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Introduction

- 1 This article deals with the ways in which the Italian politician Matteo Salvini uses gastro-posts (Niola 2019) to spread nationalist and sovereignist messages, and how – thanks to this specific form of meta-discourse – he is able to produce a model of masculinity in accordance with the contemporary rhetoric of sovereignist and nationalist discourse.
- 2 The gastro-posts are posts representing food on social media which try to capture the attention of the audience to send messages on various subjects, and for this reason they are often used by politicians (Terracciano 2019). In the age of food porn media (Lupton & Feldman 2020; Vagni 2017) through food representations it is possible to express one's own subjectivity, or identity and political positioning, in addition to show cooking skills and taste. Although it is certainly true that the discourse about food has very deep cultural roots and that communication through food has always existed, it is clear that the present global diffusion of the food porn communication depends on the specificities of the digital media: without smartphones, for taking pictures and making videos, and the social media for circulating those representations, the construction of this meta-discourse would be impossible. This system of digital communication about and through food is known as “food porn media” and it has a specific grammar.
- 3 One of the consequences of the growing spectacularization of food is the introduction of a masculine presence in the discourse on food. Some traditional models of masculinity – like the lad and emphasized masculinities (Boni 2020) – are particularly

important because they are part of an adaptive strategy for gender trespassing, called “gender manoeuvring” (Laurendeau & Sharara 2008; Schippers 2002). These models of emphasized masculinity get particular relevance when framed in a nostalgic and reactionary discourse, where the rhetoric of the crisis of masculinity is used to foster the return to identities and family models of a traditional type (Cicccone 2019). In the article, we explore two different articulations of the (re)construction of such models through food. On the one hand, we shed light on the masculinity performed by professional chefs at a mainstream media level to set a clear boundary from the supposed feminine duties of domestic food preparation. On the other hand, we reflect on the representations of the hunger and consumption style of the “glutton” male as significant traits of his “proper” masculinity.

- 4 We tackle the relation between food and the construction of the Italian national identity through the perspective of gastro-nationalism (DeSoucey 2010). It helps in exploring how the discourses emphasising food as a crucial element of tradition and national heritage can be applied to reinforce the idea of national borders, and stress distinctions (Bourdieu, 1979). Indeed, the gastro-nationalist discourse intertwines with the expression of sovereignist political stances (Appadurai 1988; 1996), and this gets particularly evident within the Italian context, where even in common sense the local food heritage is often framed as a major discursive component of the “everyday nationalism” (Billig 1995; Ichijo & Ranta 2016). Indeed, as argued by Karrebæk *et al.*, the circulation of images of the nation that depict the national cuisine, “can be a potent site of nation-building, at times in response to the globalizing conditions of circulating food and people” (2018 : 25).
- 5 The central part of this article frames the Italian sovereignist discourse, showing how elements like tradition, gender hierarchy and national myth are crucial for its creation and reproduction. The last part of the article analyses how Salvini’s gastro-posts incorporate these discourses and determine a specific grammar. The gastro-posts analysed in this article were selected among the pics posted by Salvini on his Instagram and Twitter official profiles in the period 2017-2020. We have contextualised our content analysis (Arcostanzo & Pansardi 2017; Caliandro 2018) on such social media on the basis of the frequency of their use by Matteo Salvini (who has posted almost one pic per day in the period of observation) and the high share of gastro-posts among them (about 10% of the whole amount of the posted pics).

Food and masculinity in the media

- 6 The hyper-mediatisation of food has also produced a new centrality for masculinity in the food media. In Italy, a few very famous chefs have become, in the course of a decade, among the most sought-after and prestigious spokesmen and advisors for all manner of products on TV. From being judges in cooking competitions, chefs have become judges in talent shows, TV hosts, influencers, and opinion leaders. Regarded as sex symbols, they are continuously in the spotlight of media, which celebrate them emphasising the reasons for their success and framing their public image as a role-model for men.
- 7 Starting from the 2000s, research focused on the connections between food and gender has been growing (Avakian and Haber 2005). One of the first important works that connected the history of food and nutrition to the relationship between genders was

Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century by Laura Shapiro (1986). The encounter of these first reflections with the intersectional and post-colonial approaches produced the development of a new analytical perspective (Avakian 2005). Some of the studies on media representations of the link between gender and food, for example, have often started from the kitchen as a symbolic place of gender role divisions. The work of Cindy Dorfman (1992) – a historical excursus on bourgeois American cuisine as a feminine place – tried to analyse change in the media representation of the kitchen as a symbolic territory of emotions and intimacy. Ten years later, Sherrie Innes (2001) followed a similar path, deconstructing the discourses and representations conveyed by popular media about women who cook. According to these analyses, cookbooks, advertisements and magazine articles help reproduce the idea that cooking for the family is “naturally” rewarding for women, both emotionally and aesthetically.

