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## The UltraS: An Emerging Social Movement?

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### Abstract

In recent years, there has been a rise in the conflict between the Italian police forces and football fans. This situation is a result of the resurgence of the UltraS (the S capital is a neologism of this study to suggest neo-fascist oriented fans' and to differentiate them from the wider hardcore football supporters -ultra'). However, despite their popularity among the Italian *curve* (football terraces), the UltraS have been the subject of fairly little ethnographic research. This paper is the result of ethnographic research conducted continuously between 2003-2006 and updated from 2007 to the first part of 2009. The research sought to evaluate the UltraS phenomenon via an examination of the internal and external dynamics of two nationally well-known groups located in the Italian capital of Rome (the Italian centre of the political power). The groups are the *Boys Roma* and the *Irriducibili* of Lazio who enact their performances on their respective curve (football terraces) of the city's Olympic stadium. The present paper argues that the ideological alliance between the UltraS of Lazio and Roma (followed as example by other UltraS groups throughout Italy), the death of Lazio fan Gabriele Sandri in 2007 (and concomitant violent UltraS' reaction against the police) together with the existence of the *UltraS Italia* (a national organisation which unites the main Italian Ultras groups) are all elements that signify the beginning of a common meaningful opposition to the perceived repressive Italian State. Most importantly these elements appears indicating the UltraS as an emerging social movement.

**Keywords:** UltraS, Fascism, Football, Social movement, Mobilization

### 1. Introduction

*Since the beginning of our constitution, we have had clear ideas about politics in the stadium. We believe it cannot be avoided, because every man, hence, every UltraS, has his own ideals and beliefs, and it seems right that especially in this place of aggregation he can manifest them* (Juventude Crociata -Crusade Youth), (Note 1)

Neo-fascist manifestations are not new phenomena in the Italian *curve*. However the UltraS, as they exist today, are different to those who preceded them. The above statement of the *Juventude Crociata*, an UltraS group of Padova, well represents the progressive sense of ideologisation of the Italian *curve*. This study argues that there are adequate ideological, behavioural and cultural elements manifest in the *UltraS* to conceive them- similar to the arguments of Gentry (2004) regarding gatherings of extreme right skinheads- as manifestations of an emerging social movement.

Taylor (in Klandermans and Mayer 2006) argues that social movements never originate from a vacuum but they arise from precedent experiences. The UltraS would support this claim and indeed find their roots in both the Italian youth neo-fascist and the hardcore football supporters movements (Note 2). However, before delving into the UltraS as Social Movement hypothesis, it is fruitful to outline their historical emergence. What follows illustrates the UltraS origin from the wider Italian hardcore supporters (*ultra*) (Note 3) and allows us to see how the *UltraS* constitute at least in part a particular response by one section of Italian youth towards the social, cultural and political restrictions that they encounter within the broader social system.

### 2. *Ultra* to the UltraS

The UltraS grew out of *ultra* gatherings. The term *ultra* was used to indicate generically (regardless of political orientation) all hardcore Italian football fans (invariably males between the ages of 16 and 40) that manifest behaviours that at times exceed that considered the 'norm' in linguistics, bodily comportment and ultimately violent practices. The word finds its etymology in French political discourse. During the Restoration period (1815-1830) the word *ultra-royaliste* indicated partisan loyalty to the Absolute Monarchy. The *ultra-royaliste* championed the interests of property-owners, the nobility and clericalists. They were the supporters of authority and royal tradition in contraposition

to the philosophies of human rights and individual freedoms proselytised by followers of the Enlightenment.

During the 1950s Italian football was characterised by a - generally - relaxed and informal football fan culture. Fan club offices were places to buy match tickets and gather with the like-minded to collectively listen to the state radio match commentary when the team played outside the town. The football match was a parochial town event; it was a social gathering and whilst episodes of violence were present they never acquired tragic tones. Aggressive acts were often remarkably comical; umbrellas were occasionally thrown at referees by furious fans. There were, on occasion, scuffles between opposing fans usually around long-standing district and regional rivalries and, sometimes fights were evidenced amongst groups supporting the same team over both on-the-pitch incidents (Cf. Roversi, 1992). In this era, violence in the stadium was not correlated to notions of a 'social problem'. Acts of supporter intemperance and aggression were explained as individual predispositions or as a result of the match events causing mass distemper (Le Bon 1895; Zimbaro 1969).

The chronology of the appearance of such *ultrá* (hardcore football fans) groupings is hotly debated. While Roversi (1992) argued that the first violent clashes between Italian rival fans occurred during the 1970s, the English sociologists from the Leicester University Centre for Football Research criticise this native-born assertion, claiming that such episodes have occurred since the origin of modern Italian football and cite an event in 1959 during a Napoli versus Bologna match when 65 people were injured following a pitch invasion. This dissertation favours the interpretation of Roversi whilst accepting that the debate arises out of a misunderstanding of that considered fan intemperance to that which defines the presence and practices of those considered *ultrá*. The late 1960s are the crucial fulcrum between these two paradigms.

