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Antifascist Graffiti: Crime or Contribution?

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Antifascist Graffiti: Crime or Contribution?

A Thesis in Interdisciplinary Studies submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Major of Italian Studies in Interdisciplinary Studies from The College of William and Mary

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Assigning an artistic label to graffiti has been a convoluted process, but perhaps the most fitting categorization for the medium is “outsider art”. Outsider art is defined as,

Extraordinary works created by people who are in some way on the margins of society, and who for whatever mixture of reasons, find themselves unable to fit into conventional requirements—social and psychological, as well as artistic—of the culture they inhabit. What makes this work extraordinary is the fact that it is created by people who have no training and who are so far removed from ‘normal’ expectations that they may not even think of themselves as ‘artists’.  

Recognized outsider artists include Henry Darger, Adolf Wölfli and Justo Gallego but the paradox of this definition is that most outsider artists are never recognized because their work is never discovered. Outsider artists rarely create art for personal or commercial gain; therefore they frequently keep their work hidden in their own homes. A large number of outsider artists’ bodies of work are only discovered posthumously and therefore they are never recognized while they are actively creating. In the same vein, some of the greatest graffiti artists in history have never received credit for their work because they either painted anonymously or painted under a pseudonym.

Graffiti writers often have no formal training and rarely have a voice within traditional society, due to their age, ethnicity or socioeconomic standing. Age plays a particularly important role in the graffiti movement, in that adolescents rarely have access to artistic canvases comparable to the ones they are provided with in the graffiti world. The conventional art world

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1 David Maclagan, Outsider Art: From the Margins to the Marketplace (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 7.
John Beardsley. “Imagining the Outsider” in Vernacular Visionaries: International Outsider Art, ed. Annie Carlano, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 10-31. Outsider art has a flexible definition across time and space. “Although the American understanding of the term owes a great deal to ideas originating in Europe in the early decades of the twentieth century, Outsider Art in the United States has proved to be a more confusing and elastic category than in the Old World, embracing folk, self-taught and naïve art along with that of various ethnic groups, the institutionalized and even children”.

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rarely acknowledges teenage artists, but the anonymity of the graffiti world incentivizes young, inexperienced artists to participate. Outsider art is still an evolving label, but it would not be overreaching to apply it to modern graffiti.

Modern graffiti can be broadly categorized as a criminal activity that was born in the urban centers of the United States in the 1970s. Philadelphia and New York are considered the cradles of graffiti culture, and it is within those cities that the lexicon of modern graffiti terms was born. The words “tagging”, “bombing”, “pieces”, and “throw ups”—are all terms born within the United States, suggesting American ownership over graffiti. However, the conscious action of leaving a mark on public property has existed for centuries. The word “graffiti” in fact evolved from the Italian *graffiare*, meaning “to scratch”. Graffiti is a multicultural art form that has historic connections to themes that are shared across time and space: class struggle, political participation and youth rebellion. Each country has a unique record of graffiti therefore it is critical not to view all graffiti through the lens of the modern American experience.

To examine the history of graffiti in Italy, we must begin with the Roman Empire. There is no shortage of examples of ancient graffiti, from Roman soldiers scrawling instructions for troops on street corners to persecuted Christians carving their names into the catacombs where they hid for months on end. The Empire’s largest preserved graffiti collection rests within the city of Pompeii, which contains more than 11,000 wall inscriptions—close to the number of

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2 “Tagging” refers to leaving a personal symbol or “tag”; “bombing” refers to covering a given city or neighborhood with that tag; “pieces” refer to larger, more complex works of graffiti/murals while “throw ups” refer to elaborate tags that are completed very quickly.
estimated residents who lived there (see Figure 1).\(^5\) Pompeii’s graffiti and dipinti have granted archaeologists insight into the political, social and economic realities of daily life, describing the “rise and fall of the leading families of Pompeii and local participation in the political process …given the nature of Pompeiian graffiti, which often directly addresses a reader or a particular individual, graffiti indicates where Pompeiians would be present—and where there might be an audience for such writings”.\(^6\) This trove of graffiti and dipinti did not disappear after Pompeii was submerged in ash in 79 AD but very few caches of a similar scale survived antiquity.

French and British graffiti, both ancient and modern, has often been recorded and photographed yet Italian graffiti was rarely documented or preserved until the 1920s, when it became a key propaganda source for the fascists.\(^7\) The fascists utilized what is now known as “bombing”, painting as many surfaces as possible in an area or neighborhood with the same slogan or design. Bombing impacts its audience through the sheer volume of tags it produces—it effectively creates a visual wall that no other slogan or image can penetrate. The fascists began bombing in the 1920s with the phrases “Mussolini sempre giusto”, “Viva Fascismo” and “Viva il Duce”.\(^8\)

Those slogans have survived and returned to the streets of Italy in the twenty-first century, reclaimed by neofascists. Modern Italian graffiti draws dual inspiration from the Fascist

\(^6\) Ibid., 60.
\(^7\) Sandrine Pereira, Graffiti (Santa Rosa, CA: Silverback Books, 2005), 16-17. Examples of well-preserved graffiti include: medieval graffiti within British churches, Protestant slogans scrawled across destroyed churches during the sixteenth century French Wars of Religion, threats of rebellion carved into French dungeons in the eighteenth century, nineteenth century literary references to graffiti, and the popularity of graffiti in the salons of the 1920s and the Surrealist movement.
\(^8\) Edward Townley, Mussolini and Italy (Pomsterdam, NH: Heinemann, 2002), 173. Isobel Williams, Allies and Italians Under Occupation: Sicily and Southern Italy 1943-4 (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 128-129. “Mussolini sempre giusto” translates to “Mussolini is always right”. “Fascismo” is the Italian word for fascism and “Il Duce”, derived from the word dux and comparable to the word “leader”, was a popular title for Mussolini. A popular fascist graffiti slogan that emerged in fascism’s later years translates into English as “Down with the Americans, who are all a bunch of drunks”.

“bombing” model and the American train “bombers” of the 1970s. It is an odd contradiction that the xenophobic slogan “Italy for the Italians!” is often painted in a style that originated on the streets of Philadelphia. A further contradiction within modern Italian graffiti is the “use of English—or an approximation of English, with unintentionally amusing misspellings and grammatical errors…indicating that much of the interest of the young Italian ‘bomber’ depends on external influences which he then attempts to apply to the Italian scene.” When exploring Italian graffiti, it is critical to understand American graffiti and how it influenced its European counterparts.

THE DIVISION OF AMERICAN AND EUROPEAN GRAFFITI

American and European graffiti cultures are divergent in both style and content. Although graffiti artists have diverse backgrounds and motivations, the original artists of New York and Philadelphia were more interested in the psychical challenge of going “all city” than the impact their art could have politically or socially. The 1970s and early 1980s focused on train writing, which involved sneaking into train yards at night to paint entire cars at once (see

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9 Jeffrey Bailey, *Interpreting Italians* (New York: Matador, 2015). For the sake of this paper, “modern” graffiti will be defined as any graffiti that uses spray paint (as opposed to carving or painting the letters with pots of brushes).

10 A brief note on the difference between New York and Philadelphia graffiti: New York is famous for thick “double wide” lettering that is similar to juvenile “bubble letters” while Philadelphia has popularized “wickets/wickeds”, which are elongated and exaggerated versions of a graffiti writer’s tag or initials.

11 Ibid., 98.

12 Sherwood Thompson, *Encyclopedia of Diversity and Social Justice* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 394. “All city” refers to having a recognized tag/being a recognized graffiti writer across an entire city. In the 1980s, this meant being known across all five boroughs of New York City and generally pertained to train graffiti. American graffiti is inextricably linked to hip-hop and rap music, which serves as an apt comparison for how a medium can be activist without being overtly political. The so-called “founders” of hip-hop, Kool DJ Herc, Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa, composed music that was meant to entertain, but by creating a unique brand of music that spoke about urban life in a way that no music genre had before, Thompson argues that they were connecting directly to “disenfranchised youth”. In the same way, the earliest graffiti writers found joy and entertainment in going “all city” but did not paint for expressly political reasons.
The cars were occasionally painted with anti-police or anti-poverty slogans, but in general, the trains were used to showcase creative talent rather than to protest political or social inequality. Interviews with some of the earliest graffiti writers reveal that they were far more interested in challenging themselves and inspiring envy among their fellow writers than stimulating social change. In urban centers where gangs were prevalent, graffiti writers formed their own “crews” for protection, essentially creating counter-gangs that recruited youth off of the street. Becoming a successful crew was directly related to “bombing”, covering as much territory as possible faster than competing crews in the neighborhood. The goal of tagging was notoriety rather than anonymity, which meant that graffiti was always accompanied by a tag that declared authorship. The counterculture of graffiti in the United States has never been connected to a specific political movement, but is instead considered a general revolt against normative art and traditional concepts of who can be an artist.

In contrast, the European graffiti movement centered more on buildings than on trains, which created a deviation in both the function and the technique of graffiti. Although early European graffiti artists often considered themselves to be the “younger brothers” of the

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13 *Style Wars.* Directed by Tony Silver. 1983. Public Art Films, 2002. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0EW22LzSaJA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0EW22LzSaJA). The documentary *Style Wars* is not only a record of the work of the early train writers but also played an active role in spreading graffiti culture. Screenings of the documentary brought graffiti across the Atlantic and inspired train writing in multiple European countries.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Scape Martinez, *GRAFF: The Art and Technique of Graffiti* (New York: IMPACT, 2009), 8-9. This is not to say that train graffiti does not exist in Europe or that going “all city” is no longer an important part of the graffiti culture. “Street cred” is still generally earned through “getting up” in various places all over a city. However, because major European artists create “pieces” (murals, or larger, elaborate designs) more frequently than “tags” (initials with small symbols), European artists are more likely to gain attention for the content of their art rather than the quantity.
American graffiti writers of the 1970s, they brought their own distinct styles to the table.\textsuperscript{17} French graffiti writers in particular popularized the use of stencils, which let artists paint faster and more efficiently.\textsuperscript{18} European graffiti is more frequently linked to social movements—Fascism, Nazism, Communism, Socialism and Anarchism—than its American predecessor. While American graffiti bombing may have been tied to certain gangs or graffiti crews, European bombing can be tied to soccer clubs (which often have distinct political leanings). A competition between rival graffiti crews in New York would be based purely on covering territory and receiving the respect that accompanies that task, but a European graffiti rivalry can be tied to race, socioeconomic status and elections. European artists don’t seek protection by forming a crew because they can find physical protection and a sense of political identity within the brotherhood of fascism or anarchism. Graffiti crews exist in Europe but whereas painting with a crew is a cornerstone of the American graffiti scene, it is less central to the European graffiti culture. European graffiti artists are more comfortable with anonymity because they are not part of rival crews; they are part of rival political beliefs.\textsuperscript{19} This means that rivalries between

\textsuperscript{17} Pereira, \textit{Graffiti}, 29.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 89. French stencil art began as train writing hit its strongest years and as train writing faded in the late 1990s, stencil art was strengthened into a more recognized medium.
\textsuperscript{19}\textit{Graffiti Wars}. Directed by Jane Preston. 2011. BBC One Productions, 2011. \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Itteoy50u9s&list=PLC1A25DC5677261C3&index=4}. According to the unwritten “rules” of graffiti, the retribution for tagging someone else’s territory would be entirely art-based: if one person writes a disrespectful tag, another artist will paint over it and a painting “war” may ensue. They keep their battle concentrated in the art world rather than starting a physical fight because they care more about “street cred” as artists than about violently settling the fight. Privileging artistic competition over physical violence is a unique attribute of the graffiti world. The graffiti crews of the 1970s and 1980s often engaged in graffiti “wars” rather than physical conflict. In the case of gang disputes, an offensive tag might inspire increased physical violence in a neighborhood but because gang tags don’t list individual names, the entire gang will take the brunt of the attack rather than just the person who wrote the tag. In the same way, European writers operate in a “gang” mentality—they write their political belief instead of their name because then they are allied with the entire political movement rather than standing alone. Anonymity protects them from retribution, be it artistic or physical, without dampening their political message.
graffiti artists are directly linked to their personal beliefs, as opposed to their skill as writers.\textsuperscript{20} European artists tend to stay away from traditional “tags” for two reasons. Firstly, because they care more about the message they are trying to promote than about their personal reputation as a tagger and secondly, because they want their slogans to be legible to the general public.\textsuperscript{21} While twentieth century American graffiti writers sought to create an elite group of artists who communicated and competed primarily with each other, European writers want to share their message with the community at large.

