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Polli, Chiara; Berti, Carlo

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# Framing right-wing populist satire: The case-study of Ghisberto's cartoons in Italy

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BY: Chiara Polli and Carlo Berti

## ABSTRACT

Over the last few years, right-wing populism has increased its popularity and political weight, successfully merging with Euro-scepticism, nationalism, xenophobia, religious symbolism, and aggressive forms of conservatism (e.g., anti-feminism, homophobia, and, in general, patriarchal politics). Several studies have focused on the communication strategies of contemporary populism, examining the latter's use of traditional and new media. So far, however, little attention has been paid to the role and language of right-wing populist satire. Our study draws on the ideational approach to populism to explore how right-wing populism is expressed in satirical cartoons. This approach perceives populism as a thin-centered ideology, based on a Manichean division between 'good people' and 'evil elites,' which regularly combines with other ideological components (e.g., nationalism, Euroscepticism, xenophobia). Our analysis focuses on the Italian cartoonist Ghisberto, known for his provocative and frequently controversial work. We examine a sample of Ghisberto's vignettes using multimodal analysis tools and Greimas's notion of isotopy. The aim is to investigate how right-wing populist satire constructs its different targets (the EU, left-wingers, migrants, NGOs, women, etc.) and how populist ideology exploits cartoons' communicative resources and power.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last few years, the popularity of populist parties and movements has been steadily increasing, especially in Europe and the USA, as highlighted by the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the Brexit referendum in 2016, and the growing share of votes obtained by populist parties in the European Parliament elections of 2014 and 2019 (Treib 2014; Ruzza 2019). Populism is not necessarily associated with right-wing ideologies. However, Marine Le Pen's recent success in France, Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson in the UK, Matteo Salvini in Italy, and Viktor Orbán in Hungary shows that right-wing populist parties are gaining momentum and their ideas succeed to mobilize voters. As a result, right-wing populism has drawn scholarly attention in several research fields, generating a wide array of theoretical and empirical studies investigating different aspects of this particular political phenomenon.

Populism has been studied as a political ideology (e.g., Mudde 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017), a discursive practice (e.g., Wodak 2015), and a communication style (e.g., Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2018). Most studies on populism focus on political actors (e.g., parties, movements, and political leaders), their ideological/discursive production, and their audience. However, with few exceptions (Wodak 2015; Grdešić 2017), there is little research about right-wing populist cartoons, despite their growing number and importance, often boosted through social media channels (Leon 2017).

Our study aims to address this gap by exploring the relationship between right-wing populism and satirical vignettes. Specifically, we investigate the case of the Italian cartoonist Ghisberto, who recently stepped into the limelight for his controversial cartoons, which adopt an overtly right-wing populist perspective. Our analysis attempts to disentangle satire's role in right-wing populism, its main features and differences with mainstream political communication, and its political and social implications.

## 2. Right-wing populism: Ideological elements, communication style, and the potential role of satire

Though the concept of populism is still contentious, scholars agree that at its core lies an opposition between the (good) people and the (evil) elites, with populists siding with the former and claiming to represent them in their struggle against the latter. The ideational approach concurs with this standard premise and defines populism as "a thin-centered ideology that considers society ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; see also Mudde 2004). This minimal definition highlights the centrality

of the people/elite opposition and the attendant perception of these two groups as homogeneous. In the first place, then, populism is anti-pluralist.

According to the ideational approach, populism tends to attach itself to thicker ideologies such as nationalism, conservatism, or socialism. In this respect, Wodak (2015) thoroughly conceptualized the main ideological elements of right-wing populism. First, she described the 'politics of exclusion' as a tool used by right-wing populists to attack and marginalize migrants (e.g., Béland 2020; Lutz 2019), LGBT+ groups (e.g., Mayer et al. 2014), and minorities in general (e.g., Giorgi 2020). The exclusion and subsequent scapegoating of minorities often take the form of antisemitism, present in several far-right populist groups (Wodak 2015). Currently, a politics of exclusion is promoted by several right-wing populist parties and movements across Europe, which espouse racism and discriminatory policies.

A second ideological element of right-wing populism is the 'politics of nationalism' (Wodak 2015), which in Europe intertwines with euroscepticism (Michailidou 2015; De Wilde et al. 2014). The Brexit referendum is an excellent example of how populist nationalists (in particular, Nigel Farage's United Kingdom Independence Party) tend to portray European institutions and leaders as members of a corrupt elite undermining the people's national sovereignty (see Ruzza and Pejovic 2019)

Thirdly, right-wing populism combines with the 'politics of patriarchy' (Wodak 2015) by adopting conservative and intolerant positions towards civil rights, Islamic religion (e.g., Muslim headscarves), LGBT+ rights, and abortion.

Finally, right-wing populism often relies on charismatic leaders ('politics of charisma,' Wodak 2015) claiming to fight the elites in the name of the people they allegedly represent (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). Populist political communication is thus characterized by a high degree of personalization (Krämer 2014, 2017), with its leaders stylizing themselves as the 'man of the street' and the 'champion of the people' (Bracciale and Martella 2017).

On a discursive level, these ideological elements are frequently re-combined and re-elaborated to construct a more or less coherent populist message. Research in populist communication shows that populist styles vary according to the ideological elements they prioritize. Investigating the political communication of Belgian populist parties, Jagers and Walgrave (2007) identified four different populist styles, distinguished by the level of their anti-establishment position and the degree of exclusivity/inclusivity in their rhetoric: populism can be empty (when it just claims to represent the people); exclusive (low levels of anti-elitism, but a strong focus on excluding out-groups); anti-elitist (strong anti-elitism and inclusive politics towards minorities, as in some left-wing populist groups in Europe – e.g., Diem25 in Greece); or complete (strong anti-elitism, exclusive politics). Other researchers focused on the role

of emotions (Cossarini and Vallespin 2019) in populist communication. In particular, populists often deploy negative emotions such as fear (Wodak 2015), anger, and resentment (Wahl-Jorgensen 2018) to strengthen their message.

