

Since October 2022, Italy has been under the government of the right-wing and post-fascist parties Forza Italia, Lega and Fratelli d'Italia, the latter also providing the prime minister, Giorgia Meloni. While cultural policy issues did not play a significant role in the election campaign, the allocation of various government mandates demonstrates that culture is very much on the right's agenda – even if it is still unclear what exactly that agenda is. Meloni, for example, with her announcement of a «Renaissance» of «beautiful Italy» and the «liberation of culture from leftist ideologies», represents a classically backward-looking, tradition-oriented programme.<sup>1</sup> The statements of the new Minister of Culture and ex-TV boss Gennaro Sangiuliano to abolish cancel culture first and foremost, as well as those of his Secretary of State Vittorio Sgarbi, art historian, curator and museum director, who wants to re-staff the management of the major cultural institutions with Italians, fit in with this. At the same time, Sangiuliano, Sgarbi and other figures of the staff, represent positions which, not only because they are so dazzling, hardly fit into a reactionary, right-wing political imagery.

**Does a new right-wing cultural politics already manifest in Italy, and if so, to what extent can this be outlined?**

A. F.: The appointment of people like Gennaro Sangiuliano and Vittorio Sgarbi at the head of the Ministry of Culture is a clear indicator of the government's cultural agenda. Still, at the moment, we are only getting glimpses of this new direction. For example, just days after his nomination, Sgarbi declared that he wanted an Italian director for institutions like La Scala and the Uffizi Museum. He even determined that the applications to become director of the latter should be open only to Italian candidates since «the Uffizi are Italy».<sup>2</sup> This raised much preoccupation, firstly, because of its nationalist tone, secondly, because it completely disregarded the work of their current directors, and lastly because in 2023 the direction of around fourteen major art and cultural institutions will be up for renewal.<sup>3</sup> Even though these are mostly organisations that have been granted «special autonomy» from the government and are not directly administrated by the Ministry of Culture, Sangiuliano and his team will be determining the hiring process and the candidates' requisites. In late February 2023, he expressed that no limitations will be placed on foreign applicants, yet those currently employed and up for renewal will probably not be granted another term.<sup>4</sup> Sgarbi's inflammatory statements become an opening for reactionary measures that, in comparison, appear conservative rather than extremist – and so, acceptable.

At the same time, the government has started to apply its nationalist agenda to less high-profile open calls, very possibly providing an indication of what it is to be expected in the future. The new parameters announced for the Ministry of Culture's funding application for artists under 35 – called *Per Chi Crea* – provides the first example. If the previous open call stressed the willingness to fund projects that foster intercultural dialogue, in the latest version this was replaced by the aim «to strengthen among young people the sense of belonging to the nation and the role this plays in the development of world culture».<sup>5</sup> For Sangiuliano this new orientation is a source of pride, because «Nation is a term enshrined in our Constitution».<sup>6</sup> This is certainly concerning, especially at a moment in which the Italian cultural scene has finally begun grappling with issues like inclusion, diversity and racial politics. It is also worrying that this first policy targets specifically a category that is extremely precarious (young cultural producers) and that this news has not gotten more traction in the media.

In terms of appointments, the nomination of the new president of Maxxi, the National Museum of XXI Century Art in Rome is noteworthy. The president of such an institution is assigned by the government, a practice that renders the museum highly exposed to becoming an instrument of soft propaganda. The instalment of Giorgia Meloni as Prime Minister coincided with the end of the mandate of Maxxi's previous president Giovanna Melandri (former Member of Parliament in the centre-left party PD). So, a new president affiliated with Fratelli d'Italia was selected in November 2022: Alessandro Giuli, a Roman journalist who was a member of the far-right student movement Meridiano Zero. In 2013 he stated that he admired «the more vital, sunny, joyful and patriotic twentieth century of the Great War» that the neofascist organisation CasaPound evoked but disliked «its avant-garde and pseudo futurist trappings».<sup>7</sup> Through this affiliation, Giuli's cultural references ought to be rooted in the work of Gabriele D'Annunzio, Julius Evola (focus of Meridiano Zero) and Ezra Pound, to name a few.