The ethnic demographics of European graffiti writers also influence the content of their writing. American graffiti writers are by no means a homogenous community, but the initial writers of New York and Philadelphia were young black men.\textsuperscript{22} In contrast, the European graffiti movement is dominated by European men born and raised with a “white” identity—native German, Italian, French, etc. American train writing was often an instrument for vitriolic social commentary regarding police abuse and economic inequality, but on the whole it promoted an anti-racism message. In contrast, the European graffiti scene has been co-opted by neofascist and xenophobic groups seeking a tool for promoting intolerance. Racist and xenophobic graffiti exists within the United States, but it was never at the heart of the graffiti movement, whereas in Europe, the neofascists have been creating racist pieces since they first

\textsuperscript{20} This changes the dynamic of graffiti “wars”. Historically, a “war” was an up-and-coming artist trying to prove himself by painting over the work of an established artist—a mark of disrespect that challenged each artist to one-up the other one until the “winner” created a piece that was more technically and creatively impressive than the other’s. However, in European political graffiti, it is a competition over message, not skill. A completely unskilled writer may paint over the tag of a famous writer because they want to start a “war” over the political message. This brand of graffiti “war” reveals that although certain writers may still value artistic competition, technical prowess is taking a backseat to political messaging.

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Infamy}. Directed by Doug Pray. Graffiti artists in America, especially Philadelphia, pride themselves on the fact that their tags are difficult to read and that only fellow members of the graffiti community can understand them. The whole purpose of a “wicked/wicket” is creating confusion among the general public and the police.

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Style Wars}. Directed by Tony Silver.
began using spray paint. Variations on slogans such as “Italy for the Italians”, “Go home” or “Immigrants out” are common not just in Italy but across most of Western Europe (see Figure 3). In response, there has been a growing trend of welcoming, pro-immigrant graffiti—slogans such as “No to racism” and “Welcome refugees” have cropped up in multiple cities (see Figure 4). Racially charged graffiti has been present in Europe for years, but it is proliferating at an escalated rate in response to the flood of immigration from the Middle East in 2015-2016. The graffiti battle between anti-refugee and pro-refugee sympathizers reflects the division that has existed for decades between the far right, the center, and the leftist political ideology. Neofascists have integrated xenophobia into their rhetoric to disguise it as a new ideology that developed as a reaction to the influx of migrants, but in reality, their political position is simply an extension of twentieth-century fascism.
CHAPTER 1: FASCISM, RESISTANCE AND GRAFFITI IN ITALY

On paper, Fascism in Italy ended in July 1943 with the Allied landings in Sicily and the Gran Consiglio del Fascismo’s decision to remove Mussolini from power. In reality, it took another two years for the partisans to sweep upward from the South, dismantling the Italian Social Republic, Hitler’s puppet government led by Mussolini. After Mussolini’s execution by the partisans on April 28, 1945, the First Republic was established and the battle for power between the Christian Democrats, the Communists and the Socialists took center stage. However, fascism was still present in the form of the Italian Social Movement, established in 1946 by a group of fascist soldiers, which allowed many former fascists to reintegrate into Italian society.

As in the case of many dictatorships, graffiti played an important role in creating a culture of fear and expanding the totalitarian nature of the fascist state. Mussolini’s formal commitment to reforming the art and architecture of Italy transformed the urban landscape but his mission was aided by the unofficial presence of graffiti. The image of Mussolini, already plastered across windows and walls via photograph and sketch, was further dispersed by the use of graffiti stencils and freehand murals (see Figure 5). Slogans such as “Credere, Obbedire, Combattere!” and “Mussolini sempre giusto!” were stenciled on walls across the country, in addition to quotes from his latest speeches.

For the sake of historical clarity, this paper will consider all fascist political activity after 1945 to be “neofascist”. Italian neofascists stayed relatively under the radar until December 7,

23 Simonetta Falasca Zamponi, Lo spettacolo del fascismo (Soveria Manelli: Rubbettino Editore, 2003), 139. Many of these stencils and murals were anonymous but they were clearly painted by Mussolini’s supporters, whether or not they were enrolled members of the political party.
24 Hamish Macdonald, “Mussolini and Italian Fascism” (Nashville: Nelson Thomas, 1998), 31. These phrases translate to “Believe, Obey, Fight” and “Mussolini always right!”
1970, when hundreds of militants joined together to conduct the Golpe Borghese, a failed coup d’état that was suspended before it ever began.\textsuperscript{25} Between 1969 and 1980, neofascists were responsible for a variety of bombings and attacks (collectively referred to as the “strategy of tension”) but by 1990, the neofascists were looking to reform their image.\textsuperscript{26} The Italian Social Movement leaned towards the center, aligning itself with the National Alliance to give it legitimacy and to move away from the fascist label. Many extreme right-wing politicians have shifted into official neofascist parties such as the Tricolor Flame (established 1995), the New Force (established 1997) or the National Front (established 1997).\textsuperscript{27} Despite the political rebranding of the far-right, neofascism is just as violent and dangerous as its fascist predecessor. Neofascism uses the same strategy to recruit citizens that Mussolini’s fascists used for recruitment in the 1920s. Both fascism and neofascism appeal to those who feel economically and politically threatened, unsure of their position in a changing world. An examination of both fascist and neofascist recruitment will aid in understanding why neofascism appeals to modern Italians.

PROFILE OF FASCIST RECRUITMENT

The founding members of the fasci were “marginal men, adventurers and ex-revolutionaries…the isolated became the elite…propaganda transformed weakness into a source

\textsuperscript{27} Andrea Mammone, \textit{Transnational Neofascism in France and Italy} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 149. Each of these parties operates independently but they rely on the same neofascist rhetoric and could be united at a future date. In fact, in 2004, the New Force and the National Front banded together in a coalition that secured them a seat in the European Parliament.
of psychological satisfaction and high morale”. Mussolini had a penchant for recruiting the outsiders within the in-crowd, finding the excluded (or at least those who considered themselves to be excluded) within the military and upper classes and welcoming them into the fold.

Mussolini’s fascism relied largely on military power, but the military members that he did recruit were outsiders in their own way: ex-officers, members of the shock troops and overly excitable volunteers. These officers could be seen superficially as the military elite but their commitment to Futurism made them unpopular outside of their immediate Fascist circle because of Futurism’s connection to violence and the destruction of traditional Italian culture. After recruiting in the military, Mussolini moved on to the bourgeoisie and professional classes, paying special attention to younger Italians, who used the movement as a replacement for the exhilaration of the First World War. The younger generation played a huge role in the diffusion of fascism, which they saw as an opportunity for social disruption, almost like “an extension of the licensed indiscipline of the student carnival, the Feste Goliardiche.” Mussolini made a point of declaring that “the class struggle…must be subordinated to the ‘necessities of productivity’, as well as the greatness of the nation”, which prevented fascism from seeming too radical to appeal to the youth of the elite and middle class. Fascism represented protection against the emergent communist threat that both the middle and upper class feared.

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29 Ibid., 40.
31 This is an important parallel with modern neofascist recruitment: youth from the middle class, who have no experience with war or massive political change, see joining a neofascist movement as their own personal war.
33 Ibid., 42.
In 1920, fascist recruitment shifted from the cities to the countryside, simultaneously seeking the approval of the elite, the middle class and the laborers—one of the many glaring contradictions of fascist rule. Mussolini sought to build an ideology that exalted work, both agrarian and urban, but his reliance on the bourgeoisie meant that he was never truly a representative of the working class. As membership grew throughout 1920-21, Mussolini adjusted the political aims of the movement to accommodate the new demographics he had recruited. By 1922, fascism had moved further right, promoting a specific brand of hierarchy meant to appease the elite (army, bureaucracy, magistracy and business classes) who were uneasy after the spike in violence the *squadristi* brought to the countryside. This focus on hierarchy, essentially guaranteeing a role for the “productive” bourgeoisie, assuaged upper and middle class concerns while the *squadristi* continued large-scale, violent expansion of fascist rule. By the time Mussolini led the March on Rome in October 1922, the party had a consolidated base of support, which seemingly declared that the fascists were more powerful and omnipresent than any other political movement in the country.

**PROFILE OF NEOFASCIST RECRUITMENT**

Italy is a unique country in that fascism was never truly extinguished and therefore is accepted by a large part of society as more of a constant presence than an aberration. Fascism is regarded as a national mistake but there is relatively little focus on the magnitude of the crimes

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34 Ibid., 62.
35 The squadristi, Mussolini’s gangs of thugs, would physically attack political opponents and intimidate citizens into supporting the regime. The physical brutality that they enacted during election cycles meant that even though the fascists came to power via an election rather than a coup d’état, that election can hardly be considered free or fair.
committed under the fascist banner.\textsuperscript{36} The largely revisionist history taught in Italian schools has left the door open for “a resurgence of fascist values. The lack of an Italian or French Nuremburg, of a serious collective discussion, including public opinion, gave neofascists the opportunity to profess the same backward-looking ideas…not many mainstream agencies or institutions seem prepared, or willing, to cope with events”.\textsuperscript{37} Middle and upper class youth are attractive targets for neofascist recruitment but in the modern era, the venues in which they are recruited have expanded to include sporting events. Football clubs have become a critical instrument for the systematic recruitment of Italian men. The ultras, fanatic football supporters, were initially used as political tools by the Italian Social Movement after they were banned from demonstrating in streets and squares.\textsuperscript{38} It is largely within the football clubs that neofascism has found its most dedicated recruits. Supporting the club and supporting the neofascist ideals associated with it are seen as synonymous, so a large number of Italians who feel strong personal ties to the club will accept the violence that comes with it out of a sense of loyalty to their team. For example, S.S. Lazio is aligned with far right political beliefs while A.S. Livorno has historically been left-wing. Later in this paper, I will discuss how the ultras use graffiti to propagate both their club identity and their political beliefs.

Neofascism is distinct from Mussolini’s fascism in that recruitment now relies heavily on racial prejudice targeted towards African, Middle Eastern and Asian groups. Neofascism as a movement is diverse and captures all manner of political motivations, but in the Italian context,

\textsuperscript{36} In the wake of Italy’s financial difficulties over the past several years, there has even been nostalgia about the economic boost of fascism. While living in Italy, I spoke with several senior citizens who praised the social order under both Mussolini and Berlusconi, describing their regimes as almost halcyon. \textsuperscript{37}Mammone, \textit{Transnational Neofascism}, 36. \textsuperscript{38}Adam Brown, \textit{Fanatics!: Power, Identity and Fandom in Football} (New York: Psychology Press, 1998), 90. The Italian Social Movement used them as organized muscle (almost parallel to the \textit{squadristi} of fascism). Ultras frequently use violence to intimidate rival teams, both through individual beatings/murders and large-scale stadium riots.
racism has been a unifying factor. According to a 1989 report by the European Parliament, “racism and xenophobia…graveyard vandalism, cross burning, acts of terror against immigrants, ‘hate speech’…fascism or neo-fascism [was] identified as its source”.\(^{39}\) Just as the original fascists feared the communists, neofascists fear immigrant communities and hope to repress them with force. Graffiti campaigns against immigrant populations are meant to intimidate the populace and create the illusion that neofascists, like their fascists predecessors, are everywhere in Italian society, watching and planning their attacks. Neofascist graffiti does not only target immigrants—it has been used to threaten any political ideology or public figure that is seen as a threat to neofascist ideals. To combat these intimidating “bombings”, a counterforce of graffiti campaigns has emerged which can be collectively referred to as the antifascist graffiti movement.