Finally, several scholars stress the affinity between populist communication style(s) and social media (Gerbaudo 2018). Social media facilitate the spread of populist ideology in a fragmentary way via short messages consonant with their tendency for oversimplification (Engesser et al. 2017). Moreover, they exploit social media's potential for speed and virality (Jacobs and Spierings 2019) to directly reach their audiences, bypassing traditional gatekeepers (Engesser et al. 2017).

Although most populist political communication strategies have been thoroughly analyzed, we cannot say the same for populist satire, especially in political cartoons. The academic study of political cartoons has only recently gained momentum in the wake of the growing body of research in comics studies' interdisciplinary field. Given their interlinked history and their standard formal features (i.e., the interplay between words and images used to communicate), drawing techniques, and methods of representation (Chen et al. 2017), political cartoons have found their niche in several recent publications on comics (e.g., Heer and Worcester 2009; Bramlett 2012; Smith and Duncan 2012; Howard and Jackson 2013; Chute and Jagoda 2014).

Political cartoons have also been investigated from the viewpoint of satire theory. Milner Davis and Foyle (2017) suggest that satire is "essentially humor with a critical purpose" (see also Condren 2012). It may be more or less partisan, left- or right-wing but ultimately always having as its target "the failings of those who claim to lead the nation and make decisions on its behalf, in the best interests of 'the people'" (Milner Davis and Foyle 2017: 4). Cartoons represent an ideal medium for satire because of their brevity and the powerful impact that a single, vivid image has to tackle contentious issues and convey their needle-sharp social commentary. By walking the threshold between artistic expression and opinion, we do not expect satirical cartoons to be reports of social events and situations. Hence, they are free from the burden of objectivity. This offers them considerable freedom of expression (Connors 1998) and the possibility to be openly political, or even provocative and controversial (Abraham 2009; Abraham and Appiah 2006). Constrained to condense visual and verbal elements into a single frame, cartoons turn otherwise complex issues into direct and easily legible messages and, hence, they are widely accessible and comprehensible (Giglio 2002; Abraham 2009; Tsakona 2009). Like populism, they tend to oversimplify, and their communicative style enjoys a wide outreach. Chen's (2013) research on the efficacy of political humor in the public sphere highlights how political cartoons, produced through the new media, foster mobilization and social change by drawing people's attention to official bodies' negligence. Political cartoons have the power to "either draw people together or push them apart" (Lewis et al. 2008: 12). Tsakona and Popa (2011) emphasize how cartoons

can promote social bonding within a community and be harmful and offensive towards the target of their social criticism. For instance, the 2005 Danish cartoon controversy over Muhammad's representation proved that vignettes could trigger great contention and conflict (Müller and Özcan 2007; Olesen 2007).

Cartoons frame social and political issues by personalizing them, providing them with concrete forms and brief – yet powerful and eye-catching – narratives (Greenberg 2002; Morrison and Isaac 2012). Given satire's moral vocation to clearly “demarcate vice from virtue” (Griffin 1994: 36), cartoons can function as “moral mirrors” (Koelble and Robins 2007: 319) particularly effective in pinning blame and responsibility (Greenberg 2000). These characteristics make satirical vignettes a powerful device in the hands of populist rhetoric. They can reinforce binary oppositions, give a tangible form to the people's foes (e.g., by personalizing vague notions as the elites, lobbies, media power, etc.) and spread these messages in a vivid, easy-to-grasp form.

The advent of the internet and instant communication noticeably shape-shifted the production and distribution of political cartoons (Colgan 2003; Niles 2005; Danjoux 2007; Lewis 2012). Leon (2017) highlights how cartoonists are now able to distribute their vignettes instantly and widely. By self-publishing their works online, they can also circumvent editorial processes, disseminating cartoons that may otherwise be judged too offensive for publication and vetoed by newspaper editors. This is particularly true for right-wing populist satire, often targeting out-groups with racist and discriminatory slurs. Right-wing populist satire has significantly benefited from social media and the internet in general, where content is rarely ever subject to gatekeeping. For instance, Wagner and Schwarzenegger (2020) focus on the prominent role of memes in spreading populist messages and how right-wing populist satire uses them to elicit strong reactions in its audience, potentially reinforcing far-right positions (Schwarzenegger and Wagner 2018).

These considerations can be extended to the satirical vignettes created by Ghisberto, an Italian cartoonist living in Cuba. After a brief stint as a cartoonist in 1993, in 2016, Ghisberto started sharing his openly right-wing populist political cartoons on his website,<sup>1</sup> Facebook,<sup>2</sup> and Twitter<sup>3</sup> accounts. Right-wing satire with conservative positions is anything but a new phenomenon in Italy. Suffice it to mention far-right cartoonist Alfio Krancic, working for *Il Giornale* since 1994, and former Five Star Movement (a populist party) satirist Mario Impronta (known as Marione). Ghisberto's peculiarity is that he uses social media to spread his satirical works independently. Social media gave Ghisberto freedom from any commitment to parties or media outlets (and their code of conduct) as well as a platform through which his controversial and unfiltered

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<sup>1</sup> Ghisberto's website: <http://ghisberto.altervista.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Ghisberto's Facebook account: <https://bit.ly/2MXWVmR>

<sup>3</sup> Ghisberto's Twitter account: <https://twitter.com/ghisberto1>

cartoons enjoy high exposure and diffusion. Ghisberto acts as the satirical voice of right-wing populism, with cartoons infused with nationalism, euroscepticism, conservatism, and fraught with racist and sexist slurs. His graphic social commentary's only burden is the frequent banning of his cartoons and suspensions of his Facebook page due to violations of the platform's norms.

Given the potential of this under-researched field of inquiry, the present study aims to explore how right-wing populism and its ideological elements combine with the satire of political cartoons, starting from Ghisberto's work. The study has two main research questions:

- a. What are the thematic, stylistic, and symbolic features of right-wing populist satire, and how do they relay right-wing populist ideologies?
- b. What are the similarities and differences between right-wing populist political communication and satire, and what are the potential advantages / disadvantages of the latter?

