” (Int. 3).

Interestingly, when asked about the problems caused by the legal constraints affecting their organizations, Spanish interviewees seldom mentioned national anti-racism legislation. This is probably connected to the peculiar characteristics of the Spanish radical right. Indeed, differently from its European counterparts, racist anti-immigration and anti-Semitic discourse is not central for all right-wing radical organizations (see for example Rodríguez Jiménez, 1999). Neo-falangist parties and movements are in fact primarily concerned with internal national politics, and focus mainly on matters that has to do with the nationalistic myth of *Hispanidad* (Spanishness), the defence of Spain from separatist threats and social problems, above all unemployment. The opposition to immigration and racism have indeed remained peripheral in their discourse. As a matter of fact, as it has been noted (Rodriguez 2012), even with regard to its electoral discourse the Spanish radical right has been unable to capitalize on the issue of immigration. Only the representative of the Catalan party Plataforma per Catalunya (which is one of the few Spanish anti-immigration parties ascribable to the so-called new radical right party family – Hernandez Carr...
2011, p. 49) made reference to these measures as a problem, mentioning the attempt by the authorities to accuse them of racism and xenophobia (Int., 10).

Whilst, according to the interviews, nostalgic movements seem to be immune to the Spanish anti-racist legislation, other legislative provisions appear to be more effective in their regards. One of these provisions is the Law on Historical Remembrance (Ley de Memoria Historica), passed in 2009, which prohibits commemorative events at the Valley of the Fallen, a memorial site (and nostalgic place of pilgrimage for falangist), where the founder of the Falange and the dictator Francisco Franco are interred. In this regard, the representatives of the two main (an oldest) falangist parties (Falange Española and Falange Española de las JONS) described this law as a “strict and sectarian” measure (Int. 3) and an additional tough obstacle posed by the state to their activities. This perception is openly expressed by the following quotation: “if it is done in order to restrict further our political action they are going to succeed!” (Ibid.).

5.1.2. Social and Media Stigmatization

Whilst this last interview extract indicates the perception of the Law on Historical Remembrance as an actual obstacle to the capacity for action of the organization, the representative of the Spanish National Front gave a different interpretation. He, indeed, perceived this law provision more as an effort by the political institutions to trigger a mechanism of social stigmatization against the radical right than a concrete legal constraint. The interviewee accused the state of an attempt to “demonize the ideas” of his political area by describing the ideological challengers as the “absolute evil” as in “a movie of ‘buenos y malos’” (‘good vs. bed people’) (Int. 7). In a similar vein, most Spanish interviewees expressed a perception of injustice, or, more precisely, to be victim of injustice by the state. Patrizia Catellani, Patrizia Milesi and Alberto Crescentini (Klandermans and Meyer 2006) in their research based on life history interviews with individual right-wing radical activists in Italy reported:
“interviewees [...] stated they were victims of injustice, not so much material as social injustice. They perceived they were discriminated against because of their ideology, and they stressed that the negative consequence was not so much being deprived of material benefits or social position, but not having the right to express their ideas as openly as anyone else.” (Ibid., p. 216)

The authors also stress that the interviewees expressed the perception of the society as unfair as a consequence of the way the recent history of fascism, Second World War and the Italian Resistance against fascism is interpreted (Ibid., p. 216-217). Spanish interviewees in this research showed similar perceptions when it comes to the way the society interprets the history of the Spanish civil war and Francoism. However, according to their understanding, the blame for this misinterpretation is not attributable to the society, but it is due to the distorted version of events given by the state:

_The problem comes when they want to translate the civil war in a history of good people and bad people. They want to propagate the idea that Marxists were the absolute good whilst the ideological opponents were the absolute evil! (Int. 7)._

_All the bad things that happened during the civil war are being attributed to us. This influences the public opinion [...]. This is manipulation and given that people do not read so much and they are so misinformed, they believe to everything (Int. 8)._

In a similar vein, another interviewee, blamed this misinterpretation of national history, describing falangists as ‘the only ‘bad guys’ of the civil war” (Int. 9). However, at the same time, he criticized the cultural unpreparedness of the Spanish mainstream right, which, on the one hand was “culturally unable to reply and tell people how things really were” during the civil war and, on the other hand, it was unwilling to react to this cultural offensive and say the truth about the falangists, defined as “the stigmatized” (Int. 9).