The first half of the 1970s witnessed large sectors of Italian youth, from diverse social classes, practicing a form of socio-political insubordination. When combined with an exaggerated hostility against any form of authority and the elaboration of stylistic (subcultural) peculiarities a general juvenile tumultuousness was manifest. In this temporal frame emerged the hardcore *ultrá* football supporter gatherings in and around the football stadium. According to Italian sociologist De Biasi (1993), this extreme form of support was novel to Italy and intentionally innovative, rebellious and carnivalesque. The appeal of such gatherings to Italian youth at the end of the 70s was a sign that Italian politics (and trade unions) had lost any monopoly they may once have had of mobilising both youthful and general public opinion and indeed their behaviours (Triani, 1994). In a 1975 poll conducted by the Italian magazine *Panorama*, Italian youth were found to be generally in favour of leftist ideology (86,8%) with just 7% favouring the right and a mere 6% claiming to be moderates (cited in Marchi, 1994). The majority of the football *curve* also proclaimed a tendency towards left-wing ideology.

A geo-political logic was evident between place and belief. Ideological divisions of Italian society, reflected in cities and regions, were usually mirrored in the political sympathies manifest at the local football stadia. The Veneto region, customarily hostile to communist ideology, saw the majority of their football supporters sympathetic to either the conservative Christian Democrats or to neo-fascist parties. In this era one could find Left-wing hardcore football fans groups included the AC Milan *Brigate Rossonere* (Red-Blacks Brigades), and the *Brigate gialloblue* (Yellow-Blue Brigades) of Modena. On the opposite side, it was possible to find the Verona's *Brigate Gialloblu* (Yellow-Blue Brigades), and the *Boys SAN* of Inter-Milan (constituted by members of the *Fronte della Gioventu* -the Youth Front Organisation of the Italian neo-fascist party *Movimento Sociale Italiano*). These groups together with the *Boys Roma* can be considered the first manifestation of what this study identifies as the *UltraS* movement.

Apart few exceptions mentioned earlier, the hardcore football fandom of the 1970s was not meaningfully political. Grisipigni (1993) argues that the 'death' of politics and the associated disillusionment were characteristics of Italian youth of the time: 'which returning from the disappointment of the movement of protest of 1968 and 1977 transferred the generational conflict from the political to the sports arena' (quoted in Triani 1994, p. 75). The youthful pursuit of collective identification, excitement and conflict were to be satisfied henceforth in the football context via identification with colours, symbols and territories of football-related belonging. This pursuit could be very consequential.

### 2.1 The Rise of the *UltraS*

On the 28th of October 1979 a petard fired from the *curva sud* by Roma supporters during the Rome derby killed a Lazio supporter named Vincenzo Paparelli (Cf. Mariottini, 2004). The same day, football-related violence occurred in the cities of Ascoli, Milan and Brescia causing many injuries and widespread criminal damage. This was an important date for Italian football; football spectators' violence from now became a key issue in media discourse, state institutions and public opinion. The latter called for repressive measures from the State to eradicate the *teppisti* (ruffians). Many house searches of suspects were subsequently made by the police targeting the most notorious individuals. Headquarters of hardcore football fans groups were raided and banners, drums and choreographic materials seized (Borghini, 1987).

The escalation of the hardcore football fans' violence, between the seventies and early eighties, indicates transformations in the movement during the second phase of its development. It was in the eighties that the Italian hardcore football fans movement reached its apex for participants and episodes of violence. The development of a

complex of friendships and rivalries regulated at first glance by the logic of the 'Bedouin Syndrome' ensured ostensibly that the friends of an ally became friends, and the enemies of an ally were enemies. (Bruno, cited in Marchi, 1994). This simplistic formula was, however, open to challenge arising out of historical antecedents and personal and political negotiations. The organising took on new dimensions. The exacerbation of security measures – such as CCTV surveillance and hand-held metal detectors at stadium entrances – manifested most notably a 'militarisation' of the stadium. Stadia took on the appearance of a fortress with police surrounding the vicinities and parading internally in large numbers clad in riot gear. This forced a polarisation of groups in the hardcore football fans gatherings that had hitherto co-existed. While the policing impositions reduced episodes of violence in the stadium a 'dislocation effect' saw a concomitant rise in violence outside the stadium in town centres, railway stations and tube stations (Roversi, 1992).