### 3. Methodology

Given Ghisberto's prolific amount of cartoon production, we chose to narrow our analysis scope to his *Calendario Populista 2020* (2020 Populist Calendar),<sup>4</sup> which included 12 cartoons and was uploaded on the author's website and social media accounts in December 2019. The calendar serves as an anthology of what Ghisberto considers his best cartoons for each month of 2019. Hence, we can consider it as representative of the author's core thematic and stylistic features. Our research investigates how Ghisberto's cartoons reflect or differ from right-wing populist communication and its basic ideological premises. The analysis attends to the core attribute of populism (people-elite dichotomy, Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017) and the ideological attachments typical of right-wing populism (Wodak 2015): i) politics of exclusion; ii) politics of nationalism; iii) politics of patriarchy, and iv) politics of charisma. Starting from this framework, our study relies on Kress and Van Leeuwen's visual grammar and Greimas's notion of isotopy to disentangle how Ghisberto constructs his satirical cartoons and highlight their dominant thematic and stylistic patterns.

From a semiotic viewpoint, cartoons are syncretic texts (Greimas and Courtés 1979) as they integrate visual and verbal elements. Therefore, they need to be investigated by reading images as well as words. In recent years, Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2001, 2006[1996]) multimodal approach is gaining momentum, particularly in Halliday-based social semiotics (e.g., Kress 2001, 2003; Van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001; Jewitt and Kress 2003; O'Halloran 2004; Van Leeuwen 2005; Machin 2007; Jewitt 2013[2009]). Multimodal

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<sup>4</sup> The calendar is available at the link: <https://bit.ly/3rYHE3X>

discourse involves the interaction of multiple semiotic resources, encompassing all available meaning systems, from verbal language to images, gestures, gaze, posture, and others (Jewitt 2013[2009]). Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006[1996]) elaborated their visual grammar on the premise that a multimodal text's visual component, though connected to words, is independently organized and structured. Verbal and visual languages both partake in the construction of meaning through their specific forms.

Research on media as comics and cartoons has significantly benefited from the increasing interest in visual communication and multimodality (e.g., Tsakona 2009), marking a shift from investigations on language and grammar to graphics-oriented inquiries in the so-called *ninth art*. The peculiarity of comics and cartoons is that their signification processes entail word-image relationships. Pioneering semiotic investigations in the comic medium (e.g., Eco 1964; Barbieri 1991; Floch 1997; Fresnault-Deruelle 1972; Peeters 1991; Groensteen 1999, 2011) have all highlighted the emergence of sense through both images and words. In this respect, isotopic analysis's potential as a tool for the integrated study of such hybrid texts is still mostly unexplored. The notion of isotopy (Greimas 1966a, 1966b) concerns the semes' recurrence, making a text's semantic cohesion and homogeneity possible. Though initially conceived about verbal texts, isotopic analysis can be extended to multimodal texts like cartoons, where visual items participate in the meaning-making process. Isotopic analysis focuses on semic elements and how they cohere to constitute the deep semantic structure of texts (Van Dijk 1972). Greimas distinguished between nuclear semes, which are invariable, permanent, specific, and context-independent, and classemes, which are variable, contextual, and generic. Isotopic analysis does not focus only on single terms but on the whole of the discourse, on its figures (actors, time, space) and their thematization, establishing a hierarchy between the totality of isotopies structuring a text (Bertrand 2000). Typically, texts contain multiple isotopies, while polysemic terms may participate in different isotopies and thus operate as shifters (*embrayeurs*). By focusing on relations of signification among verbal and graphic elements, isotopic analysis can provide a coherent interpretation of such texts as cartoons, whose syncretic nature demands a multiple-level reading. In this respect, isotopies act as gravitational centers (Binelli 2013) or maps, guiding the hermeneutic process into the core of Ghisberto's cartoons. Greimas's isotopic analysis, like Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar, highlights the interaction between the cartoons' visual and verbal dimension,<sup>5</sup> for it is "the simultaneity of the visual and the verbal languages [that] generates the diegesis" (Celotti 2008: 34). Finally, our analysis also draws upon Greimas's (1984) reflection on figurative and plastic semiotics to look for correspondences between the plastic level and the isotopic categories examined.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Polli (2019a, 2019b) for further examples of the combined application of Greimas's isotopies and Kress and Van Leeuwen's multimodal approach.

<sup>6</sup> See also Calabrese (1999).



## 4. Sample analysis

### 4.1. The People vs. the Elite

The oversimplified, Manichean view of the world divided between the 'good people' and the 'evil elites,' which, as we have argued, is typical of populist political rhetoric, is at the core of Ghisberto's perspective. To incorporate this ideological element in his cartoons, Ghisberto employs framing, i.e., multimodality theory's most crucial compositional resource (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006[1996]; Van Leeuwen 2005). Framing devices (e.g., dividing lines, represented elements, empty space, colors) are semiotic resources that serve to demarcate visual elements within an image. The presence of framing signifies differentiation, whereas its absence indicates connection and group identity.

Ten out of the corpus's twelve cartoons show a sharp demarcation between two entirely different and, as a rule, opposed entities utilizing physical elements that parcel out the picture. Whether walls (January, March, April, July, August, November), a gate (May), a screen (October), or even a flag (February), such physical partitions play a crucial role in the meaning-making process as they mark out two contrasting realities and worldviews. The wall is the framing partition most frequently employed by Ghisberto to split the cartoon in two and, in so doing, signify the Manichean division between the 'good people' and the 'evil elites.' In general, the wall has a powerful symbolism in contemporary populist rhetoric and political agenda, as demonstrated by Viktor Orbán's border barrier, built in 2015, to stop migrants from entering Hungary or Trump's wall between Mexico and the USA.

A clear example of Ghisberto's use of walls is the March cartoon, where the polarization between two opposed realities is underlined by the title 'Universi paralleli' ('Parallel universes'). A wall cuts the image in two, with the world of radical chic (i.e., the left-leaning elites) appropriately located on the left side and the people, on the right side. The wall's figure entails the classeme 'division' and 'exclusion.' The demarcation is further stressed on a chromatic level by using bright, vibrant, and saturated colors on the left. At the same time, the gray tone dominates the right side.