- 8 Yet, when food starts to be mediatized and spectacularized, masculinity comes into play and its relation to food becomes the object of studies and reflections (cf. Fidolini & Stagi 2020). The construction of the relationship between masculinity and food has a long and articulated history in Italy, where two men were chosen to talk about food for the first time on television. The writer Mario Soldati, who in the TV programme *Viaggio lungo la valle del Po* (Voyage along the Po valley) travelled to discover traditions and food of the peasant culture, and the gourmet Luigi Veronelli, who since the 1970s aimed to bring “good taste” in the Italian kitchens with the programme *A tavola alle 7* (At the table at 7pm). Among the chefs that currently appear on the Italian TV, those who became celebrities tend to be men who perform an exaggerated masculinity, whose prototype is the TV chef Gordon Ramsey. Scholars such as Schippers (2002) link the performance of particular models of masculinity to the need to distance from a terrain traditionally considered as feminine; men must go beyond the boundaries of the kitchen to distance themselves as much as possible from the feminine models, otherwise they run the risk of “demasculinizing” themselves. For this reason, they perform almost a caricature of masculinity¹, appearing in locations that are far removed from domestic settings, using the symbolic power available to their gender to bypass or subvert the traditional hierarchies in the field of domestic cooking, and adopting a strategy called gender manoeuvring.
- 9 The authors who have analysed the division of gender roles in kitchen broadcasts identified a binary classification to position the culinary scenarios in which men and women move: foodwork/ food leisure. This dichotomy is further expressed in the private/public axis: if the women who cook are always anchored in the reproduction of a home-maker dimension, men often cross it, to set off in search of exotic or “disgusting” flavours, to find and challenge those who cook ancient popular dishes or to compete in endurance competitions in the quantity of food swallowed. The declination of the public/private axis is also found in the type of occasion or reason for cooking: men can cook when it is a job with a high profile and recognition, for pleasure, as a challenge, or on special occasions.
- 10 In the perspective of the staging of masculinity, the representation of the man who cooks at the grill appears particularly interesting. In the mainstream imaginary, often built on American films and TV series, the barbecue is a practice usually carried out by men on every occasion of festivity. Lately the barbecue has been the subject of some TV formats, and on the web, we can find conversations and blogs where constantly

growing groups of men discuss this practice. As Lorenzo Domaneschi (2020) points out, even more interesting it is the relation between the man and his BBQ: if the meat and the fireplace are elements almost ancestrally framed as part of the repertoires of masculinity, the barbecue is a practice that is placed in times and spaces outside the house, it is a leisure form of cuisine, managed thanks to the competent use of a specific technology.