The 1980s ended with serious incidents of fans violence (Marinelli & Pili, 2000). In 1988 during an Ascoli versus Inter-Milan match, Nazareno Filippini was killed by a group of Inter Milan hardcore fans having been repeatedly struck by kicks and punches. On the June 4th 1989 during a Milan versus Roma game, a Roma supporter Antonio De Falchi died of a heart attack following an assault carried out by rivals from Milan. Amongst the traditional factions, younger formations appeared who celebrated their boundary breaking. By the mid-1980s new gatherings had joined the *curve*. These were the *cani sciolti* ('mug wumps') a neologism which equates to 'Hot Heads', i.e., those difficult to control - a term applied to youngsters by the organised *ultra* groups (Vincenti, 2000). These youngsters did not recognise themselves in any pre-existing fan groups – nor did they seek such a correlation - and did not collaborate with pre-existing supporter formations. They did not originate out of schisms within the established groups; they were autonomous from all pre-existing fan constitutions. The majority of this new demographic, invariably aged between 14-16 years, was lacking in political consciousness and had little historical knowledge of the *ultra* movement. These gatherings were significant in being more interested in self presentation than preserving links that stressed historical solidarity and wider group cohesion (Roversi, 1992). Having no pre-existing social framework from which to learn or act; theirs was a clean slate but one that was on occasion more vicious in its form of opposition, and less responsive to those who shared their football loyalties.

The new *curve* formations represented an Italian society that during the 1980s celebrated individualism, self-indulgence and ostentation. As a consequence the era saw a refusal in much of its young generation to engage or participate in matters that were political or required a sense of dedication. The nomenclature of the *curva* groups reflected this ethos. Names with political connotations were substituted by those linked to psychological conditions and drug and alcohol consumption. Example of these gatherings were the *Sconvolti* (Deranged) and *Kollettivo Alcoolico* (Alcoholic Group) *Wild Kaos* and *Aranzia Meccanica* (Clockwork Orange- from the controversial 1971 Stanley Kubrick film with its dystopian vision of violence nihilism)( Note 4). The dislike and opposition to such metamorphosis was showed in the constitution of groups in the more notorious *curve* such as Roma, Milan, Bergamo, Naples and Genova which took on them the title *Vecchia Guardia* (Old Guards). The *UltraS* groups continued the cult of masculine 'hardness', quasi-military organisation, and attachment to territory but added values now more meaningful based in the doctrines of fascism. Neo-fascist philosophy gained the same revolutionary significance as the communist ideology once had with its myths, particularly those around Che Guevara. From the early 1990s *UltraS* groups throughout Italy started to display more and more on their banners common emblems or mottos related to neo-fascism (Marchi, 1994). The *Boys Roma*, and others like them in Cagliari, Palermo, Sora, and Turris used the two-edged axe symbol of *Ordine Nuovo* (New Order) as an identifier.

That such displays were evident in and around football should not surprise a reader. The 1990s were a decade of profound political and economic crisis for Italy. An entire political system was falling apart under the acts of *Tangentopoli* (Bribesville) (Note 5); public opinion was tiring of corrupt politicians. The electorate punished the distrusted political parties which were decimated in the corruption inquiries of the Italian magistrates. Sentiments of political renewal were represented by extreme parties such as the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (Italian Social Movement) that subsequently became *Alleanza Nazionale* (National Alliance) in 1995, or by new political parties such as the *Lega Nord* (founded in 1996) and Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* founded in 1994 (Pagani, 2003). Both parties have recently (in 2009) merged in the newly constituted *Partito della Libertá* (Freedom Party) chaired by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. The era also saw the increased popularity of national revolutionary movements on the extreme right spectrum such as *Forza Nuova* (New Force) and *Fronte Nazionale Sociale* (National Social Front), and the reaffirmation of extreme left ideological parties such as *Rifondazione Comunista*.

At the moment of writing (2009), the extent and diffusion throughout Italy of gatherings that share the same *Irriducibili* and *Boys'* ideology and logic is remarkable (see Table1). In 2009, the *National Observatory on Sport Events* of the Italian Minister of the Interior (Note 6) confirmed the existence of 58 *UltraS* groupings and circa 15000 members throughout Italy. The *UltraS* are, thus, a relatively large nation-wide grouping that interacts across regions. Whilst they are not a threat to parliamentary democracy, their very existence is a stain on the Italian body politic. The political concern that they carry with them is two-fold; they are prepared for violence and they are unpredictable having unknown potential.

### 3. The UltraS Collective Identity

Over the past 20 years it has been possible to witness in the *curve* not only a rise in ideologisation but a concomitant increase in UltraS' politicisation. Simi et al. (2004) stress the main elements of the process of politicization which can be applied to the UltraS namely the belief in the possibility to resist /change things for a common cause. For the UltraS the common cause is predominantly their very survival, having common opponents (these are the police, media and football institutions); resorting to tactics such as 'supporters' strike' (where they refuse to support the football teams during the match to voice their discontent). Further shared elements are willingness to violence, public protest campaigns and a recognisable organisation, which in the last two years is starting to emerge into the newly found *UltraS Italia* (see later). The politicisation process among the UltraS marks the development of their collective identity; an important attribute of any social movement. Collective identity is a sense of 'we' based on cohesion and solidarity around which individuals act (Cf. Simi et al. 2004; Klandesmans 1997). Traditional rivalries among the UltraS groups, as this study indicated, can be forgotten to resist a perceived persecution of the State against their common way of life.