THE ALTERNATIVE: A PROFILE OF ANTI-FASCIST GRAFFITI ARTISTS

In the context of the 1990s, an American graffiti crew was “highly organized and hierarchical in structure…typically, crews consist of between four and ten people, often of mixed races and between ages 14 and 20, who work together, led by a ‘king’ or ‘queen’…a crew may break up if the leader leaves it to take up a respectable job or because he or she has been arrested”.\(^{40}\) Modern graffiti places more emphasis on the individual than the crew. In a world where graffiti is transforming into the highly profitable commercial enterprise known as “street art”, the desire to gain fame as an individual artist outweighs the comfort and protection of a crew. In the 1990s (especially within the American context), the crew gave graffiti writers a sense of identity but in the European context, in which graffiti is connected to political


movements, artists find their identity in political philosophies rather than a self-made crew. Interviews with more contemporary artists reveal the “loose structural form of crews; a writer may have a surface association with many crews…[the writer] may gain fame, respect and a more reputable identity both within the graffiti community and within the walls and spaces of a greater social system”. Crews have by no means disappeared, but they are increasingly used as a platform to promote individual artists rather than the name of an entire crew. In Italy, there are only a handful of graffiti crews still operating—artists prefer to promote their work individually.

The unifying banners of fascism and antifascism are so broad that they capture more artists than any single graffiti crew ever could. The Zona Antifa (Antifascist Zone) tag could be considered the unifying tag of the antifascists, the equivalent of a unified crew’s tag in the 1990s. Certain assumptions can be made about the antifascist graffiti writers, but it is important to remember that they are a largely anonymous subset within the larger pool of Italian graffiti artists. While there are dozens of well-publicized graffiti artists who openly share their identity, these artists’ only identifying mark is the Zona Antifa slogan. Without a signature or the tag of a given crew, there is no clue as to who the artist may be.

42 “Artists in Italy”. FatCap.com. Accessed 9 September 2015. http://www.fatcap.com/country/italy/artists.html. The largest remaining crews active in Italy are: Sten & Lex (Rome), Hardcore (Naples), EAD (Padua), HTC (Trezzo sull’Adda), Spruzzer (Milan), TD (Milan), NCV (Milan), Idea SAF (Cagliari), and S.B (Syracuse). The composition of these crews is not solely Italian artists and they do not paint solely within Italy. The pieces they create are signed by individual artists, promoting the artist rather than the crew as a whole.
43 Margo Thompson, American Graffiti (New York: Parkstone International, 2012), 207. Tags play an important role in defining the age and gender of an artist. If an artist works in consistently visible places over time, we can track how many years they have been writing. For example, the artist Invader began his mosaics in the mid-1990s, which lets us assume that he is at least in his forties. If writers choose to share their gender through the symbols/imagery in their work (like Lady Pink, who sometimes included self-portraits in her pieces) we may also determine the gender of the writer. Many female writers include
are all male, but because antifascist graffiti is so often anonymous, we have no way of knowing the proportion of female artists in the antifascist graffiti community. Race or ethnicity is also largely a mystery because graffiti writers are rarely photographed without masks or scarves, as they hope to protect their identity from the police. However, based on social media analysis of the Zona Antifa tag, we can make a few general statements about antifascist artists.

Antifascist graffiti artists are members of the younger generation (early teens to late twenties), who use graffiti as an alternative to political participation because they are often too young to participate in the formal political process. They are a new generation of Italians raised without any nostalgia for fascism. In fact, they have linked fascism inextricably with racism and “white pride”. They come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds but are often middle class or working class. A portion of them have ties to anarchist sentiments, which I will discuss later in this paper. These artists use anonymous forums and social media to share their work, promote their political message and connect from other artists across the world. The internet is a safe haven for graffiti artists, where screen names and proxy servers let them take credit for their work on blogs and forums without risking arrest or fines.

PUNISHMENTS FOR GRAFFITI

There are dozens of urban spaces around the world where graffiti has been accepted and even legalized, but this welcoming attitude towards graffiti has never reached the national level. In Italy, Article 639 of the Penal Code establishes a set of fines and jail time for graffiti. The fines are arranged in a graduated tier: €103 for damaging another person’s property, €300 to women’s portraits in their pieces, but the presence of a woman in the piece is no guarantee that the artist is female.

44 Several cities around the world have designated specific walls or condemned buildings as public spaces that can be used for graffiti. Examples include the Venice Graffiti Pit in California, the Rote Fabrik mill in Zurich and the now defunct 5 Pointz in New York City. The popular website legal-walls.net uses Google Maps to broadcast a list of walls that are legally open for graffiti around the world.
€1000 for damaging public or private transport (which can be substituted for a one to six month long jail sentence), €1000 to €3000 for damaging objects “of historic or artistic interest” (with an additional three month to one year long jail sentence). In cases of recidivism, graffiti writers can be fined up to €10,000 and will serve from three months to two years in jail. During Berlusconi’s later tenure (2008-2011), he cracked down on graffiti across the country, declaring that “Italy must recover its image”. The current high fines and jail sentences set forth by Article 639 reflect revisions to the Penal Code that Berlusconi and his supporters enacted in the late 2000s. The harsh punishments for graffiti are a major contributor in the division between traditional graffiti and “street art”. Street artists have shifted into more commercial venues so they can continue to create in their preferred medium without harassment whereas graffiti writers consider the draconian laws to be a challenge and have responded with massive tagging projects. Commercial enterprises now see graffiti as a key aspect of modern graphic design, creating the exact opposite of Berlusconi’s vision: as the legal costs of graffiti have risen, so


46 Elisabetta Povoledo, “Berlusconi aims to get tough on graffiti,” *The New York Times*, last modified October 30, 2008. Accessed September 28, 2015. [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/30/world/europe/30iht-italy.html?_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/30/world/europe/30iht-italy.html?_r=0). Berlusconi was under pressure to protect Italy’s image in the middle of the garbage crisis in Naples, during which images of garbage piled in the streets threw a negative light on the country. When discussing graffiti at an October 2008 meeting of the Federation of Merchants and Shopkeepers, Berlusconi proclaimed that “in some of our cities, it feels like we are in Africa rather than Europe”.

47 Elisabetta Povoledo, “Italian Graffiti Artist Acquitted on Technicalities,” *The New York Times*, last modified July 12, 2010. Accessed September 28, 2015. [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/13/world/europe/13iht-italy.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/13/world/europe/13iht-italy.html). Despite the increased fines, graffiti has not been significantly reduced within Italy. During a 2010 case, when the graffiti artist Daniele Nicolosi (aka Bros) was acquitted, Milanese counselor Pierfrancesco Majorino said “The city throws away millions of euros each year cleaning up graffiti, but still you have graffiti. Perhaps the city should ask itself whether it is getting the desired results…If you know 20-year-olds, you know that a fine isn’t going to stop them.”

48 For the purposes of this paper, “street art” refers to any graffiti or mural which is painted for financial gain. This includes artwork that is contracted by city councils for beautification and artwork contracted by private companies for marketing purposes.

49 Pereira, *Graffiti*, 68-75.
have the financial incentives to create graffiti. Graffiti, for better or worse, is going commercial—which has led to an increase in the documentation and popularity of tags such as *Zona Antifa*. The marketization of graffiti may in time lead to a decrease in its political power but for the moment, it is still a critical tool for activism around the world.

**SUPPRESSION, TRANSFORMATION AND CREATION**

I have created three subdivisions of antifascist graffiti based on the patterns I observed during my research: suppression, transformation and creation. Suppression involves a conscious negation of fascist artwork, such as whitewashing or spray painting over a fascist symbol or slogan. The purpose of suppression is not to return the wall to its original state like pressure washing might, but instead to demonstrate an active resistance against the fascist mentality. Transformation involves adapting the fascist symbol or slogan to render it harmless or to politicize it in an alternative way. Examples of transformation include painting hearts and diamonds over swastikas or adding the prefix “anti” to a fascist slogan. Transformation is a form of protest that aims to take power away from the fascists by morphing graffiti that usually causes fear into something comical or cute. Creation is a purely innovative approach that involves artists painting their own slogans or murals on their own stretches of wall. This approach demonstrates

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50 Stephen Eskilson, *Graphic Design: A New History, Second Edition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 388. “Nowadays some companies, in their unending quest for an advertising strategy that will reflect popular culture and appear non-commercial, have hired graffiti artists to produce murals for them. This tactic has sometimes led to popular backlashes, however, as activists have resented being upstaged and coopted by urban street culture; in an ironic twist, commercial graffiti art masquerading as street art have at times been defaced by activists with more graffiti”. Even though graffiti is being “absorbed into the mainstream”, graffiti writers still feel the need to separate graffiti from commercial art—even if that means attacking another writer’s work. This backlash against commercialism is one reason why the graffiti community has largely vilified Banksy, whose works are usually preserved and sold to the highest bidder.

51 I established these three categories while studying graffiti in the spring of 2015, thanks to an Honors Fellowship grant from William and Mary’s Charles Center. During that spring, I documented graffiti throughout Italy (Viterbo, Rome, Venice, Salerno, and Palermo), Romania (Bucharest, Maramures), Germany (Berlin, Potsdam) and France (Nice, Paris).
an artistic force that works in direct opposition to the fascists, hoping to strike before the fascists can in a given neighborhood or city. Examples of creation include slogans, murals and stencils in public locations.\textsuperscript{52} Out of these three approaches to antifascist graffiti, creation is the only one in which artists might claim ownership by signing their name.

Suppression takes the least amount of skill, but that is partially because it is not always graffiti artists who take part in suppression. Homeowners or local councils may decide to paint over neofascist graffiti because they do not agree with its political message or because they think it defaces their property. When these groups take part in suppression, they may not think of it as actively antifascist act, yet by concealing neofascist artwork, they are promoting a culture of resistance against neofascist aggression. Merely leaving the graffiti untouched would suggest that the community was ambivalent towards or even in favor of neofascism. Suppression is not always a successful technique because it draws attention to the fact that a piece of graffiti existed in that space but it is perhaps the most common approach to negating fascist graffiti.

Transformation involves more skill because it requires either a stencil or freehand use of paint. Transformations are often clumsy and unsophisticated, suggesting that the artists who perform them are inexperienced. However, the ease with which a transformation can be completed makes it the most accessible approach. Anyone, no matter their level of skill or the type of paint they use, can perform a transformation and it will still present as a defiant act against fascism, no matter how technically underwhelming it is. Transformation appeals

\textsuperscript{52} Graffiti Wars. Directed by Tony Silver. Within the graffiti community, stencils are generally seen as a tool for beginners. It is far easier to create a piece of graffiti using a stencil than spray-painting freehand. This is not to say that stencils have no respect within the graffiti community. Blek le Rat has used them for years and he is considered the father of French graffiti. However, graffiti writers typically consider freehand painting to be more challenging because it takes more time and precision to complete a piece. Stencils are an accessible, simple way to get started creating graffiti (and one that appeals more aesthetically to the general public) but they are a relatively new addition to the graffiti scene, developing more in the 1990s (when train writing was diminishing).
especially to young artists who have no training nor access to multiple colors of paints. There is little need for “can control” (dexterity with spray paint) because the letters and symbols are so simplistic. The minimalist approach of a transformation makes it the perfect gateway into antifascist graffiti. Artists can choose to never paint anything larger than a transformation and still feel that they are making a stand against fascism, or they can use transformation as a training stage before creation.

Creation requires a level of skill beyond suppression or transformation, but that does not mean only experienced graffiti artists can create. Creation applies to stencils, slogans and stickers as well as larger pieces, and this diversity of mediums in creation makes it an inclusive approach. The easiest form of creation is a sticker—either self-designed or printed off the internet—that can be placed anywhere, at any time. Beyond stickers, stencils and slogans are the next step. These require speed, precise painting and decent paint, yet even relative novices could paint in these mediums and still produce high quality work. Pieces and murals represent the greatest challenge. A major piece or mural requires multiple colors of paint, skilled painting technique and above all, the time for the paint to dry so the different colors and shapes of the mural can be completed without the paint running. Placing stickers requires only a few seconds to remove the adhesive backing, while stencils and slogans can usually be completed in ten minutes or less. However, pieces and murals can take anywhere from half an hour to multiple nights to finish. The artists creating pieces and murals are generally more skilled, more

experienced and more committed to the message. Their art will take longer to complete, which means they spend more time out on the street risking arrest or fines. Only artists who are truly committed to the message (and to the medium) will take that risk.