- 11 In Italy, the most successful TV format in this field is *I re della griglia* (The kings of BBQ), hosted by Chef Rubio, one of the most famous personalities in the Italian food television. Given his notoriety in the Italian context, it is interesting to analyse how masculinity is performed by Rubio on TV through the interpretative framework created by Jonatan Leer (2016) to describe the gastro-television path of Jamie Oliver, a famous figure in British food TV.
- 12 In *The Naked Chef* (1999-2001), Jamie Oliver inaugurated his television career proposing what Leer has defined a “de-chefisation”, that is a sort of de-professionalisation, a distancing from the authority usually asserted by the chef on television and from their gastro-cultural capital exhibited during the TV programmes, in favour of a democratisation of the television experience of food.
- 13 As argued by Boni (2020), one of the main aims of the programme is being essentially obscene, namely showing on television what normally remains in the backstage, as framed by Baudrillard (1987)². The specificity of this strand of television programmes is exactly to make the private public, to show what in everyday life should not be “staged”. Such an unveiling of the backstage clearly regards the life of men and the very masculine corporeality. The chef is thus “naked” in several senses: in the first episode of *The Naked Chef*, after unclenching from his traditional chef uniform of a French restaurant, Oliver goes to his apartment where he lives as a single. Dressed in a typical Brit-pop outfit, consistently with the new lad style³, he cooks a “naked” dish - an Italian recipe, “simple”, “traditional”, “democratic” (Boni 2020) -, that is a dish without all the sophisticated ornaments of the French cuisine.
- 14 According to Leer, this de-chefisation of the male in the kitchen on television - inaugurated by Jamie Oliver, but then interpreted by several other food television personalities - would represent a “a reconstruction of a traditional gendered order” (2016 : 86), restoring a more assertive masculinity.
- 15 Leer claims that this return to order is expressed in four new tendencies of the food television in its masculine version: beside the de-chefisation, the second would show the chef in the new role of moral entrepreneur, the third would stage him as the central character of a revitalisation of the national myth, while the last would be characterised by the idea of cooking as a model of masculine escapism. In the career of Chef Rubio on the Italian food television, we can find all the tendencies of the restoration suggested by Leer. In particular, in the format called *Unti e bisunti* (Greasy and very greasy), Chef Rubio challenges street food cooks, he eats with his hands, he visits food markets, he talks about the different cuts in meat butchering, and about local cuisine. Adopting a very confidential tone, he assumes the role of moral entrepreneur, talking about local food traditions. Following the typical forms of masculine escapism, Chef Rubio plunges in competitions in homosocial situations, far from any everyday life context or any female presence. And he teaches to recover the national myth through what Francesco Buscemi (2014) calls “gastro-diplomacy”: the

myth of national identity is reconquered thanks to an “everyday nationalism” (Billig 1995; Ichijo & Ranta 2016) made of typical recipes of the tradition.

- 16 Chef Rubio is the main character also in another format called *Camionisti in trattoria* (Truckers at the tavern), where we find the same kind of setting - very informal, homosocial -, the presence of traditional cuisine and, most important, the masculine escapism. This latter is crucial for another sub-format of the food TV: the travelogue (Boni 2020). Some of the tendencies pointed out by Leer can be applied to the narratives produced by the Italian politician Matteo Salvini in his gastro-posts. As we will see, this type of narrative takes form thanks to the unveiling of the backstage, the blurring of the division between private and public spheres - an obscenity which was already specific of the television as a medium, but has been amplified and modified by the features of the food porn media.

Doing and redoing masculinity

- 17 The analytical perspective of the performed masculinity in the food context is based on the concept of “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman 1987), where the idea is that gender is a practice constantly enacted through specific social relations (Connell 2005; West & Fenstermaker 1995). According to this perspective, gender is not a stable ontological property of individuals, but on the contrary is “a routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction” (West & Zimmerman 1987: 125). This means that the study of gender must be directed towards the practices producing it, that is towards “interactional work involved in being a gendered person in society” (West & Zimmerman 1987: 127). Many of the scholars who have studied the relation between gender and food have adopted the theoretical perspective proposed by West and Zimmerman (1987), considering gender as a continuous practical realisation (Connell 2005).
- 18 This perspective is particularly useful in the study of the relation of men with food, because it claims that behaviours develop thanks to social performances, cultural scripts (Danzinger 1997) and discursive repertoires.
- 19 The gendering of food is thus one of the mechanisms implemented to declare or strengthen the belonging to what is called the hegemonic masculinity. Food practices help men to confirm and adhere to the traditional manly taste, thus allowing the construction of strong masculine identities and relations (Newcombe *et al.* 2012). In several cultures, for instance, the consumption of alcoholic drinks is a marker of masculinity (Roos *et al.* 2001). And in general men are supposed to be less likely than women to avoid the consumption of fat foods, to eat dietary fibres and fruits or to follow a diet (Wardle *et al.* 2004). On the contrary, “real men” are pushed to consume more proteins (Levi *et al.* 2006). Furthermore, it is commonly believed that red meat - with its high content in proteins and its bloody appearance - should be for men a totem of virility and strength (Rozin *et al.* 2012). It should not surprise then that in a narrative about the crisis of masculinity, the food porn media would adopt these discourse repertoires to activate the staging of a certain type of masculinity for restoring a traditional gender order. At the end of his article, Leer writes:

“with the shaping of TV chefs as “moral entrepreneurs”, food activism closely relates to a reconstruction of a traditional gendered order. With the revitalisation of gastro-national myths, bonding with old-fashioned white masculinity is an

important component in the host's masculinity performance. In the masculine cooking-as-escapism tendency, masculinity is constructed around a counter-cuisine space, where cooking offers men a playful break from the demands of a gender-equal society. (...) The four tendencies that subsequently emerge appear to emphasise that cooking can be a way to get in touch with various forms of solid masculinity – in other words, a way to formulate counter discourses to the official gender-equal discourses” (2016 : 87).

- 20 For Leer, therefore, the food media has increasingly become “a platform for the revitalisation of traditional masculinity discourses and for a backlash against feminist discourses” (Leer 2016 : 86). For Susan Faludi (1992), a gender backlash⁴ is the backwash that cyclically pulls back women's progress: the questioning of gender hierarchies in fact is not a linear process, but rather a path where steps forward are followed by stops, steps back, leaps forward or setbacks taking to the starting point. As suggested by Chiara Volpato (2013), for restoring the gender order it is often necessary to activate a process of “reparation of masculinity”. Such a symbolic reparation may be enacted thanks to the use of various repertoires and media. Susan Jeffords (1989) has written about it explaining the process of “re-masculinization” of the American public discourse at the end of the Vietnam war, analysing the symbolic reparation of masculinity in war novels and movies⁵. The return of traditional models of masculinity in food porn media is part of this process of reparation. The restoration of the gender order taking place in the food porn media is actually part of a much larger process, which in the course of several years, has produced the narratives of the crisis of masculinity (Ciccone 2019), of the risk of a “fatherless society”, and of the feminization of society (Petti & Stagi 2015). Over time, the supposed crisis of masculinity - framed as a result of the success of feminism (Badinter 1993) - has brought the birth of several male revanchist movements. At first, we had the mythopoeic movements, whose main goal was to restore the ancient power and the naturalness of a “true masculinity”. During the last decade, we can find the phenomenon of the “manosphere”: a virtual community made up of forums, websites and blogs where almost only men meet to discuss gender relations in general, and the meaning of masculinity in particular. The most well-known groups – Pick Up Artist, Red Pill or Incels (Ging 2019) – adopt the rhetoric of the “crisis of masculinity” to free men from the supposed “female domination”.
- 21 Susan Faludi, who introduced the term of backlash to talk about the birth of such male movements, has been writing about that public “reparation” already proposed by Jeffords. In *The Terror Dream* (2008), she analyses the male chauvinist reactions that emerged in the American culture after the attacks of 9/11: the obsession with terrorism would have made re-emerge a misogynist and puritan patriotism, based exactly on the “reparation” of the traditional sex-gender system (see also Volpato 2013). Salzman et al. (2006) have proposed a similar thesis about how a model of masculinity of a traditional type may re-emerge in critical times; they refer to the “Resurgent Angry Macho Men”. And very angry are also the men who Michael Kimmel has interviewed for his book *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era* (2013): neo-Nazis, activists for fathers' rights, members of militias, hooligans, homophobes, ultra-conservative Christians – all men who feel menaced by the changes in the socio-economic status quo and by the questioning of the “natural” and limitless male rights. These “angry men” feel rancour against women, migrants, blacks, gays, and urban elites. The web is where they meet, they fraternise, and they organise. In this context,

the discourse of the fatherless society emerges - reflexively reinforcing other similar discourses - in which the narrative takes the tone of a nostalgic - or even plainly reactionary - rhetoric about the forced exemption of the fatherly authority, as one of the main causes of contemporary social problems (Petti & Stagi 2015). The discourse about the fatherless society is constructed thanks to the reference to ancestral and cultural categories: the use of psycho-analytical, religious or mythological concepts permits to reactivate all the cultural devices incorporated by the individuals in the course of the educational and socialization processes (Petti & Stagi 2015).