Regarding the other forces present within Meloni's coalition – above all Matteo Salvini's populist, far-right party Lega – the placement of Fratelli d'Italia's Sangiuliano and Giuli in public-facing posts reveals a precise strategy when it comes to arts and culture. Lega demonstrated, especially at local governance, that it is not that preoccupied with establishing or drawing from specific cultural traditions. Lega's attitude to culture is more «destructive» than reformist because it mostly deems art and culture as highbrow. It is more concerned with instilling a profoundly anti-elitist ideology by attacking symbols of progressive thinking. Such stance tends to be reactive and oppositional. Fratelli d'Italia instead draws on a more established set of cultural references that are part of a specific ideological tradition: Fascism. In this constellation, despite running in his Renaissance Party (part of Meloni's rightwing coalition), the art critic and politician Vittorio Sgarbi fits with the Prime Minister's vision, because of his reactionary uses of the visual arts. His credentials in the arts are the ideal counterbalance to Sangiuliano's lack of expertise in the field, since he is a journalist with a background in law and interests in economy. The name of Sgarbi's party and its tag line «Beauty, Peace and Freedom» place a focus on aesthetics and the past as foundational characteristics of Italian identity, thus fitting the government's understanding of the role of the arts in promoting a sense of national pride filtered through a glorified idea of the past and an attention to «beauty».

**How is the relation between the historical right-wing movement, which emerged from Italian fascism, and newer currents – also in the art world – to be assessed? And how does it relate to the arts?**

First of all, if one had to try to identify a right-wing current within the mainstream Italian art world in the last decade it would be difficult to pinpoint it exactly. I guess it would need to be defined as an attitude: a focus on aesthetics and a refusal to engage with pressing concerns and socio-political debates that the global art scene has been grappling with. But there have also been a lot of superficial and exploitative instrumentalizations of these profoundly ethical issues, often in line with a progressive, neoliberal, and Eurocentric agenda, perpetrated by parties such as PD and Movement Five Stars along the less extremist centre-right.

On the other hand, Fascism (the traditional right) had a very clear understanding of the ideological force of art and culture, and it invested heavily in these spheres.<sup>8</sup> Most notably, it founded a wide array of institutions that are still at the core of Italian cultural life, for example, the Triennale di Milano, the Rome Quadriennale, and the Venice International Film Festival. These institutions operate in an open, international guise, but invoke their founding period and «Italian values» in an uncritical way. This sterilized reading of the past constitutes one side of the continuity of fascism.

Following this tradition, Fratelli d'Italia places the past at the centre of their cultural programme and ideology. During the electoral campaign, their cultural programme was overseen by Federico Mollicone, the party's representative for culture and innovation.<sup>9</sup> In 2022, Mollicone – now at the head of the Culture, Science and Education Committee in the House of Representatives – disclosed a proposed future investment in historical re-enactments.<sup>10</sup> The only example given is that of the journey of the «milite ignoto» (unknown soldier), an episode from Fascist history, dense with nationalist rhetoric.<sup>11</sup> He also stressed the need to capitalize on Italy's heritage and the notion of «ancient future» that he identifies as its core potential.<sup>12</sup> Another target is that of «cancel culture and iconoclasm» – always used together as to oppose the most notable episode of protests around a statue referring to colonial and sexual violence in Milan, that sparked a debate around the Black Lives Matters movement in Italy.<sup>13</sup> Already in July 2020, at the height of global protests, Meloni announced on her Facebook page:

«We have filed a bill to toughen penalties against those who damage or even destroy our artistic and cultural heritage. At a time when the beauty of our millenary identity is under unprecedented attack in Italy and abroad, at a time when defacing, tearing down statues, removing symbols of our history and even Christianity seems not only acceptable but almost right, we cannot but demonstrate our need to defend what we are. And if in the United States our compatriots physically stood up in defence of the statues of Christopher Columbus threatened by blind and ignorant violence, today we intervene harshly with laws and then, with cultural projects to safeguard what we are and what Italy, with its history, represents. Today more than ever, Fratelli d'Italia is on the side of the real Italy, the one that is loved throughout the world and the one that defends itself, its future and what its art and culture represent.»<sup>14</sup>