THE HISTORY OF RESISTANCE IN ITALY

In the postwar Italian consciousness, the word resistance is synonymous with the partisans of 1943-45, who collaborated with the Allied forces to sweep Mussolini out of power. It has been estimated that “about 200,000 partisans took part in the Resistance, and German and Fascist forces killed some 70,000 Italians (including both partisans and civilians) for Resistance activities”.54 The partisan movement was a unifying moment in Italian history, which persisted in the political culture in the 1960s and 1970s, as political candidates profited from the memory of the partisans, whether or not they had fought in the war. National Liberation Committees (CLNs), the strategy groups that the partisans formed to coordinate and administrate in the localities where they fought, laid the groundwork for political collaborations in the postwar era.55 The partisan movement negated the shame of fascism, letting the Italian population focus on heroism and liberation rather than the horrors of participating in fascist rule. Scholars have to be careful not to romanticize the partisans, as they “operated with their own sets of laws, rules and regulations. They created their own form of justice, held their own trials and handed down their own sentences. They had no prisons and were constantly on the move. Authority and legitimation were moveable feasts in this world and rules were open to interpretation and manipulation”.56 However, for certain members of the Italian population, the partisans still represent the triumph of good over evil and the romanticized heroes of the 1940s continue to

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55 Ibid., 261.
56 John Foot, Italy’s Divided Memory (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 159.
symbolize the ultimate valiant resistance. Although the partisans of the 1940s generally confined their graffiti to painting the hammer and sickle of the Communist party, references to their efforts are omnipresent in modern Italian graffiti. The slogan “Onore ai Partigiani” (Honor to the Partisans) is prevalent in modern antifascist graffiti across Italy (see Figure 6).

Moving forward in Italian history, the next great act of resistance came in 1967-68. In a year of worldwide political protest, Italy’s protests and strikes spread faster and persisted longer than those of neighboring countries. The 1960s marked a period of educational reforms that opened universities to more students from the middle and lower classes, which created an increase in enrollment without a parallel increase in funding. The combination of lackluster professors and overcrowding led to a massive spike in the dropout rate, which in turn led to pressure for modernization of the education system. Sit-ins and occupation protests began in the city of Trento and from there “the insurrection spread to Milan’s Catholic University and then Turin. Fanning out across the country, its height came when police ended the occupation of Rome’s La Sapienza…a radicalizing moment, it brought the previously pacifist movement onto the national front pages and established mutual loathing”. 57 During the occupation of the universities, graffiti was painted throughout university buildings and around the surrounding neighborhoods, effectively marking the student’s territory (see Figure 7). The photographic record of this student graffiti is extensive thanks to newspapers and amateur photography but the literary record does not explore the graffiti in depth. Interestingly enough, the graffiti of the French protests of May 1968 are better documented in the academic record, despite the fact that

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57 Simon Martin, Sport Italia: The Italian Love Affair with Sport (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 165. The clash between protesters and police at the faculty of architecture at La Sapienza is referred to as “The Battle of Valle Giulia”. Student protesters threw rocks at policemen and set vehicles on fire while policemen on horseback rode through the streets beating the students. 232 people were arrested after approximately 148 policemen and 478 students were wounded in a single day.
the Italian student movement was more widespread within the country and lasted significantly longer.

In 1968-69, industrial workers began a wide-scale series of strikes in Northern Italy, demanding better working conditions, wages and pensions. This period of strikes was referred to as the *autunno caldo* (Hot Autumn) by the Italian press. The *autunno caldo* was a watershed moment for worker’s rights in Italy, opening a discussion on better working conditions, wages and class equality in the Italian industrial sector. Students left their posts at university to ally with the worker’s movement, introducing the idea of direct democracy (which considerably undercut the traditional role of unions and political parties). While the *autunno caldo* was not known for its graffiti, it does represent an important moment for Italian political consciousness because it emphasized direct communication in the same way that graffiti does. Robert Lumley writes that “the student movement had already popularized notions of direct democracy but had not been able to create durable structures. The workers movement had proved more successful…it created its own demands, forms of action and organization from below.”58 Workers circumnavigated the traditional power structure of unions, holding their own meetings and maximizing participation, regardless of union membership or position within the factory. While the student movement sparked widespread occupation and protest, the workers movement sustained those tactics by privileging direct communication and participation over traditional union hierarchies.

Unfortunately the legacy of the student and workers movements is generally overshadowed by the years which followed, a time period of violent conflict referred to as the *anni di piombo* (years of lead). The students’ challenge to the “fundamental sectors of Italian

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society: the workplace, the family and the Church...drew a response from dark, right-wing counter forces”.  

59 Beginning with the 1969 bombing of Piazza Fontana, right wing agents launched their “strategy of tension”, a set of attacks that were “intended to create panic and uncertainty that would lead to an authoritarian crackdown”.  

60 In response, the Red Brigades, a left-wing paramilitary organization that developed out of the student movement, launched their own campaign of violence. Using a five pointed star as their symbol, the Red Brigades began to strike against the state through largely symbolic attacks, several of which utilized graffiti. Over time the Red Brigades became feared for their disregard for human life while committing numerous kidnappings, robberies and murders. Their most famous act of violence came in 1978, when they kidnapped Christian Democrat Aldo Moro, holding him prisoner for fifty-five days before assassinating him.

There was a brief resurgence of student activism in the mid-1970s but throughout the 1980s, youth political activism shrank to the point of disappearing. However, in 1990 students banded together once again during the Pantera Movement. The occupation of universities in Rome, Palermo and Bologna came in response to an educational reform that shifted the financing of universities so that the schools were more dependent on private funding.  

61 Students began protesting for educational reform, but their goals eventually extended to include advocating for the right to strike and protesting racism and harsh drug laws.  

62 The Pantera movement involved student protest and occupation of universities in the spirit of the 1960s and 1970s but openly

59 Ibid., 167.  
60 Ibid., 167. The bombing of Piazza Fontana killed 16 people and wounded 88. Giuseppe Pinelli, who died in police custody, and Pietro Valpreda, who spent years in detention, were initially accused of the crime but later found innocent. The bomb was in fact the work of the right wing group Ordine Nuovo, but the neofascists who were tried for the crime were ultimately acquitted due to a lack of evidence.  

61 Andrea Hajek, Negotiating Memories of Protest in Western Europe: The Case of Italy (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 134.  

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criticized both the Italian Communist Party and former student leaders. The graffiti of the Pantera movement was distinct not for its use of slogans but for its focus on symbolism. While the catchphrase “La Pantera siamo noi” was a written call to arms, the symbol of a prowling black panther carries a much greater impact in the photographic record of the movement.⁶³ Various iterations of a black panther were painted on walls, drawn on chalkboards and scrawled on signs throughout the university occupations (see Figure 8). The students chose the black panther as their symbol as a nod to both the Black Panther movement of the United States and the legend of the goddess Isis, whose familiar was believed to be a black panther.⁶⁴ Unfortunately, the Pantera movement disintegrated as its members moved from university into the working world and Italy entered the twenty-first century without a strong activist presence.

The brutality and fear associated with the 1970s often leads Italians to overlook the triumphs of 1968. While strikes and student protests still occur in Italy, contemporaries have never matched the size and strength of the 1968 movement. Though the Pantera movement demonstrated that the desire for reform in Italy was not dead, that desire has remained dormant—perhaps out of lethargy, perhaps out of fear—for the past two decades. Graffiti could be the key to awakening that desire once more. The promise that graffiti holds for the new generation of Italians is that it preserves anonymity. Graffiti writers do not have to fear persecution if they do not sign their work, they do not have to be members of unions or political groups to participate and they do not have to organize others to work with them because graffiti is a medium that rewards the solo actor. Graffiti is a key tool in reclaiming the voice of protest and political organization in Italy because it enfranchises Italians without putting them in danger.

⁶³ In English, “We are the panther”.
POLITICAL APATHY

Italian political activity in the wake of the anni di piombo can be largely characterized as apathetic and ineffective. The fear created by the terrorist activities of the 1970s discouraged organized protest and activism and even when that fear receded, there was no resurgence of political activity. Instead, the 1980s became known as the riflusso (withdrawal), a decade of pessimism and indifference towards politics. The 1980s are characterized as “the great retreat into private life, the abandonment of collective action, the painful coming to terms with failure”.65 As the upheaval of the 1970s drew to a close, “all the parties and unions began to lose members and election turnouts dropped. Protest movements attracted far fewer people…the ideologies that held the Cold War system together—communism and anticommunism, fascism and anti-fascism—began to lose their appeal”.66 Save for the brief spark of the Pantera movement, Italians lost their faith in their own power to create positive change and adopted an almost defeatist attitude towards activism. According to Tom DeLuca, political apathy develops when a population feels politically alienated and politically subordinated.67 Political alienation occurs when “people have been so thoroughly manipulated and programmed that they lose the capacity for free intentional action, including the ability to think and act in ways that at some point may be politically relevant”.68 Political subordination emerges when “people are denied counter-ideologies, political institutions and modes of life that may help them form political intentions and act accordingly”.69 Unfortunately this apathy “which stems from long-standing feelings of mistrust for politics, disaffection, and personal political ineffectiveness, questions the

66 Britannica Educational Publishing, Italy, 278.
68 Ibid., 133.
69 Ibid., 134.
legitimacy of the political system, erodes support, and therefore weakens the performance of the system itself”.

When a political system loses credibility, citizens are less likely to vote and exercise their voice in the political sphere. The issue with the Italian political system is that this loss of credibility has been exaggerated to the point that Italians think their government will never again be functional and transparent. Italians today have created a self-fulfilling prophecy of inefficiency and corruption by refusing to believe that they can enact significant change in their own government. In order to create a new generation of Italian activists, there has to be an effort to redefine what constitutes activism and who can participate. As Robert Ventresca writes in his exploration of the Italian partisans, “if there was anything truly revolutionary about the Italian Resistance, it was surely this: the notion that politics was not something dirty or irrelevant, something below the intellectual, or above the mass of illiterate or undereducated peasants or workers…politics, the Resistance boldly pronounced, was no longer the preserve of a political class alone, but rather the business of every citizen regardless of profession”. In the intervening decades, Italians have lost this concept of politics as an inclusive discipline in which all citizens can participate. Ventresca refers to the Resistance as a period of “collective soul-searching”, a moment that Italians must recreate in the modern era to determine how to regain their agency as voters and activists.

Apathy is a dangerous attitude in any political environment, but it is especially troubling in the Italian context. Political apathy was also prevalent in Italy in the 1920s, a period during which “the Italian political elite had yielded to interest group pressures because it was desperate

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72 Ibid., 33.
for political support…individual Italians remained skeptical of the civic virtue of their fellow citizens and thus tended—partly in self-defense—to exploit the state and disobey the law. The politically strong used the state for their own narrow interests—and got away with it because of the political apathy and cynicism of the weak.”.\footnote{David D. Roberts, \textit{The Syndicalist Tradition and Italian Fascism} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979), 263.} The failure of the political elite (and the general citizenry) to take action against the rise of fascism let Mussolini ascend to power without difficulty. Ventresca writes that “[Italians were] disinterested and disaffected, resigned, apathetic and above all, apolitical. Indeed, the antifascist leadership widely shared the belief that fascism had risen to power and survived so long because of the political apathy of most Italians. Fascism may have ushered in an era of mass mobilization…but it depended on the depoliticization of the Italian people”.\footnote{Ventresca, \textit{From Fascism to Democracy}, 33.} Political apathy makes a state vulnerable to extremist ideologies which rely on political stagnation to make their platform seem innovative and rational by contrast.

