

Iconic images in propaganda

Luciano Cheles*

University of Grenoble-Alpes, France

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Italian visual propaganda often makes use of well-established imagery, to exploit its proven impact. Renaissance masterpieces with religious subject matter were recurrently reproduced on political posters in the early post-war years and during the referenda campaigns of 1974 and 1981, mostly to characterise the parties as Christian. In Italy and elsewhere these images now tend to be employed in a secular way, for instance to denounce injustices and atrocities, and invite compassion and solidarity for the victims. Symbolic motifs traditionally associated with specific ideological traditions also used to feature strongly in Italian visual propaganda; they virtually disappeared in the early 1990s with the collapse of the Christian-Democrat and Socialist parties in the wake of the *Mani pulite* investigations, and the Communist Party's transformation into a social-democratic party. They have been replaced by new icons. Iconographic motifs dear to fascism and Nazism, however, continue to be used, by stealth or unabashedly, by Italian far-right organisations.

Keywords: propaganda; poster; icon; art; Renaissance; Fascism; iconography.

Introduction

Before examining the use of iconic images in Italian political communication, it is worth quoting the definition given by the leading art historian Martin Kemp in his book *Christ to Coke. How Images Become Icon*:

An iconic image is one that has achieved exceptional levels of widespread recognisability and has come to carry a rich series of varied associations for very large numbers of people across time and cultures, such that it has to a greater or lesser degree transgressed the parameters of its initial making, function, context and meaning. (Kemp 2011, 3)

In the light of this definition, while focusing mostly on Italian iconic images as they are employed in Italian propaganda, I shall also deal with the question of their migration to entirely different geographical and cultural contexts to serve other ends.

This article will begin by considering religious works of art for propaganda purposes in Italy in the early post-war period, and discuss the revival of this practice during the referenda campaigns of 1974 and 1981. It will then comment on the political symbols that Italian parties used for decades to visually characterise themselves, their near-disappearance in the early 1990s and their replacement with new motifs. The phenomenon of the appropriation of both traditional and new left-wing icons by right-wing and far-right parties will then be investigated. Lastly, the article will deal with the persistence of fascist, and even Nazi, imagery in the publicity of some contemporary political organisations.

*Email: chelesl@hotmail.fr

Before dealing with the subject of icons in detail, it is worth remarking that images have always played a major role in political communication. This is because they are more immediate than words, and also vaguer, thus more apt to affect us emotionally than rationally. Moreover, because our visual literacy tends to be less developed than our verbal one – visual studies plays little or no part in school curricula, which privilege the written word – we are more likely to succumb to the mysterious fascination of pictorial artefacts.

Another general point that needs to be made is that graphic artists often draw from a repertoire of well-established images because the latter's visual impact has been proven. Iconic images are potentially effective, even when they are 'borrowed' in a revised form, because what is already familiar to us, consciously or subliminally, can be absorbed more easily. It should also be noted that graphic designers often turn to ready-made, second-hand materials, instead of creating new ones, out of practical necessity: because they are required to produce visual artefacts quickly, to respond to social and political events.

Religious art for Christian-Democrat propaganda

Great works of art are eye catchers and, through the cultural prestige they enjoy, can help legitimise messages. Even when they deal with religious themes, or precisely because they do, famous works of art may prove useful to political parties. Christian iconography is Manichean in character; as such, it lends itself to being exploited for propaganda purposes since the argumentation of political parties is largely based on the dialectics of conflict between opposite views.

In the late 1940s and in the 1950s, Renaissance works of art depicting religious themes, or images based on their iconography, frequently featured in political posters, especially those of the Christian-Democrat party (DC) and of the organisations that supported it. Their main purpose was to characterise them as Christian. A 1946 poster inviting the public to vote for the DC relied on a Madonna-and-Child typology to depict a woman holding a little boy; another poster, produced by the Catholic 'task force' *Comitati civici* for the 1953 election campaign, featured a Christian worker crushing two monsters that represented 'comunismo' and 'capitalismo' in the pose of St Michael/St George slaying the dragon. Equally interesting, although intended for mostly internal use, is a poster produced by the DC shortly before the local elections of 1956 to announce a national meeting to discuss strategies to 'Liberare i comuni dai fiduciari di Mosca' (free town councils from Moscow's agents): it is illustrated with a detail from the *Expulsion of the Devils from Arezzo*, part of the fresco attributed to Giotto that decorates the Upper Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi (Fig. 1). Left-wing parties, too, occasionally depicted masterpieces of religious images on their printed publicity: their aim was to fight their opponents using their arguments or to suggest affinities between Christianity and socialism in order to refute the traditional accusations of atheism (Various Authors s.d. [but 1983], 226–229; Novelli 2000, 46–47). A leaflet issued by the *Fronte Democratico Popolare* (the Communist-Socialist electoral alliance) in 1948 reproduced the portraits of Christ and three of the apostles painted by Masaccio and Masolino in the Brancacci Chapel (Chiesa del Carmine, Florence), as well as Cimabue's portrait of San Francis (Lower Basilica of Saint Francis, Assisi), together with Christ's words 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God' (Mark 10:25), in order to denounce the 'capitalism of the Vatican' (Fig. 2).¹