- 22 In the times of food porn media, a discourse on national identity, known as gastro-nationalism, is produced in addition to the staging of a traditional masculinity. The gastro-nationalist perspective investigates the political relation between food and the construction of national identities. The focus on food as a national heritage reinforces the geographical and cultural borders, stressing the distinctions (Bourdieu, 1979). Therefore, gastro-nationalism reflects and interacts with the political links connecting the nationalist projects to the food cultures at local level, translating the symbolic and material menaces to the traditional food practices of a country in an assault to its cultural heritage (DeSoucey 2010).

God, Country, Family

- 23 The anthropologist Marino Niola recently wrote - mentioning Nietzsche - that Matteo Salvini is creating for himself a public image of a “common superman” (2019). In this context it would probably be more relevant to refer to popular culture and its heroes rather than to philosophy. Salvini presents himself in the everyday life posts on Facebook or Instagram as Clark Kent, ready to suddenly become Superman (or “the Captain”, as his supporters call him) whenever there is a new menace to “our Western” values and interests: legal and illegal immigration, gay rights, abortion, secularism, the European Union. In a few years, Salvini has been able to transform the regionalist and independentist movement of the *Lega Nord* (Northern League) in a national party (*Lega per Salvini Premier*), obtaining 34,3% of the votes at the last European elections in 2019 and thus becoming the first Italian party. This has been possible thanks also to an international context dominated by Trump and to Salvini’s ties with nationalist or sovereignist movements, parties and governments all over Europe, and especially with Putin’s Russia. The new *Lega* is a populist party based on the direct relationship between the leader and his supporters, with little contribution by the other politicians or a classical party-machine - a direct link made possible by “the Beast”, Salvini’s algorithmic software managed by his spin-doctors. With the help of hundreds of militants and supporters, the algorithm is able to make the leader visible to millions of Italians every day, on the most popular subject of that day, through a very efficient and refined system of rebounds of images and contents from the territory and TV programmes to the web.
- 24 In the last years, especially during the electoral tours for the local elections from northern to southern Italy, Salvini has constantly invoked the protection of the Holy Virgin and Saints, he has displayed and kissed religious symbols like crosses and rosaries⁶ in front of his political supporters, and he has stressed the importance of the protection of Christianity against the invasion of non-Christians, and especially of Muslims. The historical Fascist motto, “*God, Country, Family*”, has lately become popular

among international Pro-family movements in Europe, Italy included. These movements have found their great enemy in what they call the “gender theory”. The first movement of this kind was born in France in the early 2010s, in traditionalist Catholic circles, and then expanded all over Europe to fight in favour of the “natural” family – formed by a male father, a female mother and as many children as possible – against the menaces of the “gender” culture propagated by the LGBT+ movements. These pro-family movements have progressively absorbed the older pro-life, anti-abortion groups, and in the less favourable context represented by pope Francis pontificate, they have abandoned a strategy of direct pressure on the Italian Catholic church, assuming instead a more anthropological and pre-political stance (Prearo 2020) that has allowed them to open up to traditionalist groups in other Christian confessions⁷. In March 2019 at the *World Congress of Families* in Verona (Italy), the major event of the new “populist religion” which had the support of several European right-wing governments, the then-Italian Minister for Interior Salvini said: “as a minister, as a man, as a daddy, I am fighting and I will fight to be sure that Italy and Europe will return to put at the centre the woman, the man, the child, so that this continent may have a future” (Prearo 2020 : 263).