The universe on the left shows a peaceful scene in which people live in villas with a pool, green grassland, and flowers, while in the background, other people are sunbathing and sailboats cut through the sea. Each of the three villas in the foreground displays a flag: the EU-flag, the rainbow peace flag, and the Communist flag (with the hammer symbolizing the working class replaced by a fork, representing the hunger of the greedy elites). One of them has a journal with the sign 'Soros' in the mailbox, while in another, a red (the color symbolically associated with left-wingers) t-shirt is drying in the sun. These are the elites' recurring affiliations, according to Ghisberto. Security guards guard the gated community while the representatives of the elites entertain

themselves. These figurative elements reiterate the classemes 'peacefulness,' 'safety,' and above all 'wealth.' The same classemes recur visually in the scene at the center of the left-universe. Here, we observe a group engaged in friendly conversation and composed of representatives of the Church (the Pope), the judiciary<sup>7</sup> (a judge with a testicle-hat and a penis-nose), the media (animalized versions of the journalists Lilli Gruber and Enrico Mentana, portrayed as a snake and a piglet, respectively), the sea-rescue NGOs (epitomized by Lifeline member Sören Moje) and the State (a man with a red tick on a golden leash and another with a tuxedo and a Rolex).

On a verbal level, the group's conversation concerns, on the one hand, people's ignorance and racism. The politicians characterize people as 'ignorant and racist' (Popolo di ignoranti rasisti) and 'illiterate and boorish' (Analfabeti e zoticoni). On the other, immigration: the activist states, 'I'll write a song to raise awareness' (Scriverò una canzone per sensibilizzare), while the Pope adds that 'Even Jesus was a migrant' (Anche Gesù era un mikrante).

Ghisberto's cartoons reverse the remarks directed at the people: on the one hand, the elite are shown to be the real illiterates as they talk with mangled words (this recurs in July and October as well), switching the letters 's' and 'z' ('rasisti,' 'sensibilizzare') and replacing 'k' with 'g' (e.g., 'mikrante'). On the other hand, a black waiter serves the elites a drink called 'Cretino' ('idiot'), a wordplay on the bitter aperitif Crodino, advertised by a gorilla in Italy. While remarking on the elite's hypocrisy towards African refugees, Ghisberto manages to add a slur ('cretino') and a racist association between a black man and a primate. We will tackle Ghisberto's representation of migrants more extensively in the next section. For the moment, it is noteworthy that the black people living in the radical chic universe are either servants or engaging in sexually-connoted activities. A muscular black man embraces a white woman while drinking naked by the pool to the Italian partisan song *Bella Ciao*. Next to another pool, with the road sign 'Parioli,' a shapely black woman wearing a bikini poses for an old man with a lecherous facial expression. Parioli is an upper-class area of Rome, associated with wealth, snobism, and a glamorous lifestyle. The sign, the woman's pose, and the old man's expression, the nakedness of the other couple all share the classeme 'sex,' which is reiterated in Ghisberto's themes of immigration, womanhood, and the lustful nature of the elites.

This isotopy persists in the other universe as well, where we have graphic representations of sexual intercourse between black men and white women (on the road and at the window of a building, above a rainbow). These sex scenes are negatively connoted as part of a dystopic overview of urban decay, where the dominant classemes

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<sup>7</sup> The association of the Italian judiciary with the left can be mainly attributed to populist politician Silvio Berlusconi, who famously defined judges as 'red robes' (see Vaccari 2015).

are 'violence,' 'poverty,' 'disgust,' and 'degeneration.' The buildings are crumbling, and the roads are full of excrements, urine, rubbish, and needles, the air contaminated by smoke and fires.

The classeme 'violence' is reiterated by the blood oozing both from a corpse lying on the street, photographed by forensic police – all the while the presumed murderer escapes holding a knife – and from a wounded woman escaping her assailant. Besides, through a window, we see a Muslim man hitting a woman, another Muslim guarding the area with a rifle, and an Isis flag waving at the window. Another classeme present is 'addiction,' evoked by such figures as the needle, pot-smoking, and a black man screaming for 'Bamba' (Italian slang for cocaine). Few white peoples escape the mayhem. Among them, a family is forced to sleep in the car (with the Italian flag on the top of it), and an old lady is looking out of the window of the 'Isis' crumbling building: they share the classeme 'poverty.'

As part of the populist search for a scapegoat, Ghisberto includes a crying judge that looks like a crocodile, visualizing the familiar saying for a hypocritical show of grief 'weeping crocodile tears.' On a wall, the poster 'Vota PD' ('Vote Democratic Party') is dirtied with excrements, a sign that those responsible for such degeneration are the left-wing elites who are enjoying their life beyond the wall.

The wall and the other barriers used by Ghisberto also share the classeme 'deception'. In February, with a cartoon dedicated to the National Memorial Day of the Exiles and Foibe, Ghisberto turns this commemoration into an opportunity to attack elite intellectuals. The picture is divided into two parts by using a Communist flag as a framing device. At the top, a school-kid asks about the missing pages in his unsurprisingly red history book, while a man in red jacket answers: "Cosa vuoi insinuare?" ("What are you hinting at?"). The implication is that the left-wing intellectual elite deliberately omitted Communist crimes from their historical accounts, thus deceiving future generations. The truth lies under their feet, as a pile of skulls and bones is hidden by the red flag. The cartoon shares the classemes 'death,' conveyed by the skeletons, and 'deception,' conveyed by the framing device, by the red book, and by the adult's evasive response to the kid's question. From a chromatic point of view, the massive use of the color red, with a very high degree of brightness and saturation, contrasts with the dullness of the colors white, gray, and black dominating the cartoon's bottom. The chromatic opposition reinforces, on a plastic level, the contrast highlighted on a figurative level.

Deception and power imbalance between the naïve people and the deceiving elites are also thematized in the April cartoon. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006[1996]) speak of classification processes in an image when the persons represented are divided into Superordinate and Subordinate according to either an overt or covert taxonomy. In Ghisberto's cartoon, a Superordinate-Subordinate taxonomy symbolizes the power im-

balance between the elites and the left-wing voters celebrating Italy's Liberation Day (April 25). The taxonomy is overtly expressed by another multimodal compositional device: salience. Salience is evaluated based on the complex interaction between visual clues, which establishes a hierarchy of importance among the elements, with some drawing more attention to themselves than others. The relative size of the persons represented (i.e., their 'visual weight') is a major factor in determining their relative significance. Ghisberto depicts the elite as giants, looking down at small-sized ordinary people. In the multimodal analysis, perspective also informs about power-relations. The fact that the people are looked at from a high angle indicates that the elite has power over them. The voters are visualized cooped in a cage for rodents, with a hamster wheel and a drinking trough full of golden coins. Left-wing voters thus are metaphorically associated with hamsters enclosed in a cage, unaware of their Subordinate condition. On an eidetic level, the cage's rectangle, combined with the surrounding circle formed by the elite-members' bodies, reinforces the idea of elites' conspiring to deceive the people.