This statement is rather symptomatic of what we are witnessing at the moment: a declination of Fascism in a purely nationalist credo that helps disciplining ideas around gender, race, and migration while hiding its direct evocation. And a call for tougher legal repercussions. This has been very successful in uniting the right,

despite its internal clashes, and in concealing the clearly Fascist roots of Giorgia Meloni's party. The premiere worked hard to clean up her image to appeal to that part of the electorate that is not openly affiliated with Fascism and to gain international credibility. After all, the Italian constitution prohibits the «reorganization, in any form, of the dissolved Fascist party».<sup>15</sup> But Meloni skilfully navigated the terrain between an official repudiation of Fascism and an open flirtation with the more extremist fringes.<sup>16</sup>

These tactics have led to increasing violence and attacks towards any scholar or cultural workers opposing Fascism in recent months.<sup>17</sup> In mid-February 2023, the Italian public was polarised by an event in Florence, in which a group of young people of a neo-fascist student movement physically attacked a group of students in front of their school. Annalisa Savino, the school director of another high school, wrote a letter to her own pupils, in which she made a parallel between this event and the squadristism that connoted the origins of Fascism. As the letter went viral, Giuseppe Valditara, the Minister of Education and Merit, intervened in a rather heated tone. He defined the letter as «ridiculous» and «inappropriate» given that «there is no Fascist peril in Italy».<sup>18</sup> Therefore, he refused to condemn the violence and neo-fascist (read anti-constitutional) nature of the attack, avoiding a necessary focus on the dangers of neo-fascist grooming and indoctrination in young people. His disproportionate reaction, which is suggestive of abuse of power, was punitive in its intent, threatening legal repercussions against the school director.

**As one of his first acts in office, Sgarbi opened two exhibitions about art that played a central role in Italian fascism: on Italian Futurism and on the Italian Renaissance. Did the culture of Italian fascism in Italy experience a break at all, a «zero hour», or did its continuities prevail until today, as is the case in Germany?**

Well, even more alarmingly, in 2022 Vittorio Sgarbi inaugurated a major travelling exhibition dedicated to the artistic work of Julius Evola, whose philosophical work is dense with racist, antisemitic, and misogynist theories. As Franco Ferraresi wrote «Evola's thought can be considered one of the most radical and consistent anti-egalitarian, antiliberal, antidemocratic, and antipopular systems in the twentieth century».<sup>19</sup> According to Sgarbi, since Evola's paintings were created between 1915 and 1922, when «Fascism was not yet there», they should not have been «completely removed».<sup>20</sup> This argument disregards that Fascism was founded in 1919 and that it originated from the bellicose, racist culture of the 1910s (indeed labelled as proto-fascism) of which Futurism and Gabriele D'Annunzio are amongst the highest exponents. Sgarbi's attempt to divorce artistic practice from ideology is a typical device employed to sanitise and restore cultural elements typical of Fascism – and in doing so, to normalise them and celebrate them.

In comparing Italy and Germany's situation around nazi-fascist continuities, thus, I believe that Italy presents an even more linear case. Firstly, because it did not experience a process of defascistization like the denazification in Germany. This lack of accountability also reinforced the self-absolving conviction that Mussolini's downfall was his allyship with Hitler, who, in such rhetoric, swayed Mussolini into passing the racial laws in 1938 and into following him into his warmongering plans. These theories are easily debunked, yet they are a common belief. They feed into the notion of «Italiani brava gente» (Italians are good people) – a narrative that has

been instilled to purportedly erase the violence intrinsic to Fascism and to its racist, genocidal project in the colonies and beyond. Specifically, this expression was employed in history textbooks in the 1960s to refer to the Italian colonial endeavour. Another difference between Italy and Germany is the wide array of architecture and public heritage still present on the territory:<sup>21</sup> The large urbanization projects that were not taken down, and in some cases even completed after the fall of the regime, in the 1950s.<sup>22</sup>