Matteo Salvini’s food porn aesthetics

- 25 To reinforce his reactionary message, Salvini emphasises traits that are usually ascribed to the Italian traditional masculinity. The overarching aim is to show his ability to embody the national tradition, proving to be a suitable leader for its “guardians”. Indeed, the very notion of tradition is a compelling symbolic tool to stimulate sovereignist feelings and claims. A series of cultural practices (such as for instance religious rites or food preparations and recipes) can be framed as traditional, and through this “invention” (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983), they are naturalised as crucial components of specific identities and belongings. As historians Capatti & Montanari (2005) argue, the enhancement of food tradition has played a crucial role in the construction of the Italian national identity. After the unification in the second half of the 19th Century, the idea of “Italy as a unity” was prompted with particular effectiveness by the references to national gastronomic heritage.
- 26 Consistently, the political communication in Italy has often integrated references to food and conviviality, aiming to become more popular, to appeal to as many electors as possible. In the collective imaginary, being “Italian” still means being aware of the national food heritage. Food is thus considered as a central component of the cultural construction on “Italianicity” (Barthes 1957; Sassatelli 2019). Consequently, a traditional Italian male is hardly representable without including food elements in his depiction. Through food porn, thus Salvini finds a powerful means of representation for his political stance. Salvini’s gastro-posts confirm his ability to embody the Italian traditional masculinity, and symbolically fill the gap between the political realm and the supposed everyday experience of the common man. Used as a rhetorical device to enable a deep identification with the political leader’s attitudes, lifestyle, and taste, Salvini’s food porn is a powerful tool for populist propaganda. Through the constant exposition of his public and private life, as well as of the materiality of his body, the pics posted by Salvini on social networks overlap the public and private spheres,

fostering a sense of proximity to the audience who gets the illusion to participate in his life.

- 27 To pursue the double-faced representation of the political leader committed to the safeguard of the nation on the one hand, and of the authentic everyman in touch with the problems faced by common people on the other, Salvini's food porn style reproduces a specific aesthetics, focusing on some core topics. In terms of visual style, the food porn pics posted by Salvini strongly differ from the most established patterns of visual representation of food on social networks. Especially at the early stages of the diffusion of food porn practices, the images of food circulating online often reproduced a spectacularised and glamour representation of the recipes. As "evidence" of the individual competence needed to participate in the mainstream discourse about food, the food porn pics usually emphasised the aesthetic components of a dish, such as its *mise-en-place*, to show the educated taste of the producer. Against the background of the democratisation of the access to the hegemonic narrative on food through the new media, this kind of food porn aims to celebrate – or attempts to emulate – the professional style in representing food, enhancing immaterial dimensions like colours, shapes and composition of the dish at the detriment of the attention for its materiality and taste. Even at a first glance, Salvini's food porn pics counter these dominant food representations, clearly rejecting their sophistication. His gastro-posts look hardly "instagrammable", as they are characterised by over-dressed meals dripping out of the plate, greasy dishes and cutlery, half-eaten food - in addition to shots that are not on focus and recurrent close-ups of his mouth while biting. Nevertheless, it is precisely through this non-conventional style that the food porn production by Salvini amplifies his populist message. It works as a demonstration of his authenticity, and of the affinity with his electors, with whom he fights against the left-wing élites, and their sophisticated approach to culture, lifestyle and taste. Also, it resonates with the process of de-chefisation described by Leer (2016) as a "restoration of the order" that re-establishes the traditional masculinity, failed by too fancy and less manly superstar chefs.
- 28 Through his everyday life food representations, Salvini becomes no longer a politician who communicates with common people from a higher position, but rather a common man who shares everybody's hunger, and pragmatically rejects the "intellectual" and "classy" taste for sophisticated or healthy food. The focus on his everyday life and related kinds of food (as, for instance, the dishes he puts on the table for his children, as a perfect "family-guy"), together with the amateur quality of the posted images, frames Salvini's food porn as an expression of "lo-fi politics" (Barile & Vagni 2019) which is meant to stimulate the illusion of participation by its audience. This is consistent with "a strategy for the survival of the political brand in a changed media ecosystem, in which it is not enough to massively promote one's own image, but it is necessary to re-create spaces of 'disintermediated' confrontation, requiring the active participation of the public" (Barile & Vagni 2019 : 81).

FIGURE 1-4: Examples of Salvin's lo-fi gastro-posts.



1-Chicken and melted cheese for my children. The lunch is served!



2. Enjoy pappa al pomodoro! [typical recipe from Tuscany]



3. Snack!



4. It's 10:30 pm, on the hills over Cesena [small Northern town] finally homemade tagliatelle with granny ragù!

- 29 The lo-fi aesthetics shapes the whole production of Salvini's food porn, which focuses on two main topics. A consistent share of his gastro-posts aims to represent his hunger as a core trait of the model of traditional masculinity embodied by Salvini. The