The practice of using religious images gradually disappeared with the growing secularisation of Italy, but enjoyed a revival during the campaigns for the referenda on divorce (1974) and abortion (1981). A DC anti-divorce poster depicting a dejected mother with a baby on her lap and

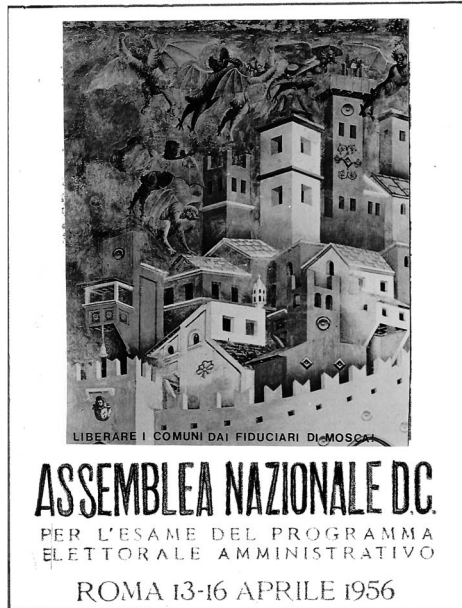


Figure 1. 'Free the town councils from Moscow's agents!'. DC poster announcing a national meeting intended to discuss the programme for the approaching local elections, 1956

DISSE CRISTO: "È più facile che un cammello entri nella cruna di un ago che un ricco nel Regno dei Cieli"

CRISTO è stato falegname. Gli apostoli erano pescatori, artigiani, umilissime gente. Per tre secoli i primi cristiani andarono al martirio per l'eguaglianza sociale e la liberazione degli oppressi. S. FRANCESCO donò i suoi beni ai poveri

MA OGGI mentre molti umili sacerdoti riescono a stento a tirare avanti **MOLTI VESCOVI E CARDINALI SONO TRA I PIU' GRANDI CAPITALISTI**

IL VATICANO HA DANARO		
NEGLI STATI UNITI	Teletoni Cinematografi	
NEL SUD AMERICA	Trasporti Alta banca	
IN FRANCIA	Alta banca	
IN GERMANIA	Compagnie di navigazione	
IN SPAGNA	e il più grande latifondista	
		IN ITALIA ESSO POSSIEME
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 180 MILIARDI DI IMMOBILI • IL 70% DELLA PRODUZIONE GAS E IL 55% DELLA PRODUZIONE ELETTRICA • 31 SOCIETÀ DI OGNI GENERE • ENORMI ESTENSIONI DI TERRA CHE MANTIENE QUASI INCOLTIVATE • 91 MILIARDI DI AZIONI INDUSTRIALI • ATTRAVERSO L'ISTITUTO CENTRALE DI CREDITO CONTROLLA OTTO GRANDI BANCHE

• Per difendere le sue immense ricchezze il Vaticano mette le armi spirituali al servizio di interessi materiali • Quando il Papato non voleva l'unità italiana scomunicò i patrioti che volevano Roma capitale d'Italia • Quando l'unità d'Italia fu compiuta scomunicò i capi dello Stato Italiano • Avvenuto poi il concordato si impegnò e non occuparsi di politica ma ha tradito gli accordi e finanzia oggi un proprio partito: la Democrazia cristiana • Con la complicità del governo democristiano calpesta la legge che proibisce ai ministri del culto di usare la religione per fini elettorali

Figure 2. 'Christ said: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God"'. Fronte Democratico Popolare brochure, 1948

an older child leaning on her knees (Fig. 3) is based, albeit in reverse, on the Leonardo cartoon for the *Virgin and Child with St Anne and St John* (National Gallery, London). Another poster, issued by the Movimento per la Vita (Pro-Life movement) and designed by the artist Pietro Annigoni (well known in Britain for his portraits of Queen Elizabeth II), depicts a woman in intimate eye contact with her baby (Fig. 4) – a composition modelled on Donatello's so-called *Pazzi Madonna* (Bode Museum, Berlin). Here too, the source has been used in reverse. A further example is the Christian-Democrat poster of 1981 reproducing a glazed terracotta roundel by Andrea della Robbia (Fig. 5). The swaddling baby featured on it is not a specifically religious motif; the choice of this work serves the DC's anti-abortion stance well because this roundel is part of a series that features on the façade of Brunelleschi's Ospedale degli Innocenti in Florence, one of the first orphanages of Europe. The purpose of these artistic appropriations is to attribute the institution of the family and conception a sacred character, and to suggest that divorce and abortion are totally alien to Italian civilisation. Della Robbia's swaddling babies may not have been universally known, but in Florence, where the poster was designed and disseminated, this motif would have struck a chord.

Religious art for secular ends

Renaissance masterpieces depicting religious subjects have not been adopted only to connote political movements as Christian. In Italy and elsewhere, civil right and political organisations have at times used them secularly, exploiting their generic symbolism, to depict events or situations they wish to censure.

