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‘Caring for the nation.

Men and women activists in radical right populist parties’

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Final research report

This project involved a comparative analysis of the gendered dimension of activism in two radical right populist[1] (RRP) parties: the Northern League (NL) in Italy and the National Front (NF) in France. Through an ethnographic investigation of RRP activism, ideology and policy, the research tackled the issues of how, on the one hand, gender shapes the two parties’ strategies as well as the trajectories, narratives and practices of their activists; and, on the other, how gender relations are transformed within these mobilisations, at the interplay with class and age. The methodology of the research involved collecting approximatively 100 interviews (life histories of male and female activists of the two parties and semi-structured interviews with relevant party representatives) as well as conducting observations. The data were collected in different sites over thirteen months in 2012-2014: Paris, Nice, Hénin-Beaumont and Lyon in France; and Milan, Bergamo (Lombardy region), Verona and Treviso (Veneto region) in Italy.

A review of the existing scholarly literature on gender and RRP support as well as on women’s participation in rightist movements, including RRP parties, pointed to some limitations, which this project has addressed.

First, most quantitative studies of RRP which take into account gender are interest-based, focusing on how men and women are differently affected by economic globalisation, while

[1] The RRP party family shares ideological traits and organisational structures: nationalism (or minority nationalism) and xenophobic positions based on the doctrine of ethno-pluralism, an emphasis on the society intended as an organic unity, an anti-globalisation stance, anti-political establishment populism, charismatic leaders and a strong presence in civil society (Rydgren 2005, Zaslove 2004).

qualitative research on rightist movements has investigated women only, focusing mainly on issues of values and beliefs, such as those concerning the traditional family (Blee 1996). Indeed, as Kathleen Blee (1996: 684) notes, existing explanations of rightist affiliation tend to be 'gender-dichotomous'. Rippeyoung (2007) stresses the need to provide a more complex picture of women's motivations for RRP support beyond the attachment to 'feminine' values such as the family, and also to consider to what extent men too may be attracted to these parties because of their attachment to the same values. The existing qualitative studies of gender in rightist movements importantly provide insight into the patterns and forms of women's participation in these movements; however, by considering women only, they fail to systematically compare the practices of women and men (Bacchetta and Power 2002, Blee 2002, Blee and Linden 2012 a, Ginsburg 1987, Mayer and Sineau 2002, Mulinari and Neergard 2014, Rommelspacher 1999). None of the existing qualitative studies of gender in the NL and the NF (Avanza 2009, Durham 1991, Erdenet 1993, Laroche 1997, Levy 1989, Mayer and Sineau 2002, Scrinzi 2014 a, Venner 1997) consider the experiences of both men and women members. Only one study of RRP members, focusing on the Netherlands, involves some comparison of men and women (Blee and Linden 2012 b). Similarly, studies of rightist masculinities have not compared male with female members: focusing on men only, they have shown that the racist discourse is predicated upon the representation of white men as emasculated and as victims of feminism and of ethnic minorities (Ferber 2000); and that men may be drawn to these organisations because they identify with the hegemonic definitions of gender which these groups celebrate (Kimmel 2007).

Second, studies which include men in the analysis of gender relations in collective mobilisations are rare (but see Le Quentrec 2009). In other words, as Olivier Fillieule (2009: 70) notes, there is a lack of studies which compare the gendered impact of activism on the lives of men and of women: existing studies of gender and social movements mostly focus on female activists. This is a major limitation to our understanding of how gender impacts on political engagement. Indeed, gender is relational and centrally defined by the social hierarchy between men and women; the gendered division of work is a crucial site for investigating gender relations in a way that avoids conflating the notion of gender with the category of women. Men are gendered social actors who develop strategies to maintain their material and symbolic privileges and to accommodate themselves with changing relations of gender, thus contributing to transform dominant models of masculinity (and femininity) (Connell 1987).

Third, recent studies of RRP and gender (Akkerman and Hagelund 2007, Farris 2012, Towns, Karlsson and Eyre 2014, Scrinzi 2014 a, Woodcock 2010) are mainly concerned with the parties' ideology and political programmes. These studies say very little on the (male and female) members of these parties, with one notable exception which however considers women only (Mulinari and Neergard 2014). Further, those recent studies which examine masculinity in RRP parties have also focused on issues of ideology, suggesting that heteronormative masculinities are underpinned by the systematic use of family metaphors in the discourse of these parties (Norocel 2013) and exploring the connections between RRP and anti-feminist movements (Keskinen 2013). In other words, in existing studies of RRP and gender an emphasis is placed on the novelties and continuities in the gendered discourse and policy of these parties, while recent changes in RRP are not investigated through the lens of activism, including the gendered division of political work (Dunezat 2009) and the impact of political engagement on women's and men's lives (Fillieule 2009). We need to know more on how female and male activists negotiate gendered changes in RRP propaganda.