As Europe witnesses a growing shift towards neofascism, Italy’s political apathy is once again priming the country for a right-wing takeover. Berlusconi’s tenure (1994-1996, 2001-2006 and 2008-2011) and the increased power of his \textit{Forza Italia} party can be attributed to a number of socioeconomic factors, but the role of political apathy should not be underestimated. Berlusconi’s reelection in 2001, in the wake of a corruption trial, suggests that “many voters do not bother to punish unethical behavior by state leaders”.\footnote{John Garrard and James Newell, \textit{Scandals in Past and Contemporary Politics} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 38.} If voters stop holding their leaders accountable, they sacrifice their power in the electoral system. Berlusconi can be defined as “a quintessential representative of a new political trend, in which a politically apathetic consumer-
oriented society can be manipulated by the mass media if they are given enough entertainment”. Berlusconi traded on his celebrity status to paint himself as an undefeatable opponent. Many Italians labeled him as “too big to fail” and accepted his rise to power. The Italian political elites of the 1990s and 2000s stood back as Berlusconi monopolized political power. If they had intervened, either due to their own misgivings or because of pressure from the general populace, perhaps Berlusconi would never have abused his office to the extent that he did. There was a brief swing back towards political activism in 2002-03, when a series of large-scale protests against Berlusconi reignited the legacy of 1968-69. However, those protests were short-lived and apathy once again set in across the nation after his return in 2008.

Political apathy is especially dangerous for young voters who model their political behavior on their parents and peers. Recent research on political attitudes in Northern Italy found an increase in “youth who either did not vote or supported political parties that promoted highly localist and binary ideologies in defense only of the rights of those who appeared to be Italian citizens and against ‘foreigners’”. When youth populations are conditioned not to vote or to only vote with regional goals in mind, they are preserving a culture of political apathy that should have died out at the end of the millennium. The idea that they may be voting along xenophobic lines is even more troubling. A 2012 study comparing youth engagement in the United States to Italy found that American youth were more involved in both political and community-oriented engagement (which includes volunteering and voting). The study suggested

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that engagement was lower in Italy due to the nature of the school system, which generally does not present service as a key tenet of its mission statement.\textsuperscript{79} Whereas Italian students were once the moral compass of Italian politics, they are now less committed to leading the charge for political change. Yet in spite of this evidence of political apathy in the younger population, there are also trends that suggest Italian youth feel comfortable participating in extra-parliamentary political activity.\textsuperscript{80} A 2009 analysis found that even though Italian youth are less engaged in traditional politics, they are more likely to participate in protests than their elders, which suggests a tendency towards activism outside of conventional protest venues.\textsuperscript{81} This is where graffiti will play a crucial role in shaping the political voices of the next generation.


\textsuperscript{80} Tom Buchanan, \textit{Europe’s Troubled Peace: 1945 to the Present} (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 2011), 232. Buchanan cites the anti-globalization movement as a sign of youth political engagement in the twenty-first century.

\textsuperscript{81} Maria Grosso, “The differential impact of education on young people’s activism: comparing Italy and the United Kingdom” (Working paper, University of Oxford, 2009), 1-22.
CHAPTER 2: GRAFFITI AS A FORM OF PROTEST

Italy has a rich history of both armed and nonviolent protest movements. The legacy of the partisans (1943-35) has persisted into the twenty-first century and they are still considered the ultimate symbol resistance in Italy. Although the neofascists are not as well organized or as powerful as Mussolini’s followers, their identity stems from the idea of the fascist soldier, and as a parallel to that soldier, the antifascists of Italy have crafted their identity around the role of partisan. A stencil used by the New York artist TMNK proclaims “art is my weapon”, and although TMNK is not Italian, that stencil can be seen as an eloquent summary of Italian antifascist artists (see Figure 9).  

Graffiti can have a strong cathartic impact on its creators. In an interview regarding the value of graffiti, the American writer DOZE said “Graff [writing]…is my defense against my sense of helplessness”. Antifascist writers see themselves as a youth force that can protect the public, rebels fighting back against a violent force that is more militarized and organized than they are—in short, they see themselves as direct descendants of the partisans. However, their approach to rebellion is markedly different.

COLLECTIVE ACTION

The central obstacle blocking Italian political activism is the collective action problem, in which “individual pursuits of self-interest leads to collectively undesirable outcomes…groups fail to achieve common objectives that are in the interest of every member…all participants seek to free ride off the contributions of others, rather than contribute to production of the good”. Italian politicians fail to act in the collective interest, and the general Italian populace follows...
their example and pursues their own self-interest rather than contributing to the collective good. In part because of the fear instilled in the wake of the 1970s and in part because of the misconception that nothing will ever change in Italian politics, few people are willing to step forward to lead the charge for political reform. European graffiti manages to circumnavigate the collective action problem because it allows actors to pursue their own self-interest (creating art or “getting up/going all city”) while simultaneously contributing to the collective interest (spreading a political message and opening the dialogue). Graffiti artists generally work alone, so their work does not require any organization of supporters or resources, therefore making it easier to act without large-scale support. Even graffiti writers who operate as part of a crew/collective are largely autonomous. Antifascist graffiti connects with the guerilla tactics of the partisans but utilizes none of the military hierarchy that was once necessary to retain order. In a way, this graffiti is the polar opposite of the political demonstrations of 1968-69. Instead of being obtrusive, grandiose and well-publicized, graffiti finds its power in being subtle to the point of being covert. Graffiti artists who remain anonymous are protected from backlash from the government and the neofascists (which counteracts the fear of activism). Graffiti produces a collective good without collective action.

**EXCLUSION FROM TRADITIONAL POLITICAL PROCESSES**

Historically, Italian suffrage has been limited and arbitrary. After the unification of Italy, only two elections (1913 and 1919) were truly considered “free” before fascism swept across the country. The anti-Semitic laws of 1938 removed political power from the Jewish population, often stripping them of their citizenship. Women received the vote in 1945 but there were still barriers to free and fair elections. Cold War politics dictated major elections and prevented the

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Italian Communist Party (PCI) from coming to power on a national scale. In the last decade, there has been pressure to extend citizenship rights to immigrants and second generation Italians but at this time these groups have not received full citizenship and lack the right to vote in elections.

Italians cannot vote in the general election (the House) until age eighteen and cannot elect Senators until age twenty-five. The head of the Italian government (the Prime Minister) is elected by Parliament; therefore House and Senate votes influence both regional and national policies. Limiting the youth’s vote restricts their power both as individuals and as a voting bloc. Sonja C. Grover explores how “though seniors may not consistently vote as a homogeneous voting bloc without any regard for the interests of the young, it seems safe to say that matters affecting those under the age of majority are likely to be of considerably less concern to seniors than those that directly affect their own age group…this has a tremendous impact on the welfare of young people in that seniors make up a significant percentage of the voting public in Western democracies”. Older voters can unite to support programs that matter to them (pensions being the most prominent example) but the youth population is effectively disenfranchised, unable to promote their own interests. Karl Hinrichs advocates for intergenerational equity, writing that “the aging of the median voter, due to declining birth rates and increased longevity, strengthens the bulwark against an improvement of children’s welfare in a zero-sum game between the two

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86 Ibid., 44.
87 Tito Boeri, Antonio Merlo and Andrea Prat, The Ruling Class: Management and Politics in Modern Italy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 15. Italy is the only country that has such restrictive age limits on Senate elections. In the rest of Europe, the minimum age to vote in all elections in 18 (except in Belgium, where voters must be 21).
88 Sonja C. Grover, Young People’s Human Rights and the Politics of Voting Age (Berlin: Springer Science & Business Media, 2010), 175.
age groups”. When middle aged and elderly voters are the only participants in an electorate, there is no advocacy for youth issues and no pressure placed on elected officials to respond to youth concerns. The next generation of Italians will inherit a political system they had no hand in creating.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GRAFFITI

As a reaction to their exclusion from the political process, Italian youth are shrugging off political apathy and returning to the tradition of activism that their ancestors built in the partisan movements of the 1940s and the protests of 1968. Graffiti is the augury of a new recommitment to political activism in Italy. Denying teenagers the right to vote in Senate elections forces them to find alternative venues in which they can express their political beliefs. Graffiti makes political participation accessible and simple: (1) it exists in a public space where it is visible to all members of the electorate, (2) its anonymous nature protects the writer from abuse, and (3) anyone can write graffiti, regardless of age, skill or socioeconomic bracket.

By painting in a public space, graffiti has the same effect as a bumper sticker, a campaign button or a yard sign. The point of campaign merchandise is to build name recognition for a given candidate or cause and graffiti can accomplish the same goal without a formally organized grassroots campaign. A graffiti slogan such as Zona Antifa declares a given city or

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90 The cost of paint may be a barrier to participation, but seeing as spray paint is relatively inexpensive, and the graffiti movement began in lower-income neighborhoods, we can assume that cost of paint is not a significant obstacle for graffiti writers.
91 Lyman G. Chaffee, Political Protest and Street Art: Popular Tools for Democratization in Hispanic Countries (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1993), 84. Consider that during the national election in Spain in 1986, right wing groups filled the province of Cantabria with anti-Basque graffiti. Basque artists responded in kind. The graffiti on both sides varied from moderate (“Enough deaths—
neighborhood as designated under the banner of a political ideology. Graffiti draws attention in the same way that traditional campaign merchandise does but it proliferates in more diverse ways. Different writers can promote the same message but their tags will vary immensely. Handwriting, paint color, size of the letters, the use of standard Italian or dialect, and the use of images in addition to text are just a few of the inconsistencies among graffiti pieces.

The anonymous nature of unsigned graffiti protects the writer from reprisals both within their community and from the police. Graffiti tags are the ideal compromise between receiving credit for a piece and remaining safe from criminal penalties. A writer can spread a tag across an entire city without ever revealing their actual name or any information about themselves. The Zona Antifa slogan has spread across dozens of countries but there is no specific artist credited with creating the slogan or the double-flag image that often accompanies it. With immensely popular slogans, there is safety in mass action. A key tenet of civil rights activism is the idea of “safety in numbers”—it is much more difficult to diffuse a massive protest than a small-scale one—and anonymous tags provide that exact safety for writers. If a tag or slogan is prevalent enough, there is no way to trace it to a single writer and arrest them—unless that artist steps forward to take ownership of their work, as Shepard Fairey did with his OBEY campaign, which is now internationally active (see Figure 10).92

Peace now” from the ETA) to violent (“Death to the ETA” from the right wing). Graffiti became a constant reminder of the election, months before anyone even went to the voting booth.

92 The OBEY campaign, also known as the OBEY GIANT campaign, was launched by Shepard Fairey in 1989-1990. The campaign is comprised of stickers bearing the slogan “Obey” and “Andre the Giant Has a Posse”. Fairey began by sticker-bombing cities around the United States, but by making his sticker available for free online, he encouraged the spread of the sticker on a much larger level, as anyone can print it out and place it anywhere. Today, OBEY stickers can be found around the world.

Anonymity has been a key tenet of the Italian political process since the Roman Empire. The secret ballot (a tradition that originated in the Roman Republic with Aulus Gabinius in 139 BCE) protects voters from unwelcome attacks from their political opponents. Anonymous graffiti was omnipresent in ancient Roman life, serving as the “vehicle of choice for the expression of class war sentiments from below…the message of indignation did not prevail…but, for a moment, the graffiti challenged the aristocratic episteme of republican Rome”. Graffiti let slaves, servants, merchants and even aristocrats protest their economic and political situation. Anyone could contribute to the graffiti and dipinti on the walls, which meant that anyone could share the opinion (even if they were not a citizen with the right to vote). The inscriptions on the walls of Pompeii are profane and threatening, but they also represent a healthy desire for political change. Modern Italian graffiti functions in the same way. Graffiti has become the secret ballot of a disenfranchised generation, letting them present their political ideas without fear of violent retribution from the powers that be.

Graffiti creates inclusion in a nation where the political system has historically been, and to this day remains, exclusionary. There is no age requirement for graffiti and writers cannot be stripped of their right to paint, even if they are convicted of a felony. Graffiti lets members of any political party participate but it also opens the political conversation up to perspectives

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93 Keegan, Graffiti in Antiquity, 174. Gabinius introduced the concept of suffragium per ta[bellam], voting using tablets.  
95 Sharon Linnéa and Josh Cochran, Mysteries Unwrapped: Lost Civilizations (New York: Sterling Publishing, 2009), 55. In ancient Pompeii, graffiti was such a core part of political campaigning that “professional” graffiti artists were hired for every election. Officials in Pompeii only served year-long terms so they were constantly on the campaign trail for reelection, relying on fresh graffiti to keep them in the public eye.  
96 Most countries operate a policy of “felony disenfranchisement” for those convicted of a serious crime. Felony disenfranchisement rarely applies to graffiti but even if it did, a convicted graffiti writer would still be able to purchase paint, even if they were unable to vote.
beyond the traditional right and left. On a socioeconomic level, anyone can participate in writing graffiti. There is no membership requirement or nepotism involved in joining the movement. In traditional Italian politics, voters must identify with set political parties or interests (trade unions, private enterprise, the Catholic Church, etc.). Graffiti artists are not tied to a fixed political identity.