By far the most represented work of art is Michelangelo's Vatican *Pietà*. Across cultures, this powerful image has come to represent emblematically the slaughter or harassment of innocent people. It was used, for instance, in a French Communist Party poster of 1951 attacking American intervention in Korea and the plan envisaged by General Eisenhower to remilitarise Northern France (Fig. 6), in a pacifist poster produced in 1969 by the International Solidarity Movement to demand an end to American involvement in the Vietnam war (Fig. 7), and in a poster of 2003 to denounce the massacre of Palestinian youths perpetrated by Israeli soldiers (Fig. 8). The *Pietà* was also reproduced in 2015 on a poster issued by the Piedmont Region on the occasion of the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia (17 May) (Fig. 9). Monica Cerrutti, *assessore ai diritti* (chair of the civil rights committee) explained: '[the *Pietà*] is a work of art that belongs to the whole of humankind. The message it wishes to express is also universal: compassion, exactly the opposite of what homophobia and transphobia are for us'.²

Michelangelo's *Pietà* is universally so famous that it occasionally features in totally extraneous cultural contexts. For instance, an Indian print that was diffused in Calcutta in 1948 shortly after Gandhi's assassination depicted Bharat Mata, the Hindu goddess who embodies the Indian nation, mourning Bapuji, the Father of the Nation, in the pose of Michelangelo's Virgin holding her Son (Fig. 10).³

Other famous Renaissance works have also been used in social and political graphics. Michelangelo's iconic image of the near-touching hands, which represents God breathing life into Adam (Sistine Chapel, Rome) is the obvious source of a French Communist Party poster (c.1980) that depicts the hands of an employer and of a worker to call for the creation of jobs (Fig. 11). The graphic designer has thought it appropriate to ascribe the right side, God's side, to the worker, rather than to the employer. In another French poster (c. 1990), produced by the anti-racist organisation SOS Racisme, the motif of the two hands has been used to depict emotional intimacy



Figure 3. 'The law on divorce harms the weakest: the children'. DC poster, referendum on divorce, 1974



Figure 4. 'Say YES to life'. Pro-Life movement poster, referendum on abortion, 1981. Drawing by Pietro Annigoni



Figure 5. 'So why do you only wish to deprive an innocent being of the right to life?'. DC poster, referendum on abortion, 1981



Figure 6. 'Our troops could return [to France] and go as far as the Brittany peninsula' (General Eisenhower). 'No! France will not be a new Korea!'. French Communist Party poster, 1951, designed by Paul Gilles



Figure 7. International Solidarity Movement, anti-Vietnam war poster, 1969



Figure 8. Poster denouncing the massacre of Palestinian youths perpetrated by Israeli soldiers, 2003



Figure 9. 'Homophobia and transphobia is a hate that kills. Don't be part of it'. Piedmont region poster, 2015



Figure 10. Bharat Mata, goddess of the Indian nation, mourning Gandhi. Print, 1948

between two people, as the slogan ‘J’aime qui je veux’ (I love whoever I want) attests (Fig. 12). Here too the position of the two hands in relation to each other has been thoughtfully worked out: the black person’s hand occupies the superior right side. A British Labour Party billboard (c. 1988) used the same motif, together with the slogan ‘Tory Health Policy. More Plastic Surgeons’, to denounce the Tories’ private health policies: the life-creating hand of the surgeon draws near the hand of his patient to take his credit card before treating him (Fig. 13). The Sistine Chapel detail also appears in a poster designed by the students of the Academy of Fine Arts of Beijing to accompany a text honouring the young people who went on a hunger strike on 13 May 1989 to demand democracy (Fig. 14): the near-touching hands are here intended to represent the determination of New Democracy supporters, whom the regime has repressed and dispersed, to keep in touch with one another.⁴

Political masterpieces for social and political campaigning

Modern works of art feature more rarely in the literature of political parties. However, one Italian painting that has repeatedly been used is Pellizza da Volpedo’s *Quarto Stato* (Fourth Estate, 1901, Museo del Novecento, Milan). This iconic work spells political activism, social reform, workers’ rights and women’s rights, and is mostly associated with the Socialist Party, PSI, which promoted it through its press shortly after it was realised (Various Authors 2001; Nano, Ellena and Scavino 2002).

Portraits and symbols as political icons

Of course works of art are not the only type of iconic imagery that political parties have relied upon to strengthen their identity. Suffice it to recall such symbolic motifs as the red flag, the clenched fist, the hammer and sickle, the rising sun and the crossed shield, as well as the portraits of personalities such as Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Gramsci, Giacomo Matteotti, the Socialist deputy murdered by the fascists, Che Guevara, the DC leader Alcide De Gasperi and the PCI leader Enrico Berlinguer.⁵ The effigies of these seminal figures may be referred to as icons not only because they are immediately recognised by many people, but because of the parties’ tendency to use the same portraits logo-fashion in their publicity. Portraits tend to be selected on the basis of their capacity to project specific images of the leaders. For instance, the image of De Gasperi with an austere expression, that was first used in the propaganda posters of the parliamentary elections of 1953 and later repeatedly reproduced in the literature of the DC, evoked the rigour and determination of the man who, allegedly, had led Italy out of economic catastrophe. De Gasperi’s gaze fixed above him characterised him as a visionary and spiritual leader (Figs. 15–16).⁶ Socialist publicity represented Matteotti with a sad expression and eyes looking upwards (Caretti 2004) following the iconography of the Christian martyr who turns his eyes towards God (Figs. 18, 19, 21). These effigies became so well established as to transcend party boundaries: for instance, both have been reproduced on commemorative stamps (Figs. 17, 20).