The establishment cultural offensive against right-wing radical organizations is indeed perceived as a part of a broad strategy aimed at creating a situation of social discrimination. This perception
contributes to exacerbate the “Us” (victim of injustice) vs. “Them” (the establishment conspirators) rhetoric which distinguishes right-wing radical organizations. In this regard, it should be highlighted that, in line with this rhetoric, the society (the people) is perceived as an innocent player, who takes part unconsciously to the stigmatizing strategy carried on by the establishment. Therefore, this latter player, which, according to the interviewees includes the state as well as the ‘communists’ and the mainstream right (Int. 7 and 9), is seen as the direct culpable of the social discrimination of these political actors.

All the interviewees include an additional central actor in this strategy of stigmatization of Spanish radical right organizations, the national mass-media, which, according to this view, “silence our voice” (Int. 7) and give a biased imagine to the public:

*They give us space only when it is in their interest, when they can present a distorted picture of us, a picture of extremists, the pirates [...]. This is what they want: the bugaboo which scares children! (Ibid.)*

Again, as it happens in the case of the establishment, the media are perceived as responsible of a discriminatory strategy, which is addressed against right-wing radical movements at the expenses of a blameless society. The society was indeed described as an additional victim of state and media strategies:

*It is a matter of unawareness more than mistrust. Given that institutions and the media do not allow us to communicate, the people have a biased idea about us (Int. 2).*

*People’s distrust stems from the fact that we cannot get our message to the people. If we could do it I am convinced that we would perform much better [...]. So, people distrust is a partial problem. The real problems are the informative boycott and the boycott by the regime! (Int. 9)*
In the discussion about the problem of stigmatization and its causes Spanish organizations only incidentally mentioned the role played by civil society countermovements such as left-wing extremist opponents and anti-fascist ‘watch-dog organizations’ (Int. 2, 6 and 7).

To summarize, in the case of Spain, the interviewees perceive that the opportunities for action of their organizations are hampered by a mix of long-term legal constraints and short term “situational” measures. Whereas the former are mainly addressed to political parties (e.g. the electoral law) the latter affect the mobilization of both right-wing radical political parties and movements (e.g. the granting of authorizations to hold demonstrations or other kind of public events). On the whole, these measures, which have a prevalent preventive aim, are perceived as obstacles to the access to political participation, both in the area of conventional politics (taking part to an election) and movement mobilization (holding demonstrations, rallies, etc.). In addition, the interviews reveal a widespread perception of social stigmatization and a diffuse sense of injustice within the Spanish radical right. However, as stressed above, the stigma does not come directly from the society, seen as an unconscious player in these strategies. Indeed, according to the organization representatives, stigmatization of this political area is intentionally fuelled by the covert strategies of the establishment and the media.

As a matter of fact, it is worth noting that none of the measures (with the exception of the law of historical remembrance) defined by the Spanish interviewees as a major problem for their organizations is neither a formal anti-extremist law provision nor it is part of an overt anti-extremism repression policy. In fact, as highlighted, according to the viewpoint of the interviewees, the toughest constraints to their activity come from the “subtle strategies” (according to the interviewees’ definition) enacted by the establishment with the complicity of the national mass-media.