expression of his crave for high-caloric food is here understood as a confirmation of the assumed “right” appetites of the straight male. The subjects usually chosen by Salvini to build such representation are particularly nourishing Italian recipes (e.g., fried calzone) presented in abundant (and often greasy) portions. To reinforce the symbolical adherence to traditional masculinity, these food representations are often paired by Salvini with textual comments such as *“Will you still love me even if I get fat?”*, through which he makes fun of the health fanatics, stressing a clear distinction between his manly hunger and the obsessive – and again intellectual, classy and “feminine” – attention for diet ascribed as a typical trait of subordinate masculinities (Connell 2005), such as the so-called “new men” and “metrosexual” ones. The resistance against the tyranny of diet regimes is here framed also as a form of nostalgic remembrance of a supposed past when, especially for men, “eating was straightforward [...] and without anxiety or uncertainty” (Gough 2007). The kind of masculinity performed by Salvini aims to diverge from these stereotypical masculinities spread by mainstream media, where the “new men are slightly feminized men who take care of their families, and are more focused on the expressive/emotive sphere rather than the rational one” (Boni 2020 : 67), and the metrosexuals “are males particularly concerned with their look and their beauty care, narcissist and accustomed to a metropolitan consumption style” (Boni 2020 : 67).

- 30 As a further enhancement of this message, Salvini often shares images where he is committed to allegedly “virile” cooking activities such as grills and barbecues. As argued by Domaneschi (2020), grills and barbecues are elements of material culture which can frame a context where a certain masculinity “is done” and reinforced. In addition, in these pics Salvini is often shirtless, emphasising in this way the informal and private character of the photos, and implicitly proving through the exposition of his pudgy body, his will to resist to the cultural pressure towards the healthy, sophisticated fit body of metrosexuals or health fanatics “new men”. What is meant to show is thus the authenticity and spontaneity of the common man, whose appetites are stronger than the processes of feminization who are represented by right-wing and populist discourses as a pervasive force threatening the “right to be a man”.

Figure 5-8: Examples of Salvini's gastro-post focused on resistance to diet, on manly hunger, and on BBQ.



5. But if they send me a cannolo [Sicilian treat] from Palermo, how can I manage to be on a diet?



6. Looking forward to grilling Renzi [his main competitor in national elections and former Prime Minister from Democratic Party]



7. A dietary and light snack at midnight: fried tomatoes, onions and ham, goodnight.



8. A light lunch from Sardinia: gnocchi with mushrooms, sausage, saffron and I have added pecorino cheese. Will you still love me even if I get fat?

31 Another recurrent topic in Salvini's gastro-posts is the celebration of Italian localities through the exhibition of typical food products. The high number of pics displaying

fruits and vegetables from specialised cultivations of different areas, as well as traditional recipes consumed on site accompanied by comments emphasising the excellence of different Italian foods, responds to a specific rhetoric purpose. Indeed, as the leader of the former secessionist party Lega Nord, after his victory in the national elections with Lega in 2018, Salvini needed to re-frame his image as the leader of the whole nation. Consequently, he made several official visits in Southern Italy, to “revise” his former image of Northern secessionist and reinforce the consent towards his party. To build a new and positive relation with the Southern electorate, the enhancement of local food products is thus used as a rhetorical device that celebrates traditions, communities and local knowledge, which until then, had been blamed by Salvini and *Lega Nord*⁸. Again, Leer’s reading about the process of de-chefisation (2016) fits Salvini’s food porn production too in its role as instrument of revitalisation of the national myth.

- 32 The symbolic function of this kind of posts does not only fit political purposes at the national level. It also works as a tool for rebranding Italian sovereignty and potential autarchy against the supposed interference of EU regulations. Indeed, as for many other populist and right-wing parties across Europe, the anti-EU discourse represents a core topic for the Lega party. The reference to food issues is thus taken as an opportunity to put emphasis on the supposed struggle of national identities and peculiarities against the homogenizing effect of EU regulation, since the political negotiations on the acknowledgment of protected foods and recipes (e.g., DOP, DOC products) resonates with the gastro-nationalist discourse (DeSoucey, 2010).
- 33 Figure 9-12: Examples of Salvini’s gastro-posts about Italian food and local food specialities.