The capital of Italy, Rome, can be considered a good example about the capability of the *UltraS* in their struggle against the Italian State. The UltraS of Roma and Lazio have gradually preferred the resistance against the State, its repressive laws and the police, to 'ordinary' clash against rival fans. Whilst aware of differences, 'Marco' of the Boys underlines the *cameratismo* (comradeship) between the two gatherings of the Boys and *Irriducibili* while indicating at the same time the common ideological based logic:

*The leader of our group had a personal friendship, based also on the same ideological outlook of life, with one of the Irriducibili leader. When he died in 2005 all the Direttivo [management board] of the Irriducibili attended his funeral and raised their hands doing the roman salute in sign of respect. We are more explicit and openly political than the Irriducibili. We produced a banner stating 'No American peace on my land!!' We are anti-Nato [they do not want American Bases in Italy]. We are against Italian soldiers in Iraq; we do not want to waste Italian blood for an American war'*

Similar dynamics are emerging among *other UltraS throughout Italy*. Few in Italy would ever imagine the possibility of the hardcore *tifosi* (fans) of Juventus and Roma sitting together in the stadium and watching a football match. This is actually happening with the *UltraS Italia* who gather to watch and support the national team as the symbol of the concept of *Patria*. In 2009, I asked 'Todde' of the Boys, who had recently been involved with the group, about the *UltraS Italia*. Namely, I questioned if there were aspects in this group to consider the *UltraS Italia* as an expression of the ability of the *UltraS* to organise themselves at a national level. The answer was positive; he told me that currently the number of the members was approximately 600 and that the *camerati* of Lazio, Roma and Inter had recently joined the project. Other members were drawn from Juventus, Ascoli, Verona, Udine, Trieste, Napoli, Genova and elsewhere. In 'Todde's analysis the same logic valid to explain the *Irriducibili* and the *Boys*, was valid for the *UltraS Italia*. Even if many of the members were neo-fascist sympathisers they considered themselves autonomous from any political party. The national mobilization of the UltraS, which is pertinent to their being considered a social movement, is manifest by their 'direct' actions. Direct action takes several forms. At its most 'primitive' it is exercised by banners containing messages of accusation and defiance displayed in the stadium. At a high level it is evidenced by social campaigns aimed to what the UltraS perceive as 'just'. Direct action is also demonstrated at an organizational level via their radio programs that proselytise and propagate their ideas against the 'system'. Whilst these typologies have become a constant 'background noise', when the issue is considered meriting, *the UltraS* can mobilise and attack the State.

Although I cannot affirm yet that the UltraS structures and connections are formally delineated among the groups, the sense of an emerging movement is present and is certainly based on a common foe and a common strategy of opposition. In 2007, the death of the Lazio UltraS Gabriele Sandri (Gasport, 2007) - killed by a police officer who intervened to control a fight between Juventus and Lazio fans at a petrol station near Arezzo- provoked an unprecedented violent reaction expressed by UltraS groups throughout Italy. UltraS from Atalanta, Taranto, Fiorentina, AC Milan, Inter Milan, Parma, Torino, and Juventus attacked police and police properties in protest both against the killing but also in rage against the militarisation of the football stadia and the cumulative repressive measures the Italian state had undertaken against them. A common theme of the chants was '*Polizia Assassini*' (Police - Murderers); graffiti on Milan and Rome walls threatened revenge upon police. In Rome the reaction of the Roma and Lazio UltraS in the streets of the Capital - assisted by the clumsy decision of the authorities to cancel the AS Roma-Cagliari match a few hours before its beginning -was extremely violent. Some 20 police officers were injured in the disturbances. At the time of the disorder four *UltraS* were arrested and charged with offences pertaining to terrorism. In March 2008 a further 16 Lazio *UltraS* were arrested in police raids in connection with the events (Note 7). The same year during the match Triestina-Rimini in *Curva Furlan* was displayed a banner to honour Sandri and the UltraS of Lazio (Note 8).

The disorders, which followed Sandri's death, were in the words of the former Italian Minister of Interior, Giuliano Amato, a manifestation of '*a blind rage, led by madly criminal minds subversive against the police, its vehicles and its symbols*' (Radioradicale, 2007). Amato informed the Parliament of planned disorder, subversive articulations, and

diversionary tactics employed by those seeking 'to attract the police and Carabinieri around CONI (Italian Olympic Committee), to leave unattended the police barracks with the intention of making their attack easier' (Radioradicale, 2007). In this case the behaviour of the Italian police force was exemplary. The police could have reacted and shot; in one instance the UltraS attacked the *Maurizio Giglio* barrack which was full of weapons, ammunition and vehicles; the law allowed them to shoot in that circumstance to protect the public but with great skills and professionalism they avoided the tragedy (Bonini, 2009). The images of the riots, globally broadcasted, were not good for the reputation of Italy.