Responding to these recent debates lying at the intersection of RRP studies, the sociology of racism, the sociology of social movements and the sociology of gender, the project aimed at producing a truly relational analysis of gender in RRP, addressing the following issues:

- *The sociological invisibility of women members and their agency in RRP parties*: In 2007, Mudde (2007: 97) noted that 'one of the least studied subfields of the populist radical right is party membership in general, and the role of women therein in particular'. So far, few studies have investigated the role played by female activists in rightist social movements, as indicated in a recent review of the literature in this field (Blee and Creasap 2010). Through an ethnographic 'internalist' (Blee 2007, Goodwin 2006) approach, the project contributed to compensate for the resilient lack of data on women's active involvement in European RRP; the project examined the agency of women members in RRP parties as well as the ways in which gender relations are both reproduced and transformed through activism inside the social movement. How is the activism of women made invisible? How does gender antagonism emerge in the activists' group? How do women resist their marginalisation within the parties?

- *The gender-specific motivations, patterns of affiliation and experiences of RRP members*: by systematically comparing the trajectories, narratives and practices of both male and female members, the project shed light on the complexity of women's (and men's) gender-specific motives for RRP affiliation beyond a gendered conceptual dichotomy. How does gender intersect with class and age to shape affiliation patterns? Are women underrepresented in RRP parties because of gender-specific models of socialisation, as Mudde (2007) has speculated?

- *The gendered impact of RRP activism on men's and women's lives*: the project investigated how political engagement can re-configure the public/private divide and examined the gender-specific 'biographical consequences of political engagement' (Fillieule 2009: 60) on both men's and women's activities in other spheres, such as the family, employment and religion. How can women be empowered through their activism in these parties? How do male activists enact or challenge the dominant models of masculinity celebrated by the parties across the public/private divide?

- *The changes in RRP ideology and politics on gender and the gendered dimensions of contemporary forms of racism*: finally, as Kathleen Blee and Sandra McGee Deutsch (2012) have noted, summing up the literature which has been developing in this field for the past twenty-five years, there is a need for studies investigating how women's activism and gendered politics in rightist movements change over time; and for studies of gender and rightist activism in cross-national perspective. The research examined how RRP has accommodated with evolving positions on gender in two different national contexts – Italy and France.

Gender and RRP parties' strategies in comparative perspective

The comparative perspective sheds light on how the gender equality frame is differently negotiated by different RRP parties and how it impacts on different contexts. Indeed, the two countries display significant differences with regard to the social construction of Otherness and of national belonging, models of integration, migration patterns, colonial history and immigration policy. Two discourses are dominant in recent debates on immigration and multiculturalism: in France, the condemnation of the cultural sectarianism (*communautarisme*) ascribed to migrants and ethnic minorities is prominent, connected with

the French 'republican' model of integration. In Italy, due to the influence of the Catholic Church on political debates, there is an emphasis on condemning the moral and cultural relativism of those who speak in favour of multiculturalism (Rivera 2010). The disapproval of cultural relativism is the Italian equivalent of the French condemnation of cultural sectarianism. The former is located in a context of weak secularism and the prominent association of national belonging with Catholicism, despite the growing distance of the Italian population from the Catholic Church (Marzano and Pace 2013); the latter is linked to the values of *liberté*, *égalité* and *fraternité* which, together with secularism, constitute a powerful resource to secure political legitimacy (Perrineau and Rouban 2012). France and Italy display crucial differences with regard to the place of religion in politics and society, and the prescriptive role played by the Catholic Church in framing public debates about immigration as well as gender, the family and social policy.