The end of traditional political icons and the *Quarto Stato*’s new lives

In the early 1990s, with the collapse of the DC and PSI following the judicial investigations into political corruption, the so-called *Mani pulite* (Clean Hands) trials, and the evolution of the Communist Party, PCI, into an avowedly social-democratic party (Partito Democratico della



Figure 11. 'Employment'. French Communist Party poster, c. 1980



Figure 12. 'I love whoever I want'. SOS Racisme poster advertising an anti-racist rally in Paris, c. 1990



Figure 13. Labour Party billboard at a Lancaster car-park, c. 1988



Figure 14. 'The people united. To the youths who went on a hunger strike on 13 May 1989 to defend democracy'. New Democracy poster produced by the Academy of Fine Arts of Beijing, 1989



Figure 15. '[De Gasperi] works for Italy'. DC poster, parliamentary elections, 1953



Figure 16. DC membership card featuring De Gasperi's portrait, 1955



Figure 17. De Gasperi. Commemorative stamp, Republic of San Marino, 2011

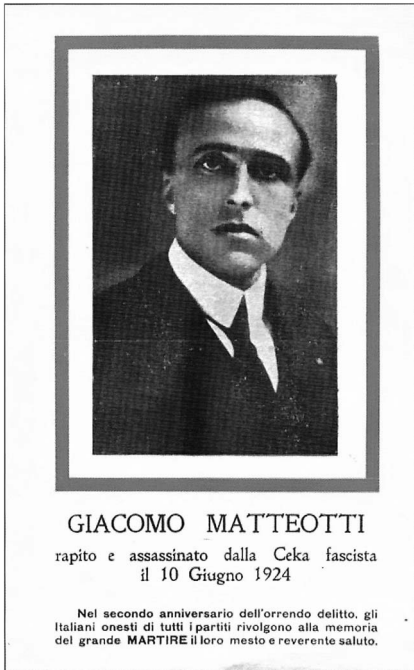


Figure 18. 'Giacomo Matteotti, kidnapped and murdered by the fascist secret police on 10 June 1924. On the second anniversary of this horrendous crime, honest Italians of all political affiliations mournfully and respectfully salute the great MARTYR'. Clandestine leaflet, 1926

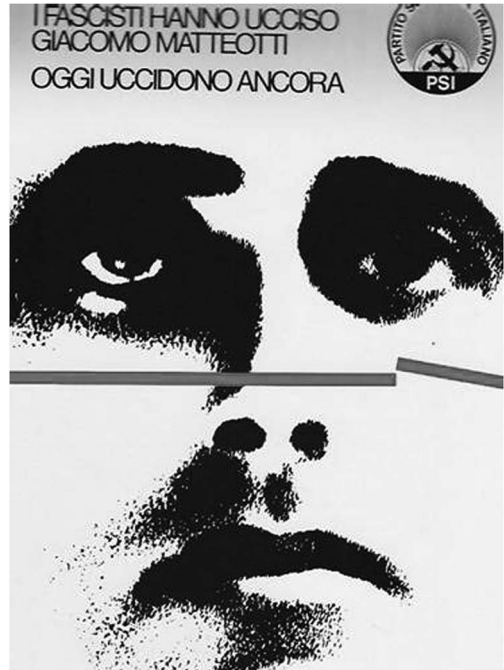


Figure 19. Matteotti. PSI poster and postcard, 1974. Design by Ettore Vitale



Figure 20. Matteotti. Commemorative stamp, 1955



Figure 21. Saint Francis Xavier, holy image, date unknown

Sinistra, PDS, later Democratici di Sinistra, DS), which allied itself with the former left-wing faction of the DC, and eventually (2007) merged with it to form the Partito Democratico, PD, many of the well-established, ideologically-charged symbols and historical figures virtually disappeared from the visual publicity of the main parties. The *Quarto Stato*, deprived of a specific party association, continued to be used, but almost exclusively by social organisations (pressure groups, trade unions etc.) as a generic symbol of social and political commitment.⁷ For instance, a poster produced by the left-wing recreational association Arcigay in 1992 to campaign for safer sex features a cartoon drawing of a group of marching men, one of whom holds a baby in the pose of the mother and child of Pellizza da Volpedo's masterpiece, together with the slogan 'Uniti contro l'AIDS' (Cheles 1995a, 66).

When political parties do use the *Quarto Stato* in their literature now, it is usually to satirise it by subverting its original political message. A Forza Italia billboard promoting the candidature of Ivan Benussi to the mayorship of Bolzano in 2005 reproduces the painting with words from the Italian Communist anthem *Bandiera rossa* (Red Flag) (Fig. 22) – an obvious act of provocation, given Benussi's strong fascist and neo-fascist pedigree, well known locally: his father was a member of the Decima MAS (the commando frogman unit created during the Fascist regime) and later a local councillor for the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano, MSI (Fregona 2013). Another Forza Italia poster, issued during the general election campaign of 2001, satirises the *Quarto Stato* more subtly. It depicts a woman with a baby before a row of people in contemporary garments representing various professions: an architect, a doctor, an airline pilot, a worker, a (black) cook etc. Unlike the original painting, which represents the demands of the proletariat and their class solidarity, the poster celebrates a contented inter-classist society, ready to entrust Berlusconi with the solution of Italy's employment problem.⁸

The *Quarto Stato* is little known to the general public outside Italy,⁹ but traces of it may be found in political artefacts far afield.