5.2. The Italian case

5.2.1. Legal constraints and state repression
Whereas Spanish organization representatives express a similar perception of national constraints (or, more precisely, the “subtle” strategies) as a problem, interviews reveal an higher degree of variance among Italian organizations. These perceptions were indeed different as for what concerns interviewees from different kind of organizations. As for Italian right-wing radical parties, none of the leading representatives interviewed described the national legal framework as a main problem with regard to the activities of their organizations, even though they perceive it as too strict and unfair in some respect. Two legal provisions in particular are often mentioned by the interviewees: the so-called “Scelba Law” (Law 645 of 1952) and “Mancino Law” (Law 205 of 1993) – from the names of the respective promoters. These two criminal law provisions, are, at present the most relevant instruments to combat racist speech and acts in Italy. The first forbids the reconstitution of the fascist party, and bans any movement that has anti-democratic goals, use or exalt violence, engages in racial propaganda and denigrates democracy. The second condemns actions and slogans related to the nazi-fascist ideology, aimed at advocating racial, ethnic and religious discrimination. In addition, it extends to these fields the provisions of the Scelba law.

In a discussion about these two laws, the representatives of the Italian party Nuova Destra Sociale, for example, stressed that their party “have never had a problem in this regard” even though they defined these law provisions as “liberticidal laws that limit the freedom of speech” and that for this reason should be abrogated (Int. 14). Moreover, similarly to what happens with Spanish parties, some Italian party representatives defined national electoral rules as “too strict” (Int. 21), “with electoral hurdles that prevent people from voting for us” (Int. 12) and as an attempt “to keep organizations like ours out from the Parliament and even from small local administrations” (Int. 14). So despite the fact that they recognized the presence of strict “unfair” restrictions, on the whole, they did not evaluate the Italian political system as particularly repressive in their regards.

On the other hand, when it comes to the least institutionalized organizational variants, a different picture emerged. First of all, as the interviews reveal, most interviewees from Italian right-wing movement organizations perceived national legal constraints as a problem. Second, although the
majority converged on this orientation, there were three significant exceptions. As for the former point, the interviewees similarly described the Italian system as very repressive against right-wing movements. They mentioned, for example, the “boycotts” (Int. 15) of the institutions against their organizations. The representative of the Italian movement Fronte Nazionale claimed that “the Mancino law is a sword of Damocles, because it is such a generic law…Because anything you say, you discriminate on religion, race …”. Similarly, the representative of the Italian youth group Patria Nostra defined legal constraints and repressive strategies as very hard, and he claimed that “whatever we do ‘they’ just bring out the fact that we are rightists in order to invoke the Scelba and Mancino laws [...]” (Int. 13).

Interestingly, also in the case of Italy, interviewees denounced the attempts by the institutions to constrain their mobilization. However, unlike in the Spanish case, here the interviews reveal the perception of a different kind of state reactions. Spanish interviewees expressed the perception of a constant and persistent covert strategy by the establishment, aimed at limiting their capacity for action. Differently, Italian movements’ representatives perceived to be addressed by repressive measures which were more episodic and “reactive” than part of a real counteraction strategy, as the following quotations illustrate:

*I would say that in a phase when we are weak they are quite permissive, however when we get stronger they become very restrictive.* (Int. 12)

*It can happen that they decide to prohibit a demonstration at the last minute as it happened in Milan with Forza Nuova. However, we can contract a bit with the police in order not to disturb public order (Ibid.).*

In order to understand the deviation from the common perception expressed by the three Italian movement organization representatives who do not judge the Italian situation as particularly restrictive in their regards (Int. 11, 17, 23), we should look at the configuration of the conflict and alliance system within which the organizations operate. In this regard, indeed, two different
attitudes towards the institutional system do emerge. Indeed, these three exceptions apart, all the
other movement representatives stressed that their organization did not have any kind of contact
with mainstream political actors, and they all firmly stated to refuse any interaction “with all the
main parties in the Parliament” (Int. 12), above all those of the centre-left and centre-right. The
leader of the Veneto Fronte Skinhead, for example, claimed that his organization opposes “any
political party included in these two ‘hodgepodge’, which are two parts of the same coin” and that
“this does not change from one government to another” (Ibid.). In a similar vein, the representative
of the right-wing social centre Casapound stressed:

*the parties most in contrast with our goals are those of the centre right as for what concerns what
they want vs. what we want for the country, whereas when it comes to direct contrasts our main
opponents are obviously those of the centre-left* (Int. 16).