Through an investigation of documentary sources and interviews with relevant party representatives and party members, the project analysed the NL and NF ideology and policy on gender and the family, pointing to their similarities and differences as well as to their evolution over time. A diversity of positions can be observed in European RRP parties, ranging from 'traditional' to 'modern traditional' views of gender (Amesberger and Halbmayr 2002). In the former, women are seen exclusively as mothers and it is claimed that they should return home to fulfil their 'natural' role. In the latter women's work is tolerated; however, women remain primarily responsible for social reproductive work. Under the new leadership of Marine Le Pen, the NF positions have evolved from a 'traditional' to a 'modern traditional' approach to gender. Nonetheless, the core of the NF policy with regard to both gender and immigration has remained stable over time and an essentialist view of gender remains at the heart of the party ideology. Since its origins, the NL has been characterised by a 'modern traditional' approach to issues of gender. Women's paid work is explicitly supported as long as this does not jeopardise their domestic responsibilities. The NL policy on issues of gender and the family reflects the party's ambivalence vis-à-vis women's labour. However the overall impact of the actions on work/family balance implemented by the party while in political office has been limited. In the context of the current economic crisis, both parties tend to refrain from positioning themselves on themes of society and the family, once a key field of intervention for them; instead, an emphasis is placed on economic and fiscal issues.

The repertoires used by the two parties to frame their political actions on 'women's issues' as well as their relationships to feminism were compared. These differences are linked

to the models of integration and the construction of Otherness which are dominant in France and Italy. That the NF (unlike the NL) no longer has a women's sub-organisation is quite typical of the current 'republican' party line. In the 'republicanised' (Shields 2013) NF, the idea of a women's group organised within the party no longer appears to be acceptable. Since 2011, together with the Catholic fraction, the party has marginalised its traditional discourse celebrating women as mothers and housewives. Further, the NF mobilises arguments – such as the condemnation of 'cultural sectarianism', which is posited as violating Republican unity – which have been developed and used by some feminists in recent public debates about parity laws in France. Despite Le Pen's pragmatic attitude on issues such as abortion and same-sex partnerships, women's as well as gay political mobilisations are not given legitimacy in the party.

This is in striking contrast with the NL approach to women's politics, where women's collective actions are accepted and indeed mobilised by the party propaganda, including the self-organisation of groups of female elected representatives lobbying on 'women's issues' in local and national institutions. On the one hand, this is linked to the important presence of NL elected representatives in these institutions, which is not the case for the NF. On the other, this NL specificity should be linked to the repertoire used in Italian debates on multiculturalism. Women-only politics are tolerated and even promoted in the NL, based on the claim that they exemplify action which – unlike the policies advocated by feminists and left-wing parties – is 'truly' in favour of women.

The project also analysed the gendered strategies through which the two parties provide their members and potential recruits with gendered sources of identification as well as with opportunities for celebrating these gendered collective identities – such as women's sub-organisations or campaigns on 'women's issues'. Both parties represent RRP politics as a struggle for women's rights or to protect women from the sexual attacks of the racialised Other or as a form of caring for the nation, and the nation as a community where women are respected by 'their' men[2].

[2] RRP parties have mobilised the issues of women's rights and gender equality in public debates which emerged in the 1990s on the limitations of multiculturalism and on migrants' integration, associating immigration with sexual violence and gender conservatism. They no longer frame migrants merely as welfare scroungers as well as a threat to the national cultural identity, the economy, and the safety of the population, but also as a threat to gender equality. RRP parties treat gender equality as a standard against which a superior national self can be measured against inferior foreign others (Akkerman and Hagelund 2007, Scrinzi 2014 b, Towns, Karlsson and Eyre 2014). Thus ethno-pluralism is applied to define women's rights as a cultural trait which is specific to Europe as opposed to other 'cultures'.

Thus the cross-national perspective contributed to on-going debates on the categorisation of the RRP party family across Europe (Mudde 2007, Rydgren 2005, Zaslove 2004), by providing insight based on the analysis of gender. In so doing, the project responded to a call for further research investigating the differences in gendered appeals and positions on the family of RRP parties in different countries (Mudde 2007, Rippeyoung 2007).

Trajectories, narratives and motives of RRP men and women activists

The project explored the gender-specific trajectories of NL and NF activists. The impact of motherhood, fatherhood and domestic responsibilities related to elderly care was examined, including how these affect activists of different generations and class backgrounds. Significant differences relate to the postponing of family responsibilities by younger women and the outsourcing of care work by middle-class households. Gender and class differences were further investigated through the comparison of patterns of 'couple-activism' or 'family-activism' in middle-class as opposed to working-class households. More specifically, an overlapping of the social networks concerning the family, employment/livelihood and political engagement emerges in these families, whereby working-class women perform activism mainly to support the husband's candidacy while middle-class women eventually achieve public and autonomous albeit marginal positions through their activism. In addition, female activists play an important role in the political socialisation of their children and younger family members, in connection with the gendered division of work across the public/private divide: having to combine their activism with their domestic chores, RRP women more often than men bring their children with them to activist actions or meetings.