An even more baffling phenomenon is represented by a patch of woods spelling the word DVX on a hillside in central Italy, that has been carefully trimmed and preserved since the 1930s.<sup>23</sup> And then, we have contemporary creations, the most infamous being the monument to Rodolfo Graziani that was constructed with public funding and was erected in the small town of Affile (near Rome) in 2012. Nicknamed the «butcher of Fezzan», Graziani was responsible for some of the most despicable events in Italian history, like the genocide in Eastern Libya and the mass killing in Debre Libanos, Ethiopia. On the other hand, there has been, in the last decade, a systematic operation to rehabilitate and admire Fascist architecture and arts.

One notable example is the high fashion brand Fendi, who has purchased the Palazzo delle Civiltà (also known as Square Colosseum), the outmost example of Fascist monumental architecture, located within the EUR neighbourhood, the most ambitious programme of urbanization during Fascism. The building now houses the headquarter of the company and functions as a symbol and a prop for advertising their collections.

The term «rationalist» is generally used to describe Fascist architecture, which, even if it can be correct in terms of defining this modernist style, also acts as a deflecting strategy, a way to remove any clear reference to the ideological underpinning of this aesthetic project. A similar tactic is employed by museums to refer to artefacts from the 1920–30s. Their authors' entanglement with the regime, or the ideological framework of these works and styles, is usually not mentioned. The disciplines of Art History, Architecture and Design are the main culprits in this systematic cleansing and recovery. And they can react with great hostility to the open questioning of this process, the discussion of the deep entanglement of ideology and aesthetics. This is something that I have experienced first-hand, within academia, when scrutinising the process of restoration of a monumental fresco by Mario Sironi, the regime's most celebrated painter. Realised in 1935 within the Main Auditorium of La Sapienza, University of Rome, it «represents an epic vision of history, with the personification of Fascist Italy among the symbolic images of the humanities and sciences».<sup>24</sup> In 1950 it was decided that rather than removing the fresco, it would be modified by painting over the references to warfare and Fascist symbolism, a task undertaken by the painter Alessandro Marzano.<sup>25</sup> In 2017 La Sapienza unveiled the restored fresco, revealing the removal of the alterations made in 1950. As a result, the Main Auditorium – a hall that hosts graduation ceremonies, lectures and even international politicians and heads of state – is now showcasing a monumental celebration of Fascism, with a vast array of explicit symbolism (like gigantic *fasci*). A video, created for an exhibition at La Sapienza illustrating the restoration process, even refers to Sironi's work as a «censored» fresco, covered because of «ideological condemnation».<sup>26</sup> It concludes by claiming that its «artistic essence» was denied, and that the restoration process has «returned it to the truth of its time».<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the press release for the exhibition states that the fresco has now also regained its

former political potency: «On the occasion of La Sapienza's 80th anniversary, the large mural painted by Mario Sironi in 1935 in the Aula Magna returns to its original beauty and power».<sup>28</sup>

Art Historians' fixation on Sironi (given his relevance in the 1930s) as well as on accessing the original artwork, has taken precedence over Marzano's work, which was part of an important historical process, and, more worryingly, over the ostentation of Fascist propaganda and symbolism within a public space, where thousands of young people are formed every year. So, going back to your question, it feels difficult to imagine a similar thing happening in Germany. From the outside, the perception is that the German government has not been giving such contradictory and mixed messages when it comes to Nazi heritage. But I might be mistaken. Going forward, perhaps, it would be crucial to try to understand how both countries have failed at keeping these ideologies at bay, to try to imagine what an effective process of denazification and defascistization would entail. And to establish networks of mutual support and exchange as the polarisation of discourse may be exposing anti-fascist thinkers to attacks and marginalisation.