#### 4. Deprivation: as reason of the UltraS mobilization?

The identification of the UltraS as an emerging social movement does not end our attempt to complete a macro analysis of the phenomenon. The task of the researcher remains one of trying to understand the emergence of a social movement. One answer may lie in the Relative Deprivation Theory (RDT), a construct which, according to Walker and Smith (2001), is a compelling topic for research and is employed in various ways to make sense of the rise of a variety of collective identities and social movements.

RDT argues that: *whenever groups find a benchmark that implies they could or should be better off than they are, a condition of relative deprivation exists and a psychological strain (cognitive dissonance) triggers participation in collective behavior* (Buechler quoted in Snow et.al., 2004, p. 49). Deprivation- or the sense of deprivation - is a condition that has resonance in both the individual and the socio-cultural setting. According to the RDT, when groups develop legitimate expectations (in the case of the UltraS the main expectations are to be present and voice their beliefs in the stadium while keeping control of the *curve*) and- at the same time- a conviction that these expectations will never be satisfied (in the case of the UltraS their expectations are strongly opposed by the Italian State via tough repression policies and legislation), they may develop a cognitive dissonance that focuses on feelings of prejudice and discrimination (Morrison, 1971). This condition, in a power-oriented movement such as that of the UltraS, can lead to forms of resistance which may comprised of violence but also staging demonstrations and lobbying the Italian parliament.

The RDT highlights the elements that may lead to the emergence of such movements, as well as providing reasons for their consolidation. Research consequently should be aimed at investigating the objective conditions that lead to discontent and, ultimately, action (Kornhauser 1959; Davies 1971).

The UltraS have always considered their cause legitimate; furthermore they consider the *curve* their territories upon and within which they have the right to voice their opinions and ideology. The recent and sudden escalation of tougher laws and State repression have promoted a perception among them of blocked expectation and a concomitant sense of outrage around notions of injustice and inequity. Such sense of grievance increasingly leads the UltraS to see themselves as societal 'outcasts' and foster conflict with the State and the media; the latter, according to the groups, have sided with the State-oppressor. Consequently the group rhetoric of stigma and discrimination have increased. At the same time, such feeling is not necessarily negative in the immediate sense of the gatherings and in the wider sense of the movement. Klandermans and Mayer (2006), focusing on youth neo-fascist gatherings, highlight different ways of coping with discrimination all of which are applicable to different degree to the UltraS. Among the most relevant is 'social creativity', whereby the groups respond by defining themselves as superior to others (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). The UltraS' feeling of superiority towards other hardcore supporters is evidenced considering themselves as 'pure' not polluted like the 'others' by the commercialized logic of modern *calcio*, where mercenaries (players) are idolized. In comparison to the 'ordinary' youth; they stress their 'elitism' and 'superior' values. They feel their ethical stance justifies and makes bearable the perceived social stigma; it is 'morally' worth it. However, the key strategy to cope with discrimination/stigma lies in what Klandermans and Mayer (2006) define as social support and feelings of belonging. The ideological and cultural traits based on ideology that make the UltraS feel strong are also able to create a similar feeling of belonging and strength throughout the movement. As Todde argues: *although there was an attempt to organise ourselves at national level before Sandri's death [he refers to the first emergence of a national group called Vikings Italia] after Sandri's death and the injustice carried out against one of us, there are more interactions among all the groups, one of the result is the UltraS Italia. On the occasion of Sandri's death for the first time, many UltraS throughout Italy displayed banners in their stadium and wrote about the death on their websites in honour of both Sandri and in solidarity with the UltraS of SS Lazio.*

There may be, however, another facet of the UltraS' grievance that deserves evaluation: this relates to the UltraS nature of an 'extreme' youth movement. The pervasive sense of dissatisfaction by the Italian youth is mostly related to the legitimate expectations by youth of an efficient political class that works in their interest. Traditionally the Italian politics has been unsympathetic and blind to youth. The UltraS do not trust Italian politics and of course oppose it. Such anti-politics discourses were a common and persisting pattern in many interactions I had with the UltraS and are diffused in the whole movement. As youth, the UltraS do not miss any chance to declare their dislike for Italian politics and their incompetent youth policies; this hostility is well represented in the following 'Marco' statement: *'I do not like*

*politics and do not follow it!! I am an extra-parliamentary; I follow the Third Position - the 'revolutionary' position. The Italian system is putrid; if the tree is sick to the root it cannot give good fruits. The problems are not the fruits that need to be changed but the tree that needs to be eradicated or at least cured. Sometimes I agree with Bertinotti [the leader of the extreme left party Rifondazione Comunista, and former president of the Chamber of Deputies]. The extreme left and right converge on some issues...'*

The term 'putrid' used by Marco can be considered a fair representation of the mood of the youth of the *curve*, an important part of the Italian youth. In 2009, the international organization *Transparency International* polled Italians to determine what they believed to be the most corrupt organization in the country. Astonishingly, 44% of the participants indicated the Italian political parties (La Repubblica –online- 03 June, 2009). The Italian journalist Bosetti in his article '*why is the political power in the hands of the old?*' (2008) argued that the current Italian political class is based on *gerontocrazia* (democracy by elders); young politicians are still underrepresented and not in key places to exercise power. Moreover, according to Abravanel (2008), Italy is far from achieving the requisite of any just society -namely having a system based on meritocracy. In Italy a career, especially in State controlled domains, is accomplished because of personal recommendations and seniority that, according to Abravanel, greatly de-motivates the youth.