HOW GRAFFITI EVADE POLITICAL CORRUPTION

Italy has a grand tradition of political nepotism and corruption, which was last addressed by the *Mani pulite* (Clean Hands) judicial investigation of the 1990s. *Mani pulite* sought to unravel the complex network of corruption (*Tangentopoli*) that lay at the heart of Italian politics and commerce. Though the investigation indicted hundreds of officials and removed many of them from public office, its effects are still seen as minimal. Martin J. Bull and James Newell argue that:

> The corruption investigations, while bringing down an entire political class, failed, beyond intellectual circles, to induce any widespread reflection on those cultural traits of clientelism, nepotism and tax evasion...the failure of Parliament and government to tackle corruption more energetically, therefore, can be seen as tied, to a degree, to popular attitudes concerning law and its supposedly ‘negotiable’ nature, and to the lack of trust between citizens and the State.

Graffiti, unlike many forms of political activism, is virtually impervious to corruption. There is no profit associated with anonymous graffiti, and unless politicians begin hiring professional writers like their ancestors did in Pompeii, it will continue to be an enterprise that nets a writer no financial gain. Graffiti has credible political power because when it protests corruption, it is doing so from a political space that is not embedded within preexisting Italian corruption.

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Graffiti writers are not elected officials or commercial magnates; they have no incentive to protect the administration or overlook flaws within the system. When they write political commentary, it is tied to their beliefs and opinions rather than their bank accounts.
CHAPTER 3: EXAMPLES OF ANTIFASCIST GRAFFITI

This chapter will examine graffiti trends that fall within the three categories I set forth earlier in the paper: suppression, transformation and creation. In the case of suppression, I will discuss whitewashing of fascist symbols and slogans by individuals (as opposed to government beautification teams). Regarding transformation, I will examine the power of diamonds and hearts painted over swastika imagery, as well as the image of the swastika being thrown in the garbage. In the case of creation, I will explore a set of tags that exists across Europe—all linked to the Zona Antifa (Antifascist Zone) slogan. These examples all come from my own research in Italy in the spring and summer of 2015. Many of my findings come from the city of Viterbo, located approximately 65 miles outside of Rome, in the region of Lazio (see Figure 11).99 The periphery of the city is as modern as any other Italian community but I lived in the historic center, which is surrounded by medieval stone walls and is largely comprised of historic buildings that were preserved or restored to their original medieval architecture. There are two gates on each side of the city that serve as entrances into the historic center—Porta Romana and Porta Fiorentina. The city can be divided approximately in half horizontally along its largest thoroughfare, Corso Italia. The central route through the city involves walking along Via Cavour but a large portion of the graffiti is painted within the smaller, residential side streets that run parallel to this avenue. Tourists may not come in contact with this graffiti (as they spend most of

99 “Popolazione Viterbo 2001-2014”. Tuttitalia, December 31, 2014. Accessed November 22, 2015. http://www.tuttitalia.it/lazio/71-viterbo/statistiche/popolazione-andamento-demografico/. Viterbo has a population of approximately 67,000 and a total area of approximately 157 square miles. It is the location of the University of Tuscia, the site of Italian Army Aviation Command, and serves as the capital of the province. It attracts thousands of tourists each year thanks to its thermal baths, medieval architecture and annual festivals. The city’s mayor, Leonardo Michelini, is a center-left politician elected in 2013 (although he was an advisor to the Christian Democrats for most of the 1990s, he does not associate with the party today). It is important to note that in this paper, I am referring to the comune of Viterbo (the city itself) as opposed to the province of Viterbo, which refers to the entire Northern region of Lazio, comprised of sixty different comuni.
their time in the San Pellegrino district or at the Papal Palace, both of which are slightly removed from residential areas) but native residents of the historic center will be exposed to it. Although Italian graffiti is frequently written in regional dialect, the majority of the graffiti I observed was written in standard Italian so that it was accessible to all Italian speakers. Interestingly, graffiti is not discussed by the citizens of Viterbo. It is considered a minor inconvenience rather than artwork and rarely enters into the public discourse. During my research, I attempted discussing graffiti with several locals but no one considered it to be a valuable addition to their city or something even resembling art—instead they wrote it off as juvenile delinquency, ignoring the political interests of their youngest citizens.

SUPPRESSION—WHITEWASHING

In many cities across the globe, graffiti is reported to the municipal government via a phone call to a non-emergency hotline or via an online form.\textsuperscript{100} Once the report is processed, the Public Works department will remove the graffiti—either by pressure washing it or by painting over it with white paint. Whitewashing is an interesting technique for covering up graffiti because it is often translucent—a shadow of the original graffiti is still visible underneath the white paint (see Figure 12). In some cities, that translucence may be chalked up to laziness on the part of the Public Works department but in cases where the graffiti was painted over by an individual rather than the city government, it suggests something more. Property owners or local individuals who choose to whitewash graffiti are acknowledging that the graffiti was once there and are essentially leaving a message for future graffiti writers—this wall is off-limits. The “negated space” where the graffiti once existed becomes a symbol of resistance. In Italian cities, where walls are often composed of yellow brick or stone, the white paint stands out and catches

\textsuperscript{100}William Schwabe, Lois M. Davis, and Brian A. Jackson, Challenges and Choices for Crime-Fighting Technology Federal Support of State and Local Law Enforcement (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2001), 27.
the eye. In Viterbo, where much of the city is made of medieval cobblestone, it stands out to an even greater degree.

In the late spring of 2015, the ultras of Viterbo launched a major “bombing” across the city, painting the year of their clubs’ foundation and several slogans painted in *fasciofont*—a style of lettering utilized by ultras across Italy (see Figure 13). The term *fasciofont* refers to a certain font that utilizes hyperextended serifs that recall propaganda and graffiti from Mussolini’s era. Ultras are renowned for both their devotion to their soccer team and for the violence they inflict while traveling in a mob. Ultras often chant offensive songs, carry massive banners with violent slogans and instigate fights with fans from opposing teams. According to Alberto Testa and Gary Armstrong, “the ultras share the same ideals enacted in the football stadium in their everyday life; they follow a code of violence with an ideological imprint…they are inextricably linked with late twentieth-century Italian neofascism”. For the first several months I lived in Viterbo, I heard the drums of the ultras every weekend as they marched to the stadium but I never saw any visual evidence of their existence within the city. Then, one morning in April, virtually every street corner and blank stretch of wall from Porta Romana down to Corso Italia bore a slogan painted in black paint, with *fasciofont* lettering. The slogans included the phrase “Ultras Liberi”, which refers to preserving the rights of the ultras in soccer stadiums and the legacy of football clubs across the country. None of the slogans were explicitly racist or fascist but the ultras historic connection to racism and neofascism made the overnight “bombing” of the city feel threatening. It was a demonstration of power meant to

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103 “The complete phrase, often shouted during soccer matches, is “Non ci avrete mai come volete voi. Ultras Liberi!” which translates to “we’ll never be how you want us to be, free Ultras!”
intimidate and imply a pervasive presence in the city, in the same way that fascist graffiti did in the 1940s. The graffiti remained untouched for a week before it was whitewashed over. The whitewashing was fairly uniform across all the slogans but it also was relatively thin, so that the edges of the letters were still visible. In Viterbo, graffiti is usually confined to the side streets and residential alleys as opposed to the more visible walls of the path through the touristic center, so seeing the whitewashed patches on the main thoroughfare sent an important message. For me, whitewashing the graffiti represented an implied warning to the ultras not to paint their slogans in such visible places in the future. Locals did not find the graffiti threatening enough to chastise the ultras face-to-face or through organized protest, but they did consider it offensive enough to paint over. In a city where graffiti is often ignored, taking the time to whitewash over a slogan represents a conscious, albeit small, act of antifascist activism.

TRANSFORMATION—ADAPTING SWASTIKAS

According to Malcolm Quinn, “Nazi architecture can be rehabilitated and used for other purposes; the Nazi swastika cannot, and it remains in neo-Nazi iconography as a portable monument to the regime”. Quinn cites the Olympic Stadium in Berlin as an example of swastikas preserving the image of Nazism in the aftermath of Hitler’s regime. The swastika still symbolizes violence and threat, not only for regions that were occupied by the Nazis, but for all nations of the world. In Viterbo, the swastika is present on numerous residential buildings and signs, either carved or painted in black ink (see Figure 14). There are half a dozen swastikas painted around Piazza dell’Erbe, a piazza in the shopping district of the city where several streets

105 Ibid., 61. Bronze swastikas on the ceremonial bell at the stadium have been partially erased, but neo-Nazis have repainted them in the bathrooms of the stadium, which has in turn inspired antifascists to paint the slogan “Nazi raus” (Nazis Out).
converge. In a number of cases, these swastikas have been transformed using spray paint. In some cases, the ends of the swastika were connected, forming a diamond shape, while other writers chose to spray paint pink and red hearts over the swastika. These diamonds and hearts are painted in an informal manner—the lines of the shapes are crooked and the paint has dripped (see Figure 15). However, it is not the skill involved in this graffiti that makes it powerful—it is the act of degrading the swastika.

Transformation can also be combined with suppression. On Via Orologio Vecchio, a residential street that opens into Piazza dell’Erbe, a fascist slogan was painted over in black paint (but with the edges of the letters exposed) and an accompanying swastika was transformed (see Figure 16).\textsuperscript{106} Transforming the swastika does not remove the historical association with Nazi oppression, but it does negate the power of the symbol. First, transformation morphs the terrifying into the comical, reclaiming local streets as a safe space that is no longer vulnerable to the threat of fascism. Second, transformation mocks the neofascists. The use of diamonds and hearts, symbols that have positive and non-threatening connotations, serves to underline what little power the neofascists really have. The threat capability of the neofascists is at least partially dependent on how they are perceived by the Italian public. In the policy world, threat is formulated as intent combined with capability.\textsuperscript{107} If neofascists are presented as juvenile and laughable, their capability of influencing their fellow Italians is minimized.

\textsuperscript{106}Google Earth, Accessed November 22, 2015. 
https://www.google.com/maps/@42.4176221,12.1063401,3a,75y,336.27h,75.83t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1s vY80PnInsZNqBqPTJebCUg!2e0!7i13312!8i6656!6m1!1e1. As of November 2015, this piece of graffiti was currently visible on the Google Earth portrait of Viterbo. This particular stretch of wall has been whitewashed in the past and the white residue and letters beneath it are still visible.

\textsuperscript{107}Oren Barak and Gabriel Sheffer, \textit{Existential Threats and Civil-Security Relations} (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 181.
In addition to the use of hearts in Viterbo, I noticed a recurring image on both stencils and stickers during my visits to Berlin and Bucharest. The image—of a black stick figure throwing a swastika into a garbage can—is popular across multiple countries and is a constant motif in antifascist merchandise sold online via social media (see Figure 17). Another variation of this image—in which a stick figure chases a swastika with a bat—is popular throughout the online Antifa community, although I did not personally observe it in the graffiti I encountered. These two images carry a powerful message because they require no text. Any observer, regardless of their fluency in the language, will understand the message. Although this image is usually painted by itself rather than over a pre-existing swastika, I consider it to be a transformation because it alters the swastika, detracting from its symbolic power.