## Notes

**1** See Elena Borelli: *Italia bella. The Discourse of Beauty and Crisis in Italian Culture and Media*, in: *Culturico*, 22.11.2020, <https://culturico.com/2020/11/22/italia-bella-the-discourse-of-beauty-and-crisis-in-italian-culture-and-media/>, last accessed on 24.03.2023.

**2** Gimmy Tranquillo: *Sgarbi: «Vorrei che La Scala e gli Uffizi avessero un direttore italiano»*, in: *controradio.it*, 08.12.2022, <https://www.controradio.it/sgarbi-vorrei-che-la-scala-e-gli-uffizi-avessero-un-direttore-italiano/>, last accessed on 24.03.2023.

**3** Mario Francesco Simeone: *Il vazer dei musei nel 2023: chi sono I quattro superdirettore in scadenza*, in: *exibart.com*, 15.02.2023, <https://www.exibart.com/musei/musei-2023-direttori-scadenza-uffizi-capodimonte-brera-mann/>, last accessed on 24.03.2023.

**4** Desirée Maida: *Il Ministero lavora al nuovo bando per i superdirettori. E Sanguiliano dice la sua sugli stranieri*, in: *Artribune.com*, 23.02.2023, <https://www.artribune.com/professionisti-e-professionisti/politica-e-pubblica-amministrazione/2023/02/ministero-nuovo-bando-superdirettori-sanguiliano-stranieri/>, last accessed on 24.03.2023.

**5** Livia Montagnoli: *L'Archi contro Sanguiliano: «Nei bandi privilegia il senso di appartenenza alla Nazione»*, in: *Artribune.com*, 23.02.2023, <https://www.artribune.com/professionisti-e-professionisti/politica-e-pubblica-amministrazione/2023/02/archi-contro-sanguiliano-bando-under-35-nazione/>, last accessed on 24.03.2023.

**6** *Ibid.*

**7** Federico Callegaro: *L'intervista. Allessandro Giuli*, in: *Barbadillo.it*, 05.02.2013, <https://www.barbadillo.it/2306-lintervista-alessandro-giuli-gli->

[ex-an-dal-tra-passo-delle-ocche-alla-diserzione/](https://www.barbadillo.it/2306-lintervista-alessandro-giuli-gli-ex-an-dal-tra-passo-delle-ocche-alla-diserzione/), last accessed on 24.03.2023.

**8** For a quick overview of the relation between Fascism and aesthetics: Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi: *The Politics of Aesthetics: Mussolini and Fascist Italy*, in: *opendemocracy.net*, 19.11.2012, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/politics-of-aesthetics-mussolini-and-fascist-italy/>, last accessed on 24.03.2023.

**9** Mollicone also made international headlines in Summer 2022 for trying to ban an episode of the children animation show *Peppa Pig*, because it represented a same-sex parenting couple: Angela Giuffrida: *Italian Politician Demands Ban on Peppa Pig Episode Showing a Lesbian Couple*, in: *The Guardian*, 09.09.2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/09/italian-politician-demands-ban-on-peppa-pig-episode-showing-lesbian-couple/>, last accessed on 24.03.2023.

**10** Mollicone gave this speech following his appointment (my translation): «I will take on this new role, with all the commitment, responsibility and awareness needed to work to safeguard and develop the culture that is a symbol of our nation's boundless heritage of knowledge and tradition». Desirée Maida: *Federico Mollicone è il nuovo Presidente della Commissione Cultura alla Camera*, in: *Artribune.com*, 10.11.2022, <https://www.artribune.com/professionisti-e-professionisti/politica-e-pubblica-amministrazione/2022/11/federico-mollicone-nuovo-presidente-commissione-cultura-camera/>, last accessed on 24.03.2023.

**11** Dalla riforma del Fus alle detrazioni dei consumi: ecco il programma di Fdi per la cultura, in *Agenziacult.it*, 10.02.2022, <https://www.agenzia-cult.it/cultura/dal-fus-alle-detrazioni-dei-consumi->

ecco-il-programma-di-fdi-per-la-cultura/?fbclid=IwAR3zlrVU-IQTQTPzClTeq6N17Ztjvy4Bazj-vCJCM8ffPITPUAiNVCENP1c, last accessed on 24.03.2023.