One of the elite-members is depicted as a pig in a tuxedo, dehumanizing the elites being another device frequently used by Ghisberto. In the March cartoon, we saw how media representative Enrico Mentana and Lilli Gruber were animalized as a pig and a snake, respectively. Besides, Ghisberto frequently represents left-wingers as small red ticks: in Italian, 'zecca rossa' (red tick) is a far-right slur for leftists. Journalists are dehumanized in the October cartoon. They appear as grotesque, monster-like creatures coming out of a television screen to feed a viewer with a rainbow mush that seems to turn his brains into pulp. The monstrous female creature that feeds him uses a golden spoon and wears a golden Rolex on her wrist, characterizing the journalistic elite with the *classeme* 'wealth.' The cartoon is titled 'La Setta – La tua pappa quotidiana.' The wordplay between La7 (a TV channel pronounced 'la sette' and usually disliked by the far-right) and 'la setta' ('the cult') indicates that Ghisberto presents the journalists as a cult that manipulates the audience by serving them 'la tua pappa quotidiana' ('your daily mush'). As the viewer submits to the cult's brain-controlling power, he goes so far as to apologize: 'Quanto faccio schifo! Scusatemi!!' ('I suck so much! I'm sorry!!').

The people's gullibility is also thematized in the November cartoon. The latter adopts a comic strip form to offer a short narrative. Here, the ruling elite is represented as a tax collector with a golden hook (eliciting the *classeme* 'wealth' and 'deception,' and connoting the State as legitimized piracy) extorting money (in the form of unfair taxes) from a poor citizen, whose patched coat, hunchbacked posture, pale skin tone, and thin figure share the *classeme* 'poverty.'

To sum up, in most of Ghisberto's cartoons, the wall (and barriers in general) is the figurative element that reiterates these *classemes*, creating the dominant isotopies of division and exclusion, standing at the core of populist rhetoric. At the polar ends of

this Manichean dichotomy stand the elite, linked to the isotopies of wealth and deception, and the people, associated with poverty and gullibility. The isotopies of violence, death, degeneration, disgust, sex, and addiction are reinforced by many figures that recur in all of Ghisberto's cartoons. As the next sections will detail, Ghisberto connects EU-institutions and immigration issues with media and left-wing positions. His dichotomous worldview is amplified by adding further enemies to the elites' nebulous category and how they oppress the people.

#### 4.2. Politics of exclusion

In Ghisberto's cartoons, the politics of exclusion of minorities takes the form of racist representations of black people (usually immigrants) and Muslims. In the March cartoon, we have seen that black people are represented either as servants and drug dealers or as sexual predators. The seme 'sex,' specifically, is reiterated either in scenes where black men engage in sexual intercourse with left-wing women, or a black woman poses for a lascivious white elderly man. The connection between sex and migrants is recurring in Ghisberto's cartoons even through small (visual and verbal) details, often marginal to the main events depicted in the vignettes. In many cases, there is an additional connection to 'wealth' (a classeme present in such figures as headphones, smartphones, golden jewelry), implying that migrants are not truly poor and needy. At the top of the January cartoon, we see a black penis statue with a smirking face, a pair of large headphones, and a golden pedestal inscribed 'Trattato di Dublino.' Next to this, a red tick waving a rainbow flag bearing the sign 'Culi aperti!' ('Open asses!'), aiming to mock Dublin's EU Treaty and the pro-migrant 'Porti aperti' ('Open ports') policy slogan. In the June cartoon, the Altare della Patria's Rome monument is replaced by a sea-rescue ship, displaying two people's silhouette having oral sex. Simultaneously, at the end of a conga of Italian Armed Forces, a caricatured refugee's body is added - though only his hand, abdomen, and smartphone are visible. In the August cartoon, another oral sex intercourse between a black man and a left-wing woman is included in a crowded scene that, once again separated by a wall, outlines the differences between Communist and Fascist beach resorts.

Only the June and December cartoons have no physical barrier dividing the picture. They both deal with inclusion, or, more precisely, the exaggerated and deliberately provocative interpretation of left-wing ideas of inclusion and the socio-political degeneration they entail. In the June cartoon, the title announces the core theme, where the inscription 'Festa della Repubblica' (Republic Day, held on June 2) is replaced with 'Festa dell'Inclusione' (Inclusion Day). Significantly, the line crossing out the 'original' title is in red. In the December cartoon, we find the reinterpretation of the conventional Christmas nativity scene. Center-right politician Angelino Alfano appears as the donkey, left-wing politician Laura Boldrini as the ox, and a grown-up African boy with a

pacifier, a smartphone, a red cap, a golden necklace, and a visible erection takes the place of infant Jesus. On the right bottom corner of the image, below a Christmas tree with a phallic shape (ejaculating) decorated with testicles, another black man is shown in the act of having sex with a white woman. He is pulling her hair, his penis penetrating her from behind and exiting from her mouth while she screams: 'METICCIAMI' (literally, 'make me mongrel'). The word is a neologism, as the noun 'meticcio' has no verbal equivalent in Italian. It is used for animals, especially for dog crossbreeds. It, therefore, composes the *classeme* 'animality.' As detailed in Section 4.4, Ghisberto is dehumanizing left-wing women, blaming them for supporting migration in order to have interracial intercourse. Moreover, we do not see the man's face, but only his genitals and hands holding the woman. He is the embodiment of Ghisberto's stereotypical conception of the black men as a sexual predator, coming to Italy to steal and submit Italian women – a fact that, in his view, only leftists would tolerate, being stigmatized as degenerate.