The research also analysed the impact of gender and religion in shaping the RRP activists' motives for affiliation, and how men and women use gendered repertoires to make sense of their activism, through reference to national belonging, to their domestic responsibilities and to their jobs. In existing studies, RRP women appear as 'compliant' members, with little ideology behind their affiliation. Instrumentality may be a motive for their joining the movement – to the extent to which affiliation enables them to maintain a relationship with other members (Blee and Linden 2012 b). The project data revealed, however, that only a minority of women were 'compliant' members. Further, while immigration/identity issues were paramount in the motives of both women and men, only a minority of women, often belonging to the parties' Catholic fractions, explicitly associated their political engagement with the defence of their family.

A higher number of women instead made sense of their activism as 'caring for the nation', as a socially useful activity to help the weakest members of the national community. Sometimes this narrative on activism as caring for others paradoxically included the racialised Other. Through this narrative, RRP members thus turned the accusation of racism back onto their political opponents: migrants are thrown into economic hardship and social exclusion by the mainstream parties' favouring of 'mass immigration'. In this respect, the research concurs with existing findings from other studies (Mulinari and Neergard 2014). Women also described their activism through reference to their jobs/studies in feminised sectors constructed as low-skilled, where emotion work is important, and claimed that in their activism they use skills and techniques taken from their jobs (nursing, childcare, social work). At the same time, they made sense of their jobs by using the symbolic frames provided by the party: for example, describing supporting people with psychological issues or helping people to find work as defending the national community from unemployment and despair caused by immigration.

Some men, too, mentioned family values as a motive for affiliation. Older men tended to explain their affiliation through their role as economic breadwinners in the family; however younger men identified with 'modern' models of masculinity and fatherhood, for instance describing migrants as deviant and bad parents and migrant families as disrupted environments where future criminals are raised. In addition, a few men considered their political engagement as a form of 'caring for the nation' and described their role in the party (also) in relation to domestic roles such as fatherhood, for instance with regard to their mentoring and sustaining the emotional and political development of younger members. Unlike the women, all those men who used a 'caring for the nation' narrative were practicing Catholics and claimed that solidarity is a defining value of Christianity as opposed to Islam. However, most men in both parties used military metaphors (as opposed to domestic metaphors) to describe their activism. Men also made sense of their activism through reference to their (skilled) managerial jobs, in relation to coordinating activists or organising party branches and actions.

Reproducing and challenging gender relations in RRP activism

The project analysed how gender is both reproduced and challenged through activism in the two parties, at the interplay with class and age.

Gender is reproduced in the activists' group through a gendered division of work which cross-cuts the public/private divide. Women, more often than men, perform admin work,

provide catering for social events, decorate the venues of party gatherings (including sewing cockades or traditional costumes at home), host political meetings in their homes and recruit/contact new members (including meeting them at their places); in so doing they fill important 'informal leadership' roles and sustain the activists' group cohesion. In the parties women take on political roles connected with the family and social issues while men focus on economic issues and immigration. Some women do billposting but men rarely do admin and very rarely do tasks associated with catering/care work. Billposting remains a symbolically charged task, often carried out at night and reserved to men as a site where hegemonic masculinity is displayed. Thus the gendered division of the activists' work distinguishes between more valued masculine work and less valued (apolitical) feminine tasks; and corresponds to a distinction between different times (night/day) and spaces (private/public sphere) of activism.

This gendered division of party work is widely justified by both men and women through essentialist assumptions. The women themselves contribute to making their work invisible by naturalising their political skills through reference to their unpaid domestic work. For example, the relational and emotion work supporting the cohesion of the activists' group or the visibility and self-esteem of male party candidates was described as based on so-called innate feminine qualities. Some women refrained from identifying as activists and, even if they performed key activist tasks, described their participation as volunteer 'care work' for elderly party members.

The project also examined how gender norms are challenged in the activists' group and how women may be empowered through their activism. The analysis focused on the transformation across time of the gendered patterns of political engagement at different periods of the activists' biographies. Changes in the gendered division of work in the family and in the party are affected by class, age and the life-cycle: women may move from being 'compliant' and passive members to investing in politics as an autonomous sphere of activity, in correspondence with personal events such as divorce/separation and widowhood, which also affect their livelihood and economic role in the family. Conversely, following separation/divorce middle-class men were induced to renegotiate their relationship to unpaid care work in the family and their commitment to the party, challenging hegemonic models of masculinity.