**CREATION—ZONA ANTIFA**

The phrase “Zona Antifa” is prevalent in graffiti and stickers throughout Italy and across the world. The symbol of the antifascist movement is a double flag—usually one red and one black—framed in a thick black circle that often carries the Zona Antifa slogan in small letters (see Figure 18). The double flag image may not be universally recognizable, but the Zona Antifa slogan (translated in various languages) clarifies the symbol for viewers who are unfamiliar with the antifascist movement. In the Italian context, a small Zona Antifa stencil is used with a single color of spray paint—it contains both the double flag logo and the phrase “Zona Antifa” written in a stylized font, with serifs on the “A”s and the “I” written in lower case (see Figure 18). The phrase “Zona Antifa” may also be painted freehand, with either spray paint or ink markers. I saw the stencil in Rome, Salerno, and Venice, which suggests that it is being used by graffiti

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108 Uli Linke, *German Bodies: Race and Representation after Hitler* (London: Routledge, 2002), 193. The stick figure is a direct reference to the symbol for “do not litter.”
writers across the nation, regardless of the historic division between the North and the South. In certain cities (including Rome, Venice, and Bologna), graffiti writers attach the name of the city to the slogan—Roma Antifa, Venezia Antifa, etc (see Figure 19). Interestingly, I never saw the Zona Antifa slogan painted within the historic center of Viterbo, which suggests that the tag is confined to more cosmopolitan urban centers. While in Berlin, I found a wide assortment of Zona Antifa stickers, stencils and tags throughout the city (see Figure 20). This suggests that while Zona Antifa may not have penetrated more suburban communities like Viterbo, it has spread between various cities across Europe.

Antifascist graffiti does not always utilize minimalist slogans and imagery. Longer phrases have also been incorporated into graffiti writers’ repertoire. One slogan I found both in Rome and Paris was “No streets for the fascists and no fascists on our streets” (see Figure 21). In Rome, it was painted in red paint across the side of a parking garage near La Sapienza University. In the Marais neighborhood of Paris’s Fourth Arrondissement, I found a sticker in neon red and blue bearing the phrase as well as the image of a young man wearing a checkered keffiyeh over his face and the circle-A anarchy slogan. These slogans make a startling visual impact as they take up more space and utilize a diverse color palate. Whereas smaller Zona Antifa stickers often aspire to subtlety, these longer slogans actively aim to grab the attention of the passerby.

The antifascist movement is not expressly connected to anarchism, but in the graffiti world, anarchy symbols are frequently coopted by various movements. Anarchism appeals to

109 At the East Side Gallery in Berlin, the phrase “antifa” is painted dozens of times on the walls—both standing alone and in combination with geographic names (Antifa Paris, Antifa Greece, etc). I also found stickers written in both German and English that promoted antifascism—some with the double flag and some without—near the Berlin Cathedral and Museum Island, as well as in the shopping district of Alexanderplatz. Antifa is not confined to the periphery of the city or to areas that only locals visit.
many graffiti writers because “the call for autonomous, unrestricted writing is ideally conveyed through the concept of graffiti which, lawless, responds only to the creativity of the writer”.

Anarchism represents the polar opposite of fascism, and graffiti writers both find refuge in the anarchist ideology and delight in further antagonizing the fascists with anarchist symbols. Laura Portwood-Stacer writes that “the circle-A insignia (featuring a capital letter “A” inscribed within a circle, with the points of the letter often transgressing the bounds of the circle itself) is probably the most recognizable anarchist symbol…the colors black and red in combination carry anarchist connotations, owing to the color scheme of a flag used by anarcho-syndicalists in the early twentieth century”. Both the circle-A and the red and black color scheme are ubiquitous in antifascist graffiti—the double flag logo is generally portrayed in red and black on Zona Antifa stickers.

The Zona Antifa slogan has not been recorded or explored by the academic community. It has swelled massively thanks to social media, and a simple search for “#Zonaantifa” on any social networking site will retrieve thousands of hits, but there is virtually no historical record of the phrase “Zona Antifa” in formal textbooks or literary journals. The term “antifa” can refer to the general culture of antifascist sentiment or specifically to the Antifascist Action Network, which is comprised of independent groups across Europe that all use the double flag as their symbol. There is a significant amount of scholarship on antifascism across Europe in the formal context, as noted by Martin.

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Greg Martin, *Understanding Social Movements* (London: Routledge, 2015), 103. The color red has historically been a symbol of international socialism. During the French Revolution, “the red flag signaled martial rule by the state, but was then appropriated by demonstrators”. The use of red and black together is a nod to “the historical association between anarchism and socialism”. The color black has always been associated with anarchism but Martin also notes that black was also used by Mussolini’s fascist movement. His use of black shirts as uniforms later inspired the British Union of Fascists to adopt similar black outfits.
political sphere but there is virtually no literature on the term “Zona Antifa”. This means it is difficult to track when the slogan first emerged and where. The Antifa movement (and the Zona Antifa slogan that operates within it) is considered to be a flat or horizontal network, without middle management between individuals and leaders. Antifascist graffiti lacks a formal, central authority which means that there is no author of the phrase “Zona Antifa”. The paucity of historical records on Zona Antifa reflects the lack of historical records of modern graffiti as whole. When graffiti is ignored or considered to be mere delinquency, it goes undocumented and is never incorporated into the historical cannon. Undervaluing graffiti as a form of political expression ignores attempts at political participation by youth who are disengaged from conventional modes of political activism.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ANONYMITY IN ZONA ANTIFA

Zona Antifa tags are almost never signed with the name of an individual graffiti artist nor that of a larger graffiti crew (see Figure 22). The name of the city or an additional antifascist phrase may be added to the end of the tag, but otherwise, it remains uniform across all locations. Zona Antifa graffiti is designed to advance a political message, not to contribute to personal glory. This is where antifascist graffiti is most distinct from the roots of graffiti in the American train yards. Going “all city” was the primary goal of the train-writing generation, and while those writers did protest police brutality, poverty and racism with in their art, they were primarily motivated by their desire to advance their own tag. Graffiti was, and still is, a protest against conventional art and laws but it is not always a selfless act. When graffiti writers in Italy first

\[112\] George B. Graen and Joni A. Graen, Global Organizing Designs. Charlotte, NC: IAP, 2005. 24. “Flat organizational structures that are egalitarian in nature are likely to be conducive to closer relationships between superiors and subordinates. Subordinates in such power structures are less likely to perceive status and power differences from their superiors”.

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began to imitate American style, they imported the concept of personal tags—and there is a multitude of Italian graffiti writers who have achieved significant success after building a brand based on their personal tag. However, the anonymity of the antifascist writers prevents any one artist or crew from taking credit for the movement. By refusing to sign their own name on the Zona Antifa tag, graffiti writers are protecting themselves from law enforcement but they are also forfeiting an opportunity to make a name for themselves. Anyone, in any country, could sign their name to the tag and declare themselves its author, but that has yet to occur. Ownership of the tag has become collective, which may come from the socialist and anarchist tendencies that are prevalent within the antifascist movement, but may also signify an unparalleled selflessness on the behalf of these writers. The tag does not advocate for a given political candidate, it does not advance an artist’s personal agenda and it does not denounce any specific person as a fascist. It just marks a neighborhood as protected, simply and eloquently calling out for solidarity.

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113 Consider the artist Peeta, who pioneered “3D” graffiti (trompe l’oeil graffiti that uses gradients of color to make it appear three-dimensional). After creating a recognizable tag for himself, he parlayed his graffiti pseudonym into a successful street art brand. He is now a minor celebrity in the graffiti world, appearing for interviews, running an online store and exhibiting in galleries throughout Europe.
Antifascist graffiti is an important manifestation of political activism in Italy but it is still illegal. Activists should not be forced to sacrifice graffiti as a tool for political activism because it reaches a massive number of people at minimal cost. Nevertheless, graffiti is still a risky practice for the writers who paint the tag. There are three options for the antifascist writers: 1) petition the government to legalize graffiti 2) move the Zona Antifa movement into commercial galleries and art exhibits where it can be legally displayed or 3) continue painting illegally on the streets. Each one of these options is problematic.

Firstly, no nation on the planet has completely legalized graffiti. Dozens of cities around the world have “legal walls” where graffiti writers are welcome to paint but those are fairly small spaces, usually just a single building or at most a city block—which rarely can contain the graffiti of an entire city. Governments refuse to legalize graffiti on a large-scale because it is tantamount to legalizing property damage and could set dangerous precedents across various criminal fields. In addition, if graffiti were to be legalized, it would be incredibly difficult to regulate hate speech within graffiti. Racist or xenophobic graffiti writers are usually tried for property damage, not for both property damage and hate speech claims. Labeling their graffiti hate speech while allowing others to write freely would create a quagmire of lawsuits over freedom of speech and where different governments draw the line. The antifascists would be able to paint freely but so would the fascists, essentially creating a stalemate between the two factions.

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114 Alison Young, *Street Art, Public City: Law, Crime and the Urban Imagination* (London, Routledge: 2013). In Melbourne, Australia, the city council experimented with designating various areas as “no tolerance” (graffiti is a crime), “limited tolerance” (property owners make the call on what actions they want to take against graffiti writers) or “high tolerance” (legal walls). The Melbourne model is a rare one that has yet to catch on in other cities in Australia, but it could be promising.
The second option—moving into commercial galleries and museums—also has its flaws. The Zona Antifa movement would have to abandon its horizontal structure, and most likely its anonymity in order to book a gallery and present the show to the public. At the moment, the writers painting the tag do not coordinate or organize but if they were to enter the conventional art world, some sort of spokesperson would have to be appointed. With so many writers painting the tag and no way to effectively communicate with all of them, it would be virtually impossible to hold a democratic meeting in which a spokesperson would be selected. Therefore, the representative for a Zona Antifa gallery show might not accurately represent the movement at all. Furthermore, if galleries and museums drummed up significant interest in the graffiti, the incentive to remain anonymous would quickly diminish. The message would be publicized through the exhibition so the graffiti writers would feel no qualms about attaching their name to the work—as they would be considered protected members of an artistic community. Once names are attached to the pieces, graffiti writers would have the opportunity to sell them to the highest bidder and begin building individual brands. The collective nature of the Zona Antifa movement would disappear and the tag would be transformed into a commercial industry that emphasizes competition over collaboration between writers.

Turning Zona Antifa into a commercial enterprise would immerse the antifascist graffiti writers in the contentious debate regarding the difference between “street art” and “graffiti”. The differentiation between the two is largely arbitrary and very few scholars have committed to a firm definition. This paper is not concerned with that distinction but it is important to note that it is often one of financial means and artistic training. As the legendary graffiti writers of the 1970s and 1980s faded into obscurity, a new generation of “street artists” stepped up to take their place and have gone on to achieve significant commercial success. Street artists, who often have
formal artistic training, transition successfully into the art world while their untrained peers are left behind, facing legal harassment and persecution. Street artists frequently have more opportunities to express themselves, more exposure to publicity and commercial gain, and run a lower risk of being reported for their work. The untrained youth who participate in the Zona Antifa movement fall outside of the realm of what is considered “street art”.

The third option—continuing to paint illegally—is the most probable outcome for the Zona Antifa movement but its sustainability in the long term is questionable. The Zona Antifa tag has made significant progress over the past several years but determining the longevity of a graffiti movement is difficult because modern graffiti is still a relatively new medium. Furthermore, there is no precedent of a writer creating a universal tag that represents a political ideology rather than an individual or a crew. The closest comparison would be Shepard Fairey’s OBEY campaign, which began in 1989 when Fairey posted the first “Andre the Giant Has a Posse” stickers. Fairey put up hundreds, if not thousands, of stickers and posters over the next several years and many people began to make the stickers themselves and begin pasting them around the world. In Fairey’s campaign,

The sticker has no meaning but exists only to cause people to react, to contemplate and search for meaning in the sticker. Because OBEY has no actual meaning, the various reactions and interpretations of those who view it reflect their personality and the nature of their sensibilities…even though these people may not know the meaning of the sticker, they enjoy its slightly disruptive underground quality and wish to contribute to the furthering of its humorous and absurd presence which seems to somehow be antiestablishment/societal convention…whether the reaction be positive or negative, the stickers existence is worthy as long as it causes people to consider the details and meanings of their surroundings. In the name of fun and observation.¹¹⁵

Fairey’s campaign is omnipresent in both the graffiti world and the commercial world, as it has spawned multiple clothing and accessory lines. However, unlike Zona Antifa, Fairey was not promoting a precise political message. Zona Antifa may have difficulty capturing the same audience on such a global scale because it is linked to a political cause, not a message that is open to interpretation. Besides OBEY Giant, virtually no graffiti movements have involved a similar number of participants as the Zona Antifa tag. If the Zona Antifa tag were to inspire a decades-long graffiti presence for an anonymous stencil rather than an individual tag, it would the first political tag to ever do so.