Dehumanizing political opponents and reiterating the *semes* 'sex' and 'wealth' are common ingredients of Ghisberto's satire. Certain other figurative elements also contribute to the nativity scene: a fire extinguisher replaces the Christmas star with the sign 'ACAB,' the well-known acronym for the political slogan 'All Coppers Are Bastards' associated with anti-racism protests; the hut is decorated with a Communist flag (with the hammer replaced by a fork), a rainbow flag, and two girls heads decapitated and hung upside-down. Therefore, 'violence' is another *classeme* associated with the cartoon figures, which, moreover, recurs in the representation of Muslims, appearing in the background. As in the March cartoon, three Muslim men, smiling sardonically, are pushing a kind of a Trojan horse, in the shape of a veiled woman holding the peace flag and the sign 'multiculturalismo' ('multiculturalism'). Multiculturalism, then, is nothing but a trap set to conquer Europe. Such a reading is consistent with the isotopy of deception highlighted previously. Furthermore, to emphasize the violent nature of the men, a dismembered woman and a body covered with the flag of Europe lie on the ground. A stream of blood flows out of the corpse's chest, as he/she pronounces the words: "Love Eurabia."

Going back to the representation of refugees, on the left bottom side of the image, a sea-rescue ship is docking on land, with a crew member wearing a Santa hat with the sign "SOROS." Several figures reinforce the isotopies of wealth (the euros falling from his pockets and the anchor's golden chain) and sex (an ejaculating penis replaces the man's nose). The crew member is holding a black baby, whose mother lies naked on the floor and bled out after the delivery. Even in this case, we cannot see the woman's face. She is just a body. The baby cries: "WIIIFIII," fueling the stereotypical representation of refugees arriving in Italy with expensive smartphones to use WI-FI connections. The scene is exceptionally graphic and willingly provocative. It also presents a box with

the writing PD (Democratic Party), which is associated with the tragic death of anonymous migrants at sea.

Representations of sea-rescue vessels full of refugees are frequently included in Ghisberto's cartoons, even as marginal elements to the main events occurring in the vignettes (e.g., a small ship on the top of the page in the people's parallel universe in the March cartoon and on the left corner on the bottom in the August cartoon). In July's cartoon, Ghisberto represents migration as a war between Italy (whose representatives are barricaded inside a fortress on the beach) and NGOs attacking from the sea. Sea-rescue ships become figures reiterating the *classemes* 'war' and 'violence' as they use cannons and slings charged with red ticks and refugees with pointy helmets to attack Italy. The *classeme* 'addiction' also recurs as a red tick on a raft is ready to attack with a giant joint, screaming: 'Bambaaa.' In Ghisberto's cartoons, this *seme* pertains to both migrants (e.g., the March cartoon), represented as drug dealers, and left-wing voters, represented as irrational and drug-addled (e.g., March, June, August, and December cartoons).

The ships attacking Italy fly Democratic Party, German, Dutch, French, EU, and peace flags. Two vessels are led by the German Sea-Watch 3 captain Carola Rackete<sup>8</sup> and what seems to be her caricatured male version. The latter's hand is replaced by a golden hook, which connotes him as a pirate, i.e., an outlaw (on right-wing populism's criminalization of sea-rescue NGOs, see also Berti 2020).

In Ghisberto's cartoons, immigration and the EU are intimately connected, as exemplified in the September cartoon titled 'Migranti: il piano UE' ('Migrants: the EU plan'). It is one of the few cartoons that do not include refugees, though it represents Ghisberto's perspective on the impact that European immigration policies have on Italy. A wall separates Italy from the neighboring countries (France, Switzerland, and Austria), represented through their armies and flags. A circular line connecting the troops on an eidetic level reinforces a sense of oppression and emphasizes Italy's siege state.

In this respect, the scene is characterized by the reiteration of the *classemes* 'war' and 'violence' through the figures of angry-looking soldiers, rifles, cannons, as well as by the submissive posture of Paolo Gentiloni (former Italian Prime Minister and European Commissioner for Economy in 2020). Gentiloni is depicted as poor, hunchbacked, with an eye-patch, beaten by a mouse, holding the Italian flag in his right hand and a matchstick in the left. Italy is characterized, then, by the *classemes* 'poverty', 'submission', and 'weakness.' The *classemes* 'degeneration' (reinforced by the figures of rubbish bins, excrements, empty bottles, broken statues, cockroaches, ruins, needles, a crinkly Italian flag on the ground) and 'death' (bones and a skull) are also present. Finally, a parade of red ticks with a rainbow flag is championing French President Em-

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<sup>8</sup> <https://bit.ly/2MZwOMi>

manuel Macron. In open contrast with the visual level, Gentiloni's words seem to praise the EU-agreement, even though the consequences are misery and a nation locked in by an insurmountable wall, symbolizing once again separation and exclusion. Ghisberto's interpretation of the politics of exclusion is clear: the inclusion of refugees means condemning Italy to destruction and poverty, a sacrifice paid by the people while the Italian elites gladly surrender to the EU-institutions, the nation's enemies.

### 4.3. Politics of nationalism

As is common among European right-wing populists, Ghisberto's nationalism incorporates a vital element of euroscepticism. The January cartoon represents the EU as a funfair managed by a dehumanized European elite, portrayed as pigs wearing blue tuxedos. One of them stands at the fair gate, beneath a neon sign with 'EUROPA' written in rainbow colors. The pig at the entrance tries to allure ordinary people to join the fair. To describe Europe, he uses the word 'merdaviglioso,' where he adds the letter 'd' to the positive adjective 'meraviglioso' ('marvelous'), to create a wordplay with 'merda' ('shit'). Such a provocative association between excrements and the EU also anticipates that what stands behind the circus wall is not as marvelous as it may seem.