In addition, Italian sociologist Carboni (2008) in his most recent study about Italian political class affirms that in the Italian parliament individuals of poor political skills but loyal to the party function merely to reinforce the leadership which has chosen them. Too Many MPs still are old professional politicians. According to Della Loggia (2008), Italy is also a country existing on political immobility, a society fragmented and lacking a strong political institutional framework. A country which has a significant public debt and which instead of introducing much needed reforms related to education, health and justice - to name but a few- is instead blocked by litigious local and national leaders who promote *de facto* a system based on political parties and not on people. Furthermore, Italy is the country wherein governments regardless of political line are unable to erase organised crime in the regions of the South; not by chance these regions experience higher unemployment rates among youth (Note 9). Roberto Saviano (2007), a young and courageous Italian journalist, argues, that since his birth in 1979 the *Camorra* (Naples's network of organised crime clans) had taken the lives of 3,600 men and women, many more that the Sicilian Mafia has on its conscience over the same period.

Della Loggia (2008) believes that this status quo is due to a society which is prisoner of its past focusing on the same political discourses, contrapositions, and the same old 'low politics'. As Clark (1996) acknowledges, such milieu can be defined as a systematic way of doing politics where concessions and favouritism become institutionalised and where conceding favours to obtain votes develops into a consistent and non-written rule.

The majority of Italians politicians have never worked; politics is their only means of income making them inclined to a systematic and methodological administration of power to survive and obtain monies. This situation creates conflict, protest and resistance especially amongst youth who are the most penalised. The protest of the Italian people for politics, political parties and their protagonists has already provoked reaction and resistance by sections of the electorate in their search for an idealistic alternative. The well-known Italian journalist Eugenio Scalfari (2007) writes:

*...grows the numbers of Italian citizens who totally refuse this political class.... This attitude can be defined as anti-politics or political because it is not the result of indifference but of active and aggressive participation [against political parties and politicians] but this does not change the reality. There is a growing refusal of 'these' political parties, of 'these' politicians....It is a total refusal on all levels: taxes, public order, legality, inequalities, and freedom. Thumbs down on everything. They [the political class] need to go (Scalfari, 2007).*

The statement of Scalfari was supported by the recent emergence of a popular movement organized by the renowned Genoan comedian Beppe Grillo who, during his stage and broadcasting career, has always been a vociferous critic against the malpractice of Italian politics and its politicians.

*We are against 'right' and 'left'; we do not have hope anymore. This should have been the government who would have changed everything. We need young people and new ideas not policies originating from 'pensioners' of 70 years [referring ironically to the existing politicians] they are all old!! The aim [of this manifestation and movement] is to 'kick them out from the palace' and most of all to express our dislike and weariness of a politics which is more and more millions of miles away from the citizens and their needs (Grillo, 2007).*

The protest took shape gradually via the comedian's Internet blog and, during his Italian tour, it found its first public manifestation with a protest meeting held in Bologna's Piazza Maggiore in September 2007. The main objective of the movement was to 'clean' Italian politics from its so-called rationalisation, wipe out its professionalisation and expose its lack of ideals. The Bologna meeting called 'V-Day' (i.e. Vaffanculo Day, or Fuck Off Day) aimed to collect signatures for a petition for a new law to prescribe the ineligibility for the future with criminal records (25 MPs in Parliament in 2007 held such a status). The movement also sought to make it invalid for any Italian citizens to be elected as an MP if holding a criminal conviction or in the legal system awaiting a verdict. The purpose was also to get rid of 'the

professional politician'. To this end the protesters proposed that no Italian citizens could be elected as an MP more than twice and anyone elected had to come from a grass-root selection procedure and not be parachuted in by some party system. Some 50,000 signatures were collected as the Piazza was linked via the Internet with 179 cities (30 of them foreign). In March 2009, Grillo launched an electoral list closed to his movement throughout Italy for the forthcoming administrative elections. Commenting the event Grillo said: *The parties are dead. We are the only virus that crosses our disappeared 'little' Italy: perhaps we lose today, but our ideas are the ones that will win in the future* (Grillo, 2009).