This positions are in line with the “antagonistic” identity of right-wing radical movement and the
“Us” vs. “Them” rhetoric, which on the one hand separates “the goods from the beds” and on the
other helps to reinforce the in-group identity when the search of political legitimation is not at stake.
As stressed by the literature (della Porta 1995), in the effort to strengthen internal solidarity by
lengthening the distance with the out-group, movement might even rely on the adoption of the most
radical strategies either in terms of anti-system attitudes and behaviour. Here, the protective
mechanisms enacted become an instrument to fuel the sense of injustice. As claimed by Koopmans
in this regard “repression embodies the very message that they seek to convey to their adherents and
to the larger public, namely, that of a repressive political system that is in need of revolutionary
change (Koopmans 1995: 32-35). On the contrary, when the search for legitimacy is not excluded,
social movements tend to strategically moderate their attitudes towards the political system.
Consequently, the mechanisms of state protection (both on the part of the state and on the part of
the challengers) – and the related injustice frame – do not need to be activated. This is the case of
the three movements in question. Thy are indeed the only organizations interviewed within the
movement organizational variant, that do not preclude contacts and even cooperation with mainstream political actors. The following interview extract can be quoted as an example of the link between the search for legitimacy and perception of political repression:

*Political repression is not harsh at all, because we are not extremists, because in our movement the culture of extremism is not present while there is a culture of political integration. Many of us had been local administrators, ex leading members of Alleanza Nazionale.. Full integration. (Int. 11)*

### 5.2.2. Social and media stigmatization

When asked about the problem of social stigmatization most interviewees show a similar perception of the situation. Similarly to the Spanish case, they denounce the information boycott enacted by the political establishment and the media as one of the main problem for this political area. At the same, as their Spanish counterparts, they see the Italian society as an unaware victim of this, as the following quotation illustrates:

*People distrust would not be a problem at all if people could know us. Unfortunately, there is an interpretation of us which leads to distrust. We are depicted as friend of the bandits, of the terrorists. The problem is communication. If you do not have the means of communication... The media do not give you the means. For example, did you know something about our position? Newspapers talk about it either in a biased way or do not talk about us at all! (Int. 18).*

Similarly, the representative of the movement organization Movimento Nazional Popolare, in a discussion about the informative blockade addressed to this political area, expressed the perception of a “system that has been manipulated by the ruling class” *(Int. 12).*

An additional interesting finding emerges from the interviews with regard to the perception of the counteractions by the Italian civil society organizations. All the representatives of youth movements stressed the existence of conflicts with the extreme-left countermovements ;“above all, the ‘antagonist left-wing social centres’ and the anarchic movement” *(Int. 23)*, i.e. the “natural”
enemies of this political area. However, they do not perceive these contrasts as a major problem for their organizations. According to the interviews this appears more to be part of the normal every-day life of these organizations. Surprisingly, apart from youth movements, none of the other Italian right-wing radical organizations refers to the same dynamic. On the contrary, various interviewees talk about problems caused by the frequent contrasts with organizations belonging to the same right-wing radical area (Int. 12, 14, 20).