Beyond the funfair walls, European citizens scream in pain as they undergo several tortures. The wall is the symbol of EU-deception as it prevents people from seeing the pigs' violence and sadism, helped by a group of red ticks. Each torture device is associated with a concept linked to EU-policies: a whip representing sanctions, a cage representing the 3% deficit/GDP limit (a reference to the so-called 'fiscal pact'), and other tortures symbolizing austerity, infractions, restrictions, and the spread (a financial concept that refers to the difference in interest rates between public bonds of different countries). The torture device symbolizing the spread is a spinning machine, driven by a pig representing the financial markets ('finanza'), with a skull positioned on its top, that wears a Rastafarian hat with Germany's colors. The skull, symbolizing German power's catastrophic impact on Europe, also recalls the embattled German captain of NGO vessel Sea-Watch 3 Carola Rackete, reinforcing the association between NGOs and EU elites and suggesting that the latter deliberately 'torture' Italian citizens with their economic measures and pro-migration policies. Even in this case, the skull is linked to the classeme 'death', which is added to that of 'violence' (already highlighted in the July and September cartoons), conveyed by the torture devices, the blood and body parts, and, verbally by the people's screams.

The same classemes recur in the May cartoon, which shows a gate recalling Auschwitz concentration camp entrance. The inscription 'Euroschwitz' establishes a direct equivalence between the EU and the Nazi regime. Holding each other's hand, a twirl of stars on a blue background (recalling the EU flag) creates a circle surrounding and



isolating a pile of children's dead bodies in striped pajamas, saliently positioned at the center of the page. Two captions are prominently placed at the top and bottom parts of the cartoon. The one at the top reports the news of the supposed slaughter of children caused by EU-imposed austerity in Greece, which – according to the cartoon – was censored to avoid fuelling anti-European sentiment. The term 'strage' ('slaughter') shares the classemes 'death' and 'violence.' On the other hand, 'notizia censurata' ('censored news') reiterates the classeme 'deception,' typical of the powerful elites, namely the media and the EU, which manipulate information to conceal their crimes and avoid people's rebellion. On the left corner, a drunk Jean-Claude Juncker (former President of the European Commission) and German Chancellor Angela Merkel are making a toast to resolving the Greek crisis. Their dialogue suggests that 'Operation Greece' was successful but that the 'patient' had died, i.e., Greece's austerity measures aimed to save the European elites and perhaps the financial institutions at the Greek's expense. The classeme 'death' is reiterated in the dead children's figures and the grave of the 'dead' news (an implicit attack on journalists).

Another symbolic reference to the deceitful nature of the EU can be found in the December cartoon. The Italian pro-European politician Emma Bonino appears here as the Biblical serpent holding the forbidden fruit: a blue-colored apple bearing the EU flag motif. The connotation is that Bonino is a deceiving politician, tempting people with the EU's false promises and causing their fall. Humankind is represented by a bleeding body, which, while lying on the ground and covered with the EU flag, exclaims victoriously: "Love Eurabia."

#### 4.4. Politics of patriarchy

Ghisberto's overtly racist cartoons also reflect a conservative, reactionary stance, with their vivid misogynist, sexist, and patriarchal representations of womanhood. The August cartoon provides a fitting example: a wall, reiterating the classeme 'division,' separates Communist (on the left) and Fascist (on the right) beach resorts. The former is chaotic, dirty, and shabby. Figures like garbage, excrements, urine, used condoms, needles, empty bottles, rats, vomit, broken beach umbrellas and beds, shower stalls with the sign 'fuori uso' ('out of order'), and an open-air toilette reiterate the classemes 'chaos,' 'dirt,' and 'degeneration.' In contrast, the fascist resort is characterized by 'order' and 'cleanness.' There is no rubbish, the sunbeds are well-kept, orderly aligned, and of the same gray color. The watchful lifeguards are Benito Mussolini look-alikes. A sign outside the shower stalls reads 'x cagacazzi' ('for ball-busters'), while another shows a screaming red tick, implying that the showers are gas chambers to kill political opponents.

Ghisberto's position regarding women's role is evident by looking at the resort clients' different representations. Fascist women are stereotypical images either of

beautiful, shapely girls sunbathing or of tidy ladies. In this respect, womanhood is connected to either 'attractiveness' or 'tidiness.' In contrast, women on the left side are represented as overweight or with sagging breasts, defecating on the sea, or performing fellatio to a migrant. A woman with sagging breasts looks out of a hut window that bears the sign 'Vendesi bambini' ('Babies for sale'). Therefore, womanhood is either connected with the classeme 'sex' or with that of 'disgust.'

The portrayal of women engaging in sexual intercourse appears in the March and June cartoons, and the graphic representation of a woman being penetrated from end to end in the December cartoon. In the latter, two left-wing women appear decorating a phallic Christmas tree with testicles. Their portrayal includes nose and ear piercings, dyed hair, unshaven legs and beard, naked and sagging breasts, drooling open mouths resembling the jaws of a ravenous animal, and eyes wide open – elements which reiterate the classeme 'animality'. From Ghisberto's reactionary viewpoint, just as left-wingers' minds are in a haze of drugs, their sexuality is seen as feral. Such a misogynist and dysfunctional conception of sexuality ultimately becomes a defining feature of specific social categories (left-wing women and black people).

In several small drawings decorating the calendar, Ghisberto insists on the association between women, sex, and immigration: for instance, in the July cartoon, he adds a sex doll exclaiming: 'Porti aperti come i nostri culi' ('Open ports just like our asses'); in the September cartoon, a full-figured woman offers herself to (sexually) satisfy all migrants in Italy ('soddisfare tutti i migranti in Italia'), relating their supposedly violent behavior to sexual frustration.

In Ghisberto's overtly sexist rhetoric, left-wing women are always dehumanized, objectified, and blamed for supposedly having interracial intercourse. The underlying political implication is that their pro-migrant stance is motivated by sexual rather than moral and humanitarian reasons.

#### 4.5. Politics of charisma

Ghisberto's cartoons do not endorse a specific populist leader to fight the elites and defend the people's rights. In this regard, they differ markedly from the frequent focus of populist political communication on charismatic leaders (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017; Wodak 2015). A partial exception can be detected in the July cartoon, where the Italian shores' only defender from the NGOs is the Brothers of Italy's (a nationalist party) leader Giorgia Meloni. She appears skewering red ticks with a sword. Simultaneously, government functionaries, the judiciary, and the Church take refuge in the fortress or help the invaders. For example, a judge with a testicle-hat and tentacles under the gown opens the door to the ticks, encouraged by the Pope. Inside the fortress, League's leader Matteo Salvini defends himself from a tick who accuses him of being a fascist and calls

for Elisabetta Trenta (Minister of Defense during the Five Star Movement and League's joint government in 2018-19). However, the sea captain beside him does not know who she is, and M5S's leader Luigi di Maio seems equally confused, implying that Italy's defense is drifting. While right-wing populist leaders are represented in a relatively positive light in this cartoon, they certainly do not occupy a charismatic position as 'champions of the people.'