The inability of the Italian State to respond to the concrete needs of people, especially its youth, who see their existence increasingly uncertain in this political framework, can be said to contribute to the creation of an ideological vacuum. The search for security and certainty can then promote the diffusion of any extreme ideologies founded on 'action'. The attraction of a political formula like fascism professed by the UltraS is, thus, not hard to see. The esteemed sociologist (and novelist) Umberto Eco (1995) lists various characteristics of what he terms 'Ur Fascism'; the most relevant for this study is irrationalism. 'Ur Fascism' is based on the cult of action for the sake of action; there is no struggle for life, but rather a 'fight for life'. According to this formula, Pacifism is collusion with the enemy; action is good in itself, and must be implemented without reflection.

This will to act by UltraS movement is the opposite of the immobilism dominant in Italian politics. The groups will fight for their ideas no matter the outcome and no matter the medium used. As Eco recognised in his reflection on fascism, in any mythology the 'hero' is an exceptional being closely linked to the cult of death. Heroism is the norm. The Fascist hero aspires to death as the ultimate reward for a heroic existence. As 'Antonio' of the Boys argues: *'who dies or is a victim of this state in our groups is not forgotten and will be always remembered'*. The heroes celebrated by Italian UltraS are people that fight for their ideals and if necessary pay for it with their lives. Their heroes are the deceased – their 'fallen' are such as Paolo di Nella (Note 10); others are the 'victims' of the DASPO (Stadium banning order) or those imprisoned for being UltraS. As Eco (1995) notes for those devoid of alternative social identities, *Ur-Fascism*, presents a privilege - to be born with a sense of nation going back to the Roman Empire, of being Italian, the inheritor of the values, cults and histories. Significantly the *Boys* and *Irriducibili* sport the colours of the Italian flag in their merchandising.

The UltraS have parallels elsewhere. For many, modern society lacks meaningful relationships, beliefs, strong values and a sense of place (Klapp 1969, p. 318). In modern cities there is absence of strong identifications of strong point of reference. In this context many correlate themselves with the most unlikely of individuals and movements. The 'Boxer', one of leader of the *Irriducibili* group, recognizes this and has his logic for the response it provokes:

*When we speak about issues such as the Palestine Intifada and Saddam Hussein's Iraq they do not like it; they do not like political topics at the stadium because they could create a consensus; this scares politicians who cannot control votes. This is the reason for this strong police repression...*

In distant places, in obscure texts and in myths of origin are found the UltraS narratives and practices to aspire to, even if the causation has no relevance to the Roman or Italian context. The sympathy to the Irish Republican, which is present among the groups, cause arises out of their perceiving in Ireland a nation forever resisting an imposed discourse via myth, legend and songs - and ultimately violence. The Irish nationalist populations celebrate the warrior; the nationalist murals are admired, stressing, as they do, a sense of identity through symbols, non-conformist heroes, national (and submerged) identities. The Palestinian cause offers the same admiration-logic. Such support is not required, it is what such people symbolise that matters.

The wish of the UltraS to be heard and counted is evidenced by 'Giovanni' of the *Irriducibili* :

*I can tell you even more; for a while a well-known and popular extreme left-leaning newspaper [Il Manifesto] dedicated articles about us and praised us for our social battles against drugs and pedophilia; ironically they said we were fascist that did not know how to be communist. How ignorant! Many do not know the social doctrine of fascism has many things in common with the revolutionary left. Unfortunately in Italy fascism has been always depicted as reactionary whilst in origin it was nothing like that; unfortunately these things are taught in history books that our children study where many things are represented following dominant ideology ... for us communism has been reactionary while real fascism was revolutionary'.*

## 5. Concluding remarks

The ideology of the Italian neo-fascists, as expressed by the UltraS, has potential in the Roman (and in the Italian) *curve*; it has revolutionary power and has found in the stadium an outlet. As 'Giovanni' elaborates:

*Until the emergence of our group, everyone thought that the typical UltraS was an imbecile who goes to the stadium to watch the match, perhaps drunk and seeking violence. We want to send a message to the public; the *Irriducibili* showed the public that UltraS can think beyond football. We did this firstly with our fanzine and then with our radio broadcast. Via these tools we can express our opinions and defend ourselves from media attacks; this was the main reason why we started radio broadcasting. The fanzine pushed the *Irriducibili* thought at the games, our radio show keeps it alive all*



*week. We wanted to underline that the Irriducibili are Lazio UltraS but they are also citizens wishing to have their opinions heard. We have been pioneers; we tried to make other UltraS realize that we are a potent lobby and we can make a difference at the elections.*

Giovanni's statement underlines the status of Agorá of the football stadium. The Agorá is an ancient Greek term meaning public meeting place (Camp, 1992). It is a location in Ancient Greece primarily for public assembly. The Agorá is the location where the oikos (private dimension) and ecclesia (public dimension) meet. It is the location where private problems are dealt with in a meaningful way. This locale is used to articulate, not just to draw narcissistic pleasures or to search for some relief through public display, but to collectively seek the tools that are powerful enough to lift individuals from their privately suffered misery. It is the space where ideas may be born, take shape and be considered the 'public good'. It pursues the 'just society' or at least provides comfort in a sense of 'shared values'. (Bauman, 1999). The Italian football stadium is one of the few remaining Italian modern social Agorá. It is a site where not only football, but also ideological opinions – often the antithesis of notions of political correctness – and direct actions are freely expressed in the pursuit of a wider consensus and resistance. 'Todde' affirms :