There is no exact genesis point for the Zona Antifa tag but we can assume, (based on social media archives of the tag) that it only developed in the twenty-first century. Fifteen years is a long time in the graffiti world but in the world of traditional political activism, the most important battles take decades, if not centuries, to win. Graffiti is not the only weapon in the antifascist arsenal but it does appear to be one of their most effective and should not be abandoned. The longevity of antifascist graffiti is as yet undetermined. Within the next year, the Zona Antifa tag may have completely collapsed and Italy’s graffiti writers may return to purely artistic graffiti. Unfortunately, this outcome seems improbable as peace and stability are not on the horizon for Italians. The European economy is under enormous strain, unemployment is prevalent and income disparity soars higher every year. These economic conditions have prompted a surge of neofascist activity, often targeted at immigrants or minority populations within the country. The year 2015 brought an influx of refugees that will undoubtedly change the demographics of Europe in the coming years and the neofascists and their allies have already begun to stir up hate against them, labeling them a drain on public welfare and a threat to public
safety. Italy, and Europe as a whole, will not be a tranquil oasis anytime soon—effectively securing antifascist graffiti’s presence on the continent.

Preserving graffiti is a challenging task. First of all, graffiti is exposed to the elements. Damage from water and weather fades paint and chips away letters, leaving pieces completely illegible. Secondly, there are virtually no areas where graffiti is consciously protected and restored. Popular graffiti walls and trains are often painted dozens of times in a single year, with artists painting over the work of others with no regard for what they are covering up. When city councils wash graffiti off of these areas, they wash the wall down to its bare surface rather than washing the paint off one layer at a time, exposing different works. Aside from the ancient carvings at the ruins of Pompeii and the stickers and tags on the Berlin Wall, none of the pieces of antifascist graffiti I observed are in a protected environment. Cities constantly shift and grow, and the eruption of new buildings requires the sacrifice of older stretches of concrete and fiberglass. No construction company will take the time to document the graffiti painted on a property they are tearing down. Consider that Brooklyn’s infamous 5 Pointz, an abandoned property that served as New York’s graffiti Mecca for almost three decades, was whitewashed and bulldozed in 2014 to make way for a condominium (see Figure 23). 5 Pointz was one of the most iconic monuments to New York’s graffiti scene but it was ineligible for historically protected building status, which grants special designation from historical associations and can protect against demolition. Many of the instances of antifascist graffiti I witnessed in Italy will be destroyed within the year—either when they are painted over by the city council or when the building where they are painted is put under construction. Italy is a country that is deeply devoted to preserving its historical architecture but even in Viterbo (a town famous for its historic medieval sector), construction is an omnipresent feature of the city’s landscape.
Graffiti’s illegal nature means that it invites destruction. There is no organized Italian movement to preserve graffiti and furthermore there are no legal grounds for protection of the *Zona Antifa* tag, even though it has political significance.

The fleeting nature of antifascist graffiti is reflective of the manner in which it is painted. Antifascist graffiti is a rapid movement that leaves little time for attention to detail. *Zona Antifa* murals that take up an entire wall or train require more concentration and time to create, but even those immense pieces have to be completed quickly, so as not to attract attention from passing police patrols. Traditional artists have the luxury of spending months or even years on a painting but graffiti writers don’t pour hours into the creation of their tag because they need to be gone almost as soon as the paint dries. Graffiti tags are designed to survive for, at most, a few years.

In this paper, I have documented a slice of the antifascist graffiti that was present in Europe in 2015 but I have just scratched the surface. An untold number of tags are painted and then immediately destroyed within hours, before anyone, let alone someone like me who is actively searching for them, ever witnesses their existence. There are so few official records of the antifascist graffiti movement that this paper may be one of the most comprehensive analyses of the subject to date. Yet even so, this paper is not so much a holistic view of the antifascist graffiti movement as it is a microscopic snapshot of one corner of an immense graffiti project.
CONCLUDING NOTES

Graffiti is a reactionary activity that never develops in a void. In ancient Pompeii, perhaps our earliest record of graffiti and dipinti, carved and painted slogans were used to promote political candidates and protest the status quo. Even graffiti that does not have an explicit political cause operates as a tool of protest simply because it is an illegal activity. The train writing generation of the American East Coast began their work because they saw the trains as a challenge, a moving canvas in the urban landscape that let them share their tag and their message with the entire city, rather than merely their own social group. The idea of “getting up” and “going all city” may not have been expressly political but by leaving their mark on the trains, those writers actively fought to be remembered by a society that would have preferred to write them off as delinquents who would never escape the constraints of their socio-economic class.

As graffiti spread through Europe in the 1980s, it took on a political tone that enfranchised youth who were disenchanted with the economic and political realities that surrounded them. The use of panther stencils and graffiti in the Pantera movement could be considered the precursor to the modern Zona Antifa tag. Graffiti cannot flourish unless there is an issue worth protesting, which explains why during times of peace and prosperity, graffiti becomes more artistically motivated and less politically centered. Therefore, the presence of the fascism—which never ended in Italy but has recently resurged to new heights—created a set of graffiti artists who dedicated themselves wholly to activism rather than artistic pursuit. This paper has made two claims regarding antifascist graffiti in the Italian context: 1) for the antifascists, this graffiti is a continuation of the battle that was fought between the fascists and the partisans in the 1940s and 2) antifascist graffiti is unique from other forms of graffiti, both political and secular.
The partisans of the late 1940s occupy a unique space in Italian history. Italy has historically been controlled by intellectual elites and the bourgeoisie (both industrial and agricultural) who threw their lot in with political movements that did not reflect the broader Italian consensus. From the initial unification of Italy until fascism, Italian political activity was dominated entirely by the upper echelons of society, and while fascism claimed to be the voice of the Italian populace, it only reinforced the power of traditional elites. The partisan movement was the first truly organic and inclusive political movement in modern Italy, incorporating freedom fighters from various strata of society—especially those from the lower classes. The partisans organized and funded themselves, and while they did receive military assistance from Allied forces, their victory over Mussolini is seen as a native Italian triumph rather than a salvation via foreign powers. The GAP (*Gruppi di Azione Patriotica*) were the embodiment of courage and efficacy, and decades later, in 1970, young Italians would reclaim the name GAP (this time standing for *Gruppi di Azione Partigiana*), launching guerilla attacks on the state in the Northern region of the country.\(^ {116} \) The protesters of 1968 felt that they carried the legacy of the partisans and were merely completing the battle that had begun in 1943 (in the same way that the fascists felt they carried the legacy of the *Risorgimento* and were merely completing the unification of Italy). Today’s antifascists are inextricably linked to the original partisans, viewing themselves as advocates for those who have been excluded from power and defenders of a population at risk of attack from the fascist resurgence.

Antifascist graffiti is unique from other graffiti in that it is anonymous, prolific and creative. The anonymous nature of *Zona Antifa* graffiti simultaneously protects graffiti writers from arrest and prevents them from taking credit for their work. In a world where notoriety

defines success, an individual who sacrifices the chance to promote their own brand is exceptional. *Zona Antifa* requires hundreds of writers to prioritize the global brand of antifascism over their personal brand. Antifascist graffiti is also remarkable because of its sheer scale. Relatively few artists have been able to cover a single city with their graffiti so spreading the antifascist tag across not only an entire country but an entire continent is virtually unprecedented. Finally, antifascist graffiti is singular because it is comprised of multiple creative processes: suppression, transformation and creation. Suppression is a tacit warning to the fascists while transformation openly mocks their symbols and ideology, challenging them in the public sphere and detracting from the culture of fear they try to create. Creation is the boldest form of antifascist expression as it places antifascist slogans and symbols on the same level as their fascist predecessors. The sheer technical variety involved in creation—stencils, freehand, and stickers—is a marvel and the range of slogans and images painted on the walls of Italy is truly astounding.

This paper does not advocate for the destruction of property. I have not asked for graffiti to be legalized or for criminal punishments for graffiti to be lessened. Antifascist tags are relatively inexpensive to clean up and are a minimal imposition on the daily lives of the residents of Italian cities, but I have not asked for graffiti writers to be pardoned. Instead, this paper recognizes political activism after decades of stagnation in the Italian electorate. Graffiti may not be a conventional method of activism, but as this paper has shown, it is in fact an Italian tradition dating back to the civilizations of ancient Rome and Pompeii. Engaging in antifascist discourse in public space harkens back to the legacy of both the partisans and the protests of 1968, and the battle to create freedom of speech and social equality, a battle that the Italian populace appeared to virtually abandon after the “Years of Lead” (excluding the *Pantera*
movement). Apathy towards activism and protest morphed Italian voters into passive actors, asleep at the wheel while resurgent fascism grew unchecked. Antifascist graffiti is not so much a call to arms as it is a call to vote—a request for the Italian populace to once again care about their political system and agitate for change. Graffiti may be an imperfect medium of communication but it is better than labeling the Italian political system as “too broken to be fixed”. As Europe grapples with the Syrian refugee crisis, Italy will become the home of thousands of immigrants who will be walking targets for the neofascists. There has already been a rise in racist and xenophobic graffiti across Europe and it will only grow in the coming years.117 Now more than ever there is a need for a strong antifascist presence in Italy. With Italy’s youth essentially disenfranchised until the age of twenty-five, alternative arenas for political expression must be opened. By literally taking the fight to the street, antifascist graffiti writers are challenging their peers not to bury their heads in the sand. Graffiti demands attention and provokes conversation—a conversation that is accessible for anyone who walks by. Each generation of Italians grows further and further away from the legacies of 1943 and 1968—in terms of time, space and technological development—yet through this graffiti, they can connect to that historical identity while simultaneously committing themselves to current politics.

The Zona Antifa movement will never be legalized by the Italian government, but it does not need to be to retain power and relevance. Graffiti is a criminal action but it is also an accessible medium that anyone of any age, gender, socioeconomic class and skill level can participate in. Graffiti was built on egalitarianism whereas traditional art and politics are rooted

in hierarchy and bureaucracy. The antifascist graffiti writers may be criminals but their crimes are nonviolent, and do not create a culture of fear in the neighborhoods where they are painted. This demonstrates how the antifascists have updated the legacy of the 1940s partisans and the 1968 student protesters. Violence was the key to power for both groups: the partisans used guerilla warfare to take down the Nazis and fascists and the students used what was sometimes referred to as mob violence to fight back against police brutality. The Red Brigades twisted the legacy of 1968 to justify a string of violent crimes throughout the 1970s, contributing to a fear of activism that would dominate the Italian psyche for decades afterwards. Graffiti is an inherently nonviolent practice—even when violent language is used to threaten fascists, it is meant in a philosophical way and is not an actual call to commit violence (see Figure 24). Peaceful protest is a phenomenon that has historically been difficult to achieve, let alone maintain over a period of several years. Yet the antifascist graffiti writers are doing just that in Italy, and across Europe. Their criminal activity does not need to be forgiven but their political role should be recognized, and lauded, by grassroots organizations around the world. They have assembled what may be the biggest—and most politically conscious—graffiti crew in history using two words and a stencil. In the process, they have reconnected young Italians to their past and have given them an idea of what role they can play in shaping the future. Antifascist graffiti has restored the spirit of protest to Italy, without shedding a single drop of blood or casting a single vote in the Senate.

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118 The phrase “Morte ai Fascisti/al Fascismo” (Death to the Fascists/Fascism) is not uncommon in antifascist tags. This phrase is not meant to promote the murder of fascists, but instead to encourage the end of the fascist ideology.
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IMAGE APPENDIX

FIGURE 1

FIGURE 2


**FIGURE 3**


FIGURE 4


FIGURE 5


FIGURE 6


FIGURE 7


FIGURE 8


http://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2010/01/30/news/venti_anni_pantera-2132695/
FIGURE 9

FIGURE 10

FIGURE 11

http://viterbo.artecitta.it/index.php
FIGURE 12
FIGURE 13


FIGURE 15
FIGURE 16

FIGURE 17


FIGURE 18


FIGURE 19


FIGURE 20

FIGURE 21


FIGURE 22


FIGURE 23


FIGURE 24