**12** Ibid.

**13** Lorenzo Tondo: Milan Mayor Refuses to Remove Defaced Statue of Italian Journalist, in: The Guardian, 14.06.2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/14/milan-mayor-refuses-re-move-defaced-statue-italian-journalist-black-lives-matter>, last accessed on 24.03.2023.

**14** Giorgia Meloni, in: facebook.com, 08.07.2020, <https://www.facebook.com/giorgiameloni.pagina.ufficiale/photo/a.10151958645677645/10158400986977645/>, last accessed on 24.03.2023.

**15** Legge 20 giugno 1952, n. 645, art.4

**16** It is also interesting to notice how Sangiuliano has recently sparked a heated debate when he claimed that Dante – the quintessential symbol of Italian culture – is the founder of Italy's right-wing culture. More information, Tom Kington: Italy's Culture Minister Says Dante Was Father of Italy's Right-Wing, in: The Times, 16.01.2023, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/italys-culture-minister-says-dante-was-father-of-italys-right-wing-nt2bghzlf>, last accessed on 24.03.2023.

**17** In 2018, instead, after the formation of the Lega-Movement Five Stars government, with Salvini as Ministry of Interior, Italy witnessed a sudden increase in racist violence, most notably in the killing of Idy Diene in Florence and the mass shooting by Luca Traini in Macerata.

**18** Marcella Piretti: Tutti contro Valditara per l'attacco alla preside di Firenze: Inaccettabile, in: dire.it, 23.02.2023, <https://www.dire.it/23-02-2023/876110-tutti-contro-valditara-preside-di-firenze-inaccettabile/>, last accessed on 24.03.2023.

**19** Franco Ferraresi: Threats to Democracy: The Radical Right in Italy after the War, Princeton 1996, p. 44.

**20** Gabriele Alberti: Sgarbi: Evola artista grande come Kandinskij. Perché è stato oscurato. Grande

mostra al Mart, in: secoloditalia.it, 17.07.2022, <https://www.secoloditalia.it/2022/06/sgarbi-evola-artista-grande-come-kandinskij-perche-e-stato-oscurato-grande-mostra-al-mart/>, last accessed on 24.03.2023.

**21** On this issue, and also for a more detailed comparison between Italian and German approaches to Nazi-Fascist heritage, see an article by Ruth Ben-Ghiat that generated a heated discussion, resulting in threats against the author. Ruth Ben-Ghiat: Why Are So Many Fascist Monuments Still Standing in Italy?, in: The New Yorker, 05.10.2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/why-are-so-many-fascist-monuments-still-standing-in-italy>, last accessed on 24.03.2023.

**22** For example, the EUR district in Rome. Or Romano Romanelli's Monument to the African Soldier, that in 1952 was installed in Siracusa, Sicily, since it could no longer be placed in the formerly occupied city of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, for which it was commissioned.

**23** After being ruined by a fire in 2018 it has been restored by CasaPound's volunteers. More information (in Italian) here: HuffPost editorial: Casapound ricostruisce la scritta "Dux" sul monte Giano, in: huffingtonpost.it, 05.02.2018, [https://www.huffingtonpost.it/2018/02/05/casapound-ricostruisce-la-scritta-dux-sul-monte-giano\\_a\\_23352938/](https://www.huffingtonpost.it/2018/02/05/casapound-ricostruisce-la-scritta-dux-sul-monte-giano_a_23352938/), last accessed on 24.03.2023.

**24** <https://orientamento.uniroma1.it/views/cu/cu-aula-magna.html>

**25** This was possible because of pressure exercised by Sironi's associates, including the biggest exponent of «rationalist architecture», Marcello Piacentini, who designed the university.

**26** The video is accessible here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4FEqP39epW4>, last accessed on 24.03.2023.

**27** Ibid.

**28** Ibid.