The absence of a leader focus in Ghisberto's populist rhetoric may be due to the cartoons' nature. Refractory to any form of power and authority, satire is more suitable for questioning leaders than for 'creating' or endorsing them. Therefore, Ghisberto's cartoons cannot be considered a form of propaganda in favor of a specific populist politician but rather an endorsement of populist ideology in general.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

In the previous section, we analyzed Ghisberto's right-wing populist satire and identified its characteristic isotopies. We found that this particular form of communication makes extensive use of symbolic elements, such as walls, to represent the elites/people dichotomy (the *classemes* 'division' and 'exclusion' are especially diffuse in the sample, and the images' plastic components regularly reinforce divisions and contrasts). We also demonstrated that right-wing populist satire effectively reproduces the main features of right-wing populism (as identified by the ideational approach). In the multimodal space of a cartoon, Ghisberto mixes short verbal elements with detailed and impactful images. In so doing, he manages not only to summarize the core of populist rhetoric, namely, the Manichean division between the good people and the evil elites, but also to merge it with a range of far-right ideological elements like racism (politics of exclusion), euroscepticism (politics of nationalism), and sexism (politics of patriarchy).

Another substantial difference between populist political communication and populist satire is the latter's capacity to bend and, sometimes, even eliminate the boundaries of what can be said and represented. Ghisberto's cartoons often include explicit insults and offensive representations of individuals. These can be directed at the elites (e.g., animalized journalists and EU-bureaucrats, judges with testicle-shaped heads) and ordinary people and minorities (e.g., left-wingers represented as ticks or drug addicts, sexually-objectified women). However, satire is generally taken to act on behalf of ordinary people and minority groups, not against them. Evidently, the aggressive style of right-wing populist communication modifies the targets of political cartoons.

The presence of the *classeme* 'animality' indicates that the dehumanization of individuals is a device that Ghisberto systematically uses against the 'enemies': they are frequently turned into animals like crocodiles, pigs, ticks, snakes. In some cases, the enemies are caricatured as sex-related body parts, e.g., the judiciary members have testicle-shaped heads, the sea-rescue vessel has a penis-shaped nose. Discrimination is also explicit and widely used: political opponents (left-wingers) are either dehumanized or depicted as disgraceful and perverted (as indicated by the *semes* 'disgust', 'addiction,' 'degeneration'); migrants are seen as scroungers; women are often naked, caught in the act of having sex in public (the *seme* 'sex' is widely present, with a negative connotation), or objectified, as in the July image of a pro-migrant left-winger represented as a sex doll. The black woman who dies during childbirth, in the December cartoon, is even denied an identity.

Ghisberto's cartoons also incorporate the *semes* 'violence' and 'death': physical and sexual violence, murder, and torture are attributed to the various enemies of the people, such as Muslims in the December cartoon with the Nativity scene; sea-rescue NGOs in the July cartoon, the European Union in the January cartoon. The May cartoon is pervaded by a general atmosphere of violence and death, implying that the EU resembles the Nazis and their death camps. Violence, however, is not only used negatively. By winking at the use of gas chambers to eliminate political opponents (symbolized as a red tick), the August cartoon explicitly celebrates fascist extermination policies.

While populist politicians can only push their communication so far without serious consequences, Ghisberto's satire – though not uncontested – benefits from satire's high degree of freedom, treading at the limits of tolerance. At the time we are writing (August 2020), his Facebook page is open and has over 80,000 followers, suggesting relatively high popularity. At the same time, Ghisberto sells some of his original cartoons through his website and Amazon. He is proving particularly skillful in exploiting the freedom of expression granted to satire to push right-wing populism as far as possible. In his cartoons, polarization, the distinctive mark of populist style, reaches an extreme degree of intensity. In his markedly divided world, no nuances or ambiguity are admitted: all left-wingers are ticks, all migrants are scroungers, all European leaders, technocrats, and bureaucrats are evil 'moneybags' (the *seme* 'wealth' has a negative connotation and is often associated with 'animality' and 'violence').

Satirical cartoons' potential to establish binary oppositions and represent them with uncompromised vividness and pungency is much greater than mainstream political communication. The fact that satire is allowed to stretch the boundaries of what can be said without serious consequences did not go unnoticed among political actors. In Italy, right-wing populist politician Matteo Salvini started using irony and humor to attack his opponents by generating social media content that often resembles satirical vi-

gnettes.<sup>9</sup> Although not (yet) pushing the boundaries of political communication as far as Ghisberto's cartoons do, the use of satire by Salvini other populist politicians, such as Giorgia Meloni, enables them to voice their polarizing and extremist messages and ridicule their opponents.

If populist political communication is moving (as it seems) towards the broader use of satire-like content, it is all the more important to understand the role satire plays in populism – especially right-wing populism. Employing satire in political communication, supported by social media's systematic use, may contribute to a radical change of the political communication environment. Our study demonstrated that satirical cartoons can express the core values of right-wing populism by exploiting multimodal communication features with a forcefulness and a license not customarily permitted in politics. To give depth to our analysis, we focused on a single case-study from Italy, a country where right-wing populism is currently quite strong. However, further research should widen the scope of analysis to other cases and, perhaps, investigate the potential of satire to normalize extreme positions in right-wing populist communication. In this respect, the study of political satire and its role in populism represents a field of inquiry with considerable potential, integrating political science, communication studies, linguistics, and semiotics.

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<sup>9</sup> An example can found at the following link: <https://bit.ly/3amgIow> (Accessed on 30 August 2020).

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**AUTHOR**

**Chiara Polli** Postdoctoral Fellow at the Department of Psychology and Cognitive Science, University of Trento, Italy.



**AUTHOR**

**Carlo Berti** Postdoctoral Fellow at the School of International Studies, University of Trento, Italy.





2020 Populist Calendar , Cover and January to April