The first example we shall consider is the mural *Justice of the Plains*, painted in 1938 by the Regionalist artist John Steuart Curry in the Department of Justice Building in Washington, DC as part of the Federal Art Project launched by President Roosevelt to provide employment to artists and boost the morale of the country (Fig. 23).¹⁰ It depicts families of pioneers with their covered wagons and cattle confronting the attack of two masked outlaws, and features a striding woman with a baby in her arms that seems indebted to the female figure painted by Pellizza da Volpedo. Since Curry was strongly interested in political art – such an interest had led him to spend an extended period in Paris in 1926 to study the works of Gustave Courbet and Honoré Daumier (Junker and Adams 1998) – it is not implausible to presume that he was acquainted with the *Quarto Stato* and treat the near-quotation of a detail from this painting as a private homage to a socially committed artist.

Another striking example is provided by a banknote issued by the Central Bank of Iran in the early 1980s (Fig. 24). Its obverse side represents a group of people marching in support of Ayatollah Khomeini that is based on the *Quarto Stato*, as is suggested by the special emphasis placed on the small group of figures at the head of the march, by the presence of a woman on the right and by the shadows they all cast. The Italian painting must have been thought of as an appropriate source of inspiration for a picture celebrating the recently-established Islamic revolution. The *Quarto Stato* could have been known to some Iranian artists because the regime of the Shah was considerably open to Western culture. That Western art is at times used as a source of inspiration to promote revolutionary Iran is also attested by a poster that depicts the apotheosis of Khomeini, blatantly based on a Madonna painting by the seventeenth-century Spanish artist Murillo (Chelkowski and Dabashi 2000, 172–174).¹¹



Figure 22. 'Avanti popolo...Defend your vote! ... and Benussi will triumph!'. Forza Italia billboard, local elections, Bolzano, 2005



Figure 23. John Steuart Curry, *Justice of the Plains*, 1938, mural painting. Department of Justice Building, Washington, DC



Figure 24. Iranian banknote, early 1980s

New icons

To return to Italian political iconography, the old icons have been superseded by new ones, such as the rainbow flag with the word 'Pace' (Peace) in its centre and the 'Hope' poster designed by Shepard Fairey in support Obama's 2008 presidential campaign (Fairey and Gross 2009), which, in view of the popularity they enjoyed, have been at times appropriated by right-wing politicians. A subtly deceitful right-wing use of the rainbow flag is the billboard produced in 2005 to advertise the candidature of Giovanni Pace, an MP representing the 'post-fascist' party Alleanza Nazionale, AN, to the governorship of the Abruzzo Region. The candidate's surname, the choice of the font and the coloured strips motif were all used to evoke the Peace flag. The aim was to conceal his far-right convictions and present a modern, progressive image that might appeal to (ill-informed) left-wing voters too (Cheles 2012, 144–146).

Similar appropriations of left-wing icons by right-wing and conservative parties and movements are current elsewhere too. In France, during the campaign for the 2012 presidential election, the leader of the Front National Marine le Pen advertised a meeting at Paris-Dauphine university with a stylised portrait of herself clearly inspired by Barack Obama's 'Hope' poster (Cheles 2012, 128, 141). In 2014, campaigners protesting against the *Mariage pour tous* (Marriage for All) Bill granting equal rights to same-sex and heterosexual couples, used graphics that were modelled on those of May '68 in order to project a libertarian and transgressive image (Figs. 25–26) (Zeller and Wandrille 2013). To attract media interest, their massive demonstrations even featured the presence of the 'Homen', a specially created group of young men with painted slogans on their bare chests, that were intended as the male equivalent of the Ukrainian protest group Femen (though, curiously, unlike the latter, they wore masks to conceal their identity) (Cusset 2013, 21; Ackerman 2013). The protesters were trying to persuade young people, the vast majority of whom approved of the Bill, that their marriage-for-straight-ones-only message was 'très cool'. The proponents of the Bill responded by enlisting the support of the ultimate French icon, Marianne, shown in posters kissing a female companion (Figs. 27–28).