Further, the research explored the relationship of RRP women to feminism and to the issue of women's discrimination. Some female activists overtly criticised sexism in the parties and the wider society. More specifically, the research focused on the female members'

resistance to the construction of their work as 'apolitical' both as individuals (in the NF and in the NL) and, in the case of the NL women's association, as a group. This association provides women with a unique non-mixed space – absent in the NF – where lower middle-class and working-class women in their 60s gather and exchange experiences of gender inequalities. Many more NL than NF female activists complain about sexism in society and/or in the party, suggesting the crucial role of a non-mixed feminine space in diffusing a critical view of gender relations and in promoting the activists' identification 'as women' in competition with national and partisan allegiances. At the same time, several female NF activists mentioned their being attracted to the NF by the modern image of femininity embodied by Marine Le Pen. Differences among the women's attitudes to acknowledging gender inequalities in society and in the parties could also be observed in relation to age and the life-cycle. Despite this overt criticism of women's discrimination in society and their marginalisation in the party, all the activists – both men and women – expressed an essentialist view of gender relations.

Criticism of sexism in their parties was expressed by several women through a populist repertoire typically used by the NL and the NF to attack mainstream political parties. Female activists use ideas of gender to criticise internal hierarchies in the party, associating them with gender inequalities and attributing the lack of internal democracy and the disregard for the activists' hard work to the local male leadership. Dominant ideas on women's selflessness and devotion to the public good are also mobilised to draw distinctions between different party fractions.

Finally, several informants in both parties – albeit with differences linked to religion and age – expressed tolerant positions on contraception, abortion, divorce, homosexuality and same-sex civil partnerships and, in some cases, on gay marriage and adoptions by gay couples, thus indicating the evolving attitudes of NL and NF party members. Divergent views on issues of sexuality were also linked to regional subcultures, resulting in heated debates between activists of different local groups.

The gendered construction of the enemies of the nation

The research examined the gendered processes through which the outsider/enemy is socially constructed in the activists' group, focusing on the figures of the racialised Other on the one hand and the parties' political opponents on the other.

While only a few women in the NF expressed criticism of gender inequalities and sexism in the NF and in French society, many NF activists – especially women but also men – were

vocal in attributing sexism to the racialised Other. Among those women who described the racialised Other as misogynist there were also some women of the NF Catholic fraction, who mentioned the defence of the family as their main motive for joining the party; thus the perception of migrants – more specifically Muslims – as misogynist overcame differences related to the women's attachment to 'traditional' or 'modern traditional' models of femininity. Such representations were also widespread among the NL activists, especially among women. The perception of the racialised Other as misogynist also characterised female informants of different generations. Further, male activists of different generations identified with hegemonic traditional models of masculinity, describing immigration (as well as feminism and gay mobilisations) as emasculating European men. Gender models dominant in the past (pre-WW1, pre-feminism, pre-1968) were idealised: female activists described them as characterising periods when the family was not in decline and where women were not threatened by migrants in public spaces; male activists described them as times when modernity, feminism and immigration had not yet undermined the traditional family. Women activists experienced the activists' group as a space where they were protected from the attacks perpetrated by the racialised Other, including sexual violence, and where men respected women. NL and NF men were described as chivalrous and ready to defend their women. While both men and women criticised migrants and particularly Muslims for being sexist, only female activists described the NL and NF's political opponents as sexist organisations which fail to defend women's rights, where women's presence is tokenistic and where female politicians' careers depend on their granting sexual favours.

In addition, the project considered activism as a site where men and women come to hold and express anti-immigration views as well as their experiences of stigmatisation. The activists' group functioned as a space where individuals were provided with the gendered cognitive frameworks through which they expressed their anti-immigration views. In the party meetings the activists often exchanged their experiences of stigmatisation and anecdotes concerning migrants' wrongdoings. While the stories told by NL male activists cast migrants as a threat to physical safety and the safety of one's property in the public sphere, NL women exchanged their (negative) experiences as employers of migrant care-givers in the domestic sphere, representing them as a threat to the domestic decorum and well-being of the family. Thus women mobilised the racialising constructions used by the NL propaganda to make sense of the relationship with their migrant employees in the home. Training sessions addressed to young NF members, focusing on stigmatisation and how to deal with mischievous journalists, reflected the effort put by the NF into de-demonising its

public image. The practices of managing the activists in collective actions of NF local coordinators also focused on de-demonisation and emphasised stigmatisation. The experience and perception of stigmatisation involved gender-specific roles, as women were considered to be more exposed to physical attacks by leftist activists; the limited presence of women among the NF activists was explained through their duty, as mothers, to protect their children from physical violence and from stigmatisation by outsiders.

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