*The football stadium allows us to bring our battles -via the media- to 40 million Italians. Before in the stadium you would rarely find socio-political issues raised by UltraS. It is the only place that we can speak freely about our ideas without being charged with subversive association. In other places we would be repressed. We are people that do not want to be made stupid by consumerist repression, we want to discuss and to confront. The stadium ends are ours and here we can express who we are and impose our rules. We go to the stadium and articulate our ideas because the State does not allow the individual to freely speak out because of rampant political correctness. We fight this lack of freedom mainly with negative campaigns but when the State allows us to express our values; we also send constructive and positive messages.*

In their Agorá -stadium, the *UltraS* have a liminal arena for the public performance of stigmatised behavior. In ritual and display, they have words and symbols and, similar to Rappaport's (1979) debate on religious protagonists and performance, the believer 'gives substance to the symbol, as the symbol gives him form' (p. 200). The Agorá -stadium becomes for the *UltraS* another means of identification; it can be considered at the same time a place for the outlaw and socially excluded and a locale where the *UltraS* can resist repression. Football support coupled with a strong ideology induces notions of the 'Fundamental', but as Vrcan and Lalic (1999) have argued in the context of post-1991 Croatian football and football-related political ideology, the escalation of conflict makes it possible to die because of symbolism.

### 5.1 An Ethnographic Note

This ethnographic study adopted a Triangulation strategy, using more than one method to collect information (Denzin 1989, 2000, 2003; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.230). I used Participant observation (Gold, 1958), semi-structured interviews focusing on influential members (7 individuals) and casual conversations with 21 individuals. Furthermore, I employed documents such as the groups' fanzines, newspapers articles and information retrieved from Internet. To attain an outcome both trustworthy and authentic. (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The Names used in this paper are fictional.

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## Notes

- Note 1. Citation retrieved June 11, 2001, from <http://www.tifonet.it/free/juventudepd>.
- Note 2. The notion of a social movement used in this study is that of a 'collectivity acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside institutional channels for promoting or resisting change in the group, society, or world order of which it is a part' (Simi et.al, 2004, p.3). More specifically the study refers to 'power-oriented' movements, which contrarily to participation-oriented movements, act in concert to achieve group influence to make or block changes (Morrison, 1971).
- Note 3. A reader is directed to the seminal work on the topic written in 1992 by Italian Sociologist Antonio Roversi titled *Calcio, tifo e violenza* [Football, tifo and Violence] for a more detailed and dedicated analysis.
- Note 4. For an in depth account on the history of the Italian hardcore football supporters movement cf. C. Balestri, & G. Viganò. *Gli Ultra': Origini, storia e sviluppi recenti di un mondo ribelle. Quaderni di Sociologia, 34*.
- Note 5. The *Tangentopoli* scandal erupted in full in the late 1980s; it did not only reveal the illicit financing of political parties and bribery of politicians but promoted a loss of faith amongst the Italian electorate in the integrity of their country's political life and indeed in wider Italian society.
- Note 6. In 2009, questions were asked to the *National Observatory on Sport Events* of the Italian Ministry of the Interior; the questions aimed to evaluate the efficiency of the police strategy in tackling violence at the football stadium (of which the UltraS are an integral part).
- Note 7. Retrieved January 11, 2008, from <http://www.ecn.org/antifa/article/1831/Arrestati20estremistididestra>
- Note 8. Retrieved April 09, 2009, from <http://www.curvafurlan.forumfree.net>
- Note 9. Recently Eurostat (the statistics department of the European Community) in his study about the European youth unemployment situation has documented that six Italian south regions have reached the alarming threshold of 30% with Sicily at the 37% (Cf. <http://blog.panorama.it/economia/2009/02/16/disoccupazione-giovanile-6-regioni-del-sud-tra-le-prime-in-ue>).
- Note 10. Paolo di Nella is considered by Italian neo-fascism as one of their martyrs against the communists. He was honoured in 2005 by the former center-left Mayor of Rome, Walter Veltroni with a street dedication in a historical Roman Park. In February 1983, Di Nella was acting as a member of the *Fronte della Gioventù* (Youth Front-the youth organization of the neo-fascist political *Movimento Sociale Italiano*) placing posters at Piazza Vescovio aiming to raise environmentalist issues concerning the preservation of the historical park of Villa Chigi. He was attacked by a group of the extreme left; he died after seven days in coma (Cf. <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2009/02/10/alemanno-cambia-la-targa-del-martire.html>).