The far right's enduring symbols

I argued earlier that the images that were part and parcel of the identity of the parties of the First Republic have virtually vanished with them. This may true of the DC, PSI and PCI, but not of the far right. In 1995 the MSI notably transformed itself into Alleanza Nazionale, AN, an allegedly moderate and modern right-wing party. Yet, despite claims that fascism had been relinquished – hence the party's definition of itself as 'post-fascist' – AN relentlessly clung to its roots, as is evidenced by the many iconic motifs drawn from the rich fascist and neo-fascist repertoire which regularly featured in its graphic output hidden in plain sight. Some examples will illustrate this practice.¹²

The logo of the university movement of AN, Azione Universitaria, made up of an open book with a superimposed *feluca* (the traditional cocked hat of Italian university students) was modelled on the insignia of the Gruppi Universitari Fascisti, GUF (Figs. 29–30). The acronym of AN's youth group, Azione Giovani, led by Giorgia Meloni from 2000 to 2009 (as co-ordinator first, and president later), appears in some publicity as a stylised amalgamation of the Celtic Cross and the swastika: it has a whirling movement and hooked edges (Figs. 31–33).¹³ It so features, for instance, on the armband worn over a black shirt by a female activist, depicted on a recruitment poster of 2007 (Fig. 34). This attire is strongly reminiscent of that worn by the Hitler youth and other Nazi paramilitary and military organisations. A sticker bearing the logos of AN and Azione Giovani, c. 2004, reproduces a sculpted portrait of a figure with Mussolini's traits, together with



Figure 25. 'Hands off marriage. Sort out the unemployment problem'. 'All born from a man and a woman'. Anti-gay marriage poster, 2013



Figure 26. 'We want jobs, not gay marriage'. Anti-gay marriage poster, 2013



Figure 27. 'Freedom. Equality. Fraternity. No more, no less'. Pro-gay marriage poster, 2013



Figure 28. 'Say YES to marriage for all'. Pro-gay marriage poster, 2013



Figure 29. 'Italy in our hearts'. Azione Universitaria (AN) sticker, c. 2005



Figure 30. 'I will not break, I will not bend'. Medal with the insignia of the Gruppi Universitari Fascisti, Florence, 1929

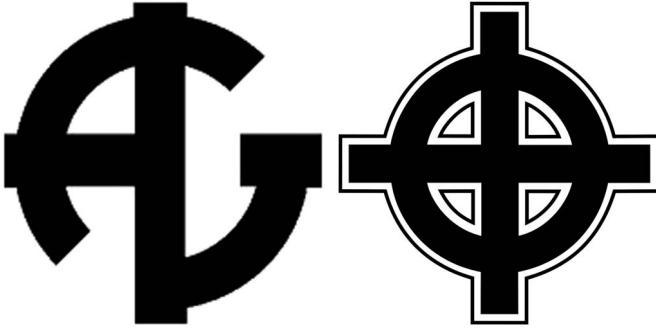


Figure 31. Logo of Azione Giovani (AN) Figure 32. Celtic Cross

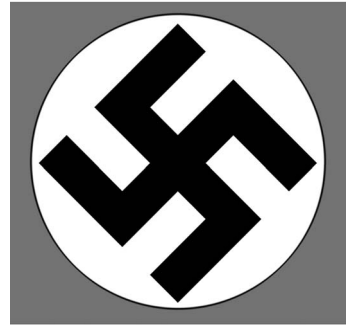


Figure 33. Swastika



Figure 34. 'Join the action. On your feet among the ruins'. Azione Giovani recruitment poster, c. 2007

the slogan ‘Non programmi dobbiamo creare, ma uomini, uomini nuovi’ (It is not programmes that we must create, but men, new men) (Fig. 35), which is none other than a quotation from a text by the Romanian fascist politician Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, the founder of the Iron Guard:

The country is dying for want of *men*, not for want of *programmes*. That is our opinion. And that is why it is not programmes that we must create but men, new men. Because the men of today, educated by politicians and infected by Jewish influence, would compromise the most splendid programme (Codreanu 1936, 286).¹⁴

Fascist symbols were not relinquished by Alleanza Nazionale leaders when their party merged with Berlusconi’s Popolo della Libertà, PDL, in 2009. Giorgia Meloni, who was entrusted with the leadership of Giovane Italia, the PDL’s youth movement, and Gianni Alemanno, during his period of office as mayor of Rome (2008–2013), did not miss opportunities to use them. A recruitment advert for Giovane Italia, c. 2010, featured two membership cards so composed as to form Mussolini’s monogram (Fig. 36) – a motif that was ubiquitously represented during the *Ventennio* (Fig. 38). The advert’s design may have been inspired by an MSI card of 1972 (Fig. 37) to subtly suggest a continuity with the past. The logos Alemanno chose in 2010 for the Formula Uno race that was to take place in Rome and in 2012 for the city’s new emblem both integrated the Duce’s iconic ‘M’ in the word ‘Roma’. In the first motif, which included a stylised rendering of the Palazzo della Civiltà – the highlight of the fascist-built EUR district –, the letter was emphasised through the use of red colour; in the second by turning it into the shaft of the pillar on which rests the Roman she-wolf (Figs 39–40). Neither symbols were ultimately adopted because the Formula Uno project was scrapped and the Rome emblem was found to be aesthetically poor.¹⁵

Iconic images from Nazi art and propaganda also feature regularly in the publicity of far-right organisations. A poster of 2007 bearing no party logo commemorated the killing of three young MSI activists in via Acca Laurentia, in the popular Tuscolano district of Rome, in 1978,¹⁶ using a Hitler Youth recruitment poster (late 1930s) in slightly adapted form (Figs 41–42). The larger-than-life statues of Arno Breker, who was ‘Official State Sculptor’ of the Third Reich, have repeatedly been cited visually in the literature of extreme right groups: for instance, *Bereitschaft* (Readiness, 1939, Arno Breker Museum, Nörvenich, Germany) featured in 2011 on a poster produced by the Nazi-Maoist group Socialismo Nazionale (Fig. 43), while *Aufbruch der Kämpfer* (The Warrior’s Departure, 1941, Arno Breker Museum, Nörvenich), was reproduced on Forza Nuova’s propaganda for the 2013 parliamentary elections (Fig. 44).¹⁷