To sum up, on the whole, the responses of the Italian interviewees show a greater degree of variation in comparison to the Spanish case. This finding mirrors the greatest heterogeneity (and, as emerges, tendency to internal conflicts) of the Italian right-wing radical organizational milieu. The interviews reveal different interpretations according to the organizational form of the movement. Indeed, on the one hand Italian political movements emerge as more affected than parties from both national law constraints and situational repressive strategies. On the other, similarly to what happens in the case of Spain, the mobilization capacity of political parties seems to be weakened by the most informal, “subtle” strategies of the state and the media. As in the previous case, and in line with the populist right-wing radial style, the society is not hold responsible for the stigmatization of these organizations. Finally, the movement vs. countermovement dynamic which, according to the interviewees, affects the area of youth organizations is not perceived as a weakening factor by the representatives of these organizations. As assumed, under specific circumstances, counteractions can be perceived as an opportunity to strengthen in-group solidarity vs. the out-group.

6. Discussion and conclusion

So, according to this short insight into the world of right-wing radicals in Italy and Spain, how do these radical actors perceive state and social reactions against them? And what are the mechanisms which drive their interpretation?

This paper was built on the assumptions that access to the political system is not necessarily a goal for any political movement and that political and social reactions to extremism should not
necessarily be seen either as costs for the organization or closed opportunities of access to the political system. As it is shown, indeed, negative responses by the state and the society can assume different meanings according to the characteristics, goals, and kind of interactions of an organization. Here the strategic dilemma between identity and legitimacy is found to play a significant role.

As for the case of Italy, for example, the interviews reveal that, on the one hand, those organizations interested in accessing the political system (all the political parties and the three movements that, according to their own assertions, are more “state-oriented”) do not perceive anti-racist and anti-extremist law provisions as threats. Being institutional legitimacy their main goal they strategically tend to adopt a more moderate style in comparison to their movement counterparts that overtly deny any contact with institutional actors. However, despite the fact that these organizations are not concerned by these law constraints, they overtly express disapproval in their regard. In some cases they even support their abrogation. After all, the boundary between the need for legitimacy (towards the outside) and the need to strengthen internal identity is very thin for organizations of this type. On the other hand, there are those organizations that portray themselves as antagonist with respect to the institutional system. These actors insist on their distance from institutional politics and mainstream political actors “of the system”. In line with the “paradox of the illegitimate identity”, this negative attitude towards the outside, leads them to the necessity to resort to expressive mechanisms able to reinforce internal identity in order to survive. In particular, the amplification of the “Us” vs. “Them” rhetoric through the adoption of radical behaviour and attitudes may be seen as an effective way to reinforce in-group solidarity ties. That is why measures specifically aimed at sanctioning or preventing this kind of expressions – above all, the informal “subtle” strategies of the authorities to prevent mobilization events – are perceived as a problems for these organizations. At the same time, other forms of reaction might be perceived as opportunities to strengthen the “in-group” (in a dynamic of opposition towards the “outgroup”) rather than costs. This is the case of left-wing movements’ counteraction strategies against youth
groups of the far right in Italy. On the whole, Italian responses to the far right, according to these interviews, are not perceived as tough as in the case of Spain. They predominantly affect political movements, while the “degree of freedom” of right-wing political parties seems to be greater. Moreover, Italian interviewees describe a kind of repression that is more episodic and reactive. Differently, in the case of Spain, interview data show a more encompassing and effective strategy (or, according to the viewpoint of our interlocutors, a harsher strategy) against the radical right than in Italy. It emerges that state measures effectively affect both those movements that seek political legitimacy and those that operate relying on expressive, identity-reinforcing strategies, regardless their organizational form. Indeed, interviewees describe a situation where the access to both the conventional and expressive forms of participation are closed, due to different kind of state measures, that are perceived as part of the same covert strategy. We have seen the case of Spanish falangist and neo-francoist parties: on the one hand, their way to institutional access is blocked by legal constrains (long-term formal measures), and, on the other, their capacity of mobilizing identity resources is precluded by both short-term situational factors (the “subtle” state strategy”) and more stable formal factors (the Law of Historical Remembrance). This picture mirrors the Spanish reality of a weak movement unable to emerge and evolve: “una presencia ausente” (an absent presence), quoting the words of Javier Casals (2001).
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