Conclusion

This paper began by quoting Martin Kemp’s definition of ‘iconic image’. I would argue that, at least in the domain of propaganda, his definition needs to be qualified. An icon need not be an image that is immediately recognisable by a large public across times and cultures. It may be a picture well known in a specific cultural context, which is chosen by a graphic artist belonging to a totally different one in order to exploit its proven visual impact, regardless of the intended public’s familiarity or lack of familiarity with it. The *Pietà* image in the Gandhi poster was unlikely to have been perceived as such by the majority of the Indian population; it must have been adopted solely in view of its strong emotional appeal. Moreover, certain images may be viewed as iconic only by those who are acquainted with the culture that generated them, and with which they feel in agreement. The drum-beating youth and the herculean warriors depicted in the posters referred to above are cases in point: they no doubt struck a chord with far-right activists, but the absence of any public outrage suggests that the references to Nazism completely escaped the vast majority of the population, as no doubt they were meant to do.



Figure 35. 'It is not programmes that we must create, but men, new men'. Azione Giovani/AN sticker, c. 2004



Figure 36. 'We are eagles, dreamers, rebels... We are free men'. Giovane Italia (PDL) recruitment advert, 2010



Figure 37. MSI membership card, 1972

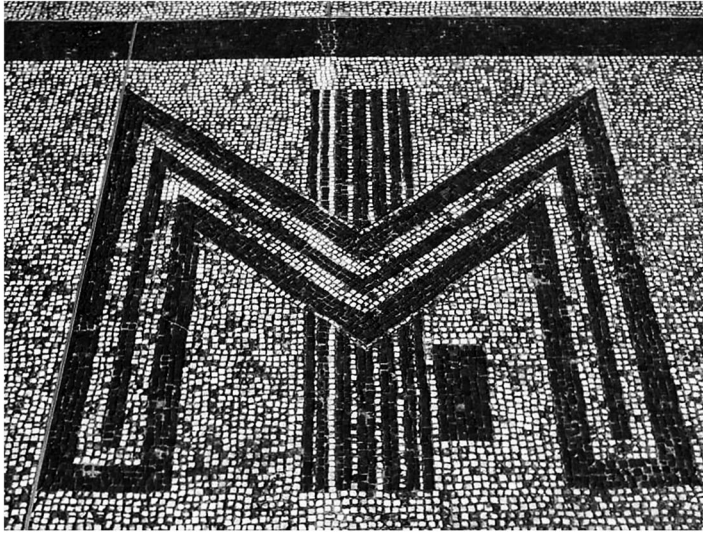


Figure 38. Mussolini's monogram, detail from the mosaic flooring at Rome's Foro Italico sports complex (formerly Foro Mussolini), completed in 1938



Figure 39. 'Rome. Formula Future. 2000 years in pole position'. Logo for the Formula Uno race that Rome intended to host, 2010



Figure 40. New logo for the city of Rome (eventually abandoned), 2012

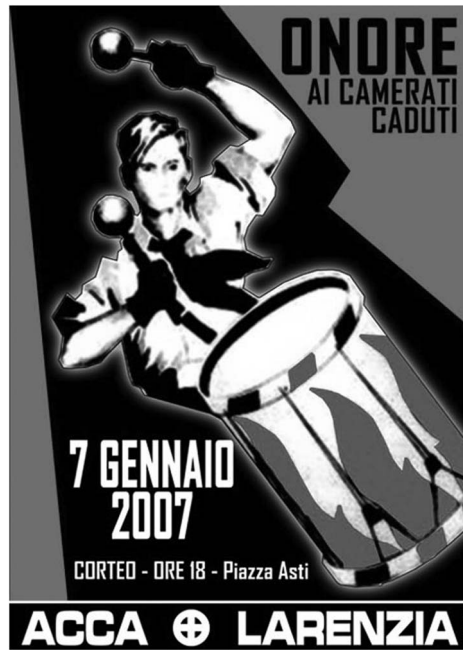


Figure 41. 'Honour to the comrades who have fallen'. Poster advertising a rally to commemorate the right-wing victims of the Acca Larentia terrorist attack, 2007



Figure 42. 'The youth united in the Hitler Youth movement!' Nazi poster, late 1930s



Figure 43. 'Red anger, black rage. Red-brown pride'. Socialismo Nazionale poster, 2013



Figure 44. 'Italy is in chaos. Power to Forza Nuova!' Forza Nuova poster, parliamentary elections, 2013

The examples discussed in this article attest to the sophisticated use many graphic artists make of iconic motifs when designing political artefacts. On account of their strength, these images are employed to bolster a political identity or promote such values as compassion and solidarity. They may also function as vehicles of censure and attack, and be appropriated by political organisations from their opponents for satirical ends, or to confuse and deceive the public. Lastly, some iconic motifs are used surreptitiously by radical groups to evoke ideological allegiances that would be deemed outright unlawful if stated overtly.

Credits

Fig. 23: Carol M. Highsmith Archive/Prints and Photographs Division/Library of Congress, Washington DC

Fig. 30: Archivio Storico, University of Bologna

Note on contributor

Luciano Cheles's researches have focused on Renaissance iconography and its impact on contemporary culture, and on visual propaganda in Italy and France. Recent publications include *L'Image recyclée*, co-edited with G. Roque (BUPPA, 2013) and the essays 'Piero e l'arte americana' and 'Piero e la cultura di massa', both in the exhibition catalogue *Piero della Francesca: indagine su un mito* (Silvana, 2016). He has curated several exhibitions on Italian political and social graphics. *Grafica Utile*, first shown at the Design Museum, London, has toured several venues in Britain and France.

Notes

1. On the graphic propaganda of the early post-war period, see especially Ferri. 2008. On the use of Christian imagery by the DC and the Comitati civici, see Cheles 2004, 264-265, 279, which reproduces the posters featuring the Madonna-like woman and the Christian worker.
2. Not everyone agreed with her. The use of Michelangelo's statue was censored by the local co-ordinator of the far-right party Fratelli d'Italia and by the Catholic councillor Davide Gariglio, co-ordinator of the centre-left Partito Democratico (Strippoli 2015).
3. Socially committed art also frequently relies on the iconography of the Pietà and of other themes of the Passion (especially the Ecce Homo, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection) to depict the distress, death and mourning of innocent people, and the ultimate triumph of the ideals of those who sacrificed their lives for them (Sborgi 1995; Various Authors 1992).
4. I should like to thank Frédéric Le Gouriérec of the Chinese Studies department of the University of Poitiers for providing this interpretation.
5. For useful surveys of the visual propaganda of the main parties of the so-called First Republic, see Dané 1985; Novelli 2000; Various Authors s.d. (but 1983). For the red flag, the crossed shield, the clenched fist and the portrait of Che Guevara, see Dommanget 2006, Rossi 2014, Korff 1992 and Kunzle 2002, respectively.
6. It should be noted that repeated attempts were made in the last century to beatify him (Cruz 2003, 30-33).
7. This painting had also been used with generic libertarian meanings before the 1990s (Various Authors 2001; Ellena and Scavino 2002).
8. Cheles 2012, 126-127, 139 for an illustration and a detailed analysis of this poster.
9. The international success of Bernardo Bertolucci's epic film *1900* (1976), which displayed the credits over a zoom out of Pellizza da Volpedo's painting, must, however, have familiarised some sectors of the non-Italian public with it.
10. Because it celebrates American history and values, the art produced under the project is often viewed as a form of propaganda.
11. The Iranian artist must have chosen to model Khomeini's portrait on that of Murillo's Virgin to accentuate his holy character. It should be noted that 'ayatollah' means 'sign of God'.

12. For exhaustive accounts of the MSI's and AN's use of fascist motifs, see Cheles 1995b and Cheles 2010.
13. On the Celtic Cross, which was the emblem of the Charlemagne division of the SS and of far-right movements such as Jacques Doriot's Parti Populaire Français and Jean Thiriart's Jeune Europe, see Bouzard 2006. On the swastika and its adaptations by far-right organisations, see Heller 2000.
14. Translation quoted from Blinkhorn 2000, 126.
15. Rome's new logo was chosen following a competition. For a selection of the entries, see Scanu 2010, which includes essays by Gianni Alemanno and Rome's *assessore alla Cultura* (chair of the Culture committee) Umberto Croppi, once a prominent member of the MSI. The logo's design was hotly debated in the press (see Ballardini 2012; anon. 2012), but the Mussolinian allusion went completely unnoticed.
16. On this terrorist attack and the significance that the far right attributes to it, see Baldoni and Provvigionato 2009, 279–288; and Caprara and Semprini 2009, 420–426.
17. Books and the internet provide a wide range of fascist and Nazi images that can readily be copied and adapted by far-right groups to suit their ends. On Breker, see Egret 1996, a generously illustrated trilingual (German-French-English) volume.

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Italian summary

La propaganda figurativa italiana si serve spesso di immagini ben affermate, per sfruttarne l'impatto comprovato. I capolavori a soggetto religioso del Rinascimento furono ripetutamente riprodotti sui manifesti politici nei primi anni del dopoguerra e durante le campagne referendarie del 1977 e 1981, perlopiù per caratterizzare i partiti come cristiani. La tendenza attuale, in Italia come altrove, è di servirsi di queste immagini laicamente, per esempio per denunciare soprusi e atrocità, e suscitare compassione e solidarietà nei confronti delle vittime. Erano molto presenti nella propaganda italiana anche motivi simbolici tradizionalmente legati a particolari tradizioni ideologiche; essi scomparvero nei primi anni Novanta con il crollo della Democrazia Cristiana e del Partito Socialista in seguito alle inchieste Mani pulite e alla trasformazione del Partito Comunista in un partito social-democratico. Sono stati sostituiti da nuove icone. Invece, i motivi iconografici cari al fascismo e al Nazismo continuano ad essere utilizzati, velatamente o palesemente, da organizzazioni di estrema destra.