9. What a smell! You must ALWAYS eat and drink Italian, we do not have anything to envy to anybody!



10. Here in Calabria [Southern region] tastes are real!



11. Strawberries from Maletto in Sicily, let's buy and eat Italian food only!



12. Good morning with figs from Campania [Southern region]

Conclusions

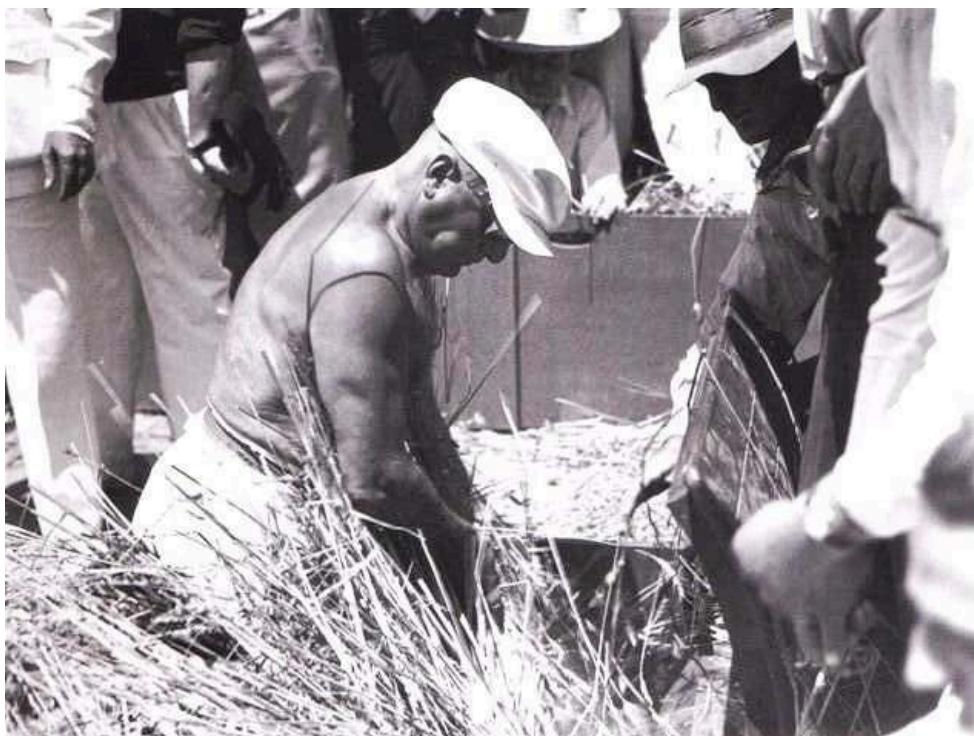
- 34 In Italy, the relationship between food and politics has a long and complex history. In politics, food has been used for forging and strengthening ideals, for obtaining popular consensus, for giving shape to the national identity, and for many other goals. Television channels have often collaborated in these symbolic enterprises: at first with the TV programmes about food and the restoration of traditions, useful for the creation of a national identity; then with the lifestyle formats to educate on a “correct” food consumption; and finally with 'makeover television' about diets, interpreted as technologies of the self to promote a “good citizenship”. The media driven hyper-production of narratives about food has induced aestheticizing tendencies and a progressive domestication of the audiences to food porn. And now, in the age of food porn media, the food images are used as a grammar to talk about one’s taste, to show one’s positioning as consumer, to certify specific cultural and political memberships.
- 35 Despite all the changes intervened in the course of time, food is still one of the most significant frameworks for the reproduction of gender roles and confinements. In the “doing gender” perspective, food practices represented on media are an effective instrument to stage various repertoires of masculinity and femininity. With the recent spectacularization of food, some chefs have become true icons, performing roles characterized by a super-emphasized - and sometimes even almost grotesque - masculinity. Next to these superstar elitist chefs, other male characters have appeared in the food porn media, producing counter-narratives as well. The emergence of these different media personalities may be interpreted as a symbolic reparation of a masculinity that, for years, has been said to be in deep crisis. The narrative about the

crisis of masculinity feeds a need for a backlash; it is part of a larger narrative about the urgency of the restoration of the traditional gender order, to return to a larger social order. This kind of rhetoric is adopted by some populist movements – in Italy those invoking the centrality of “God, Country and Family” – to legitimise sovereignist and nationalist claims.

- 36 In Italy, the Lega political party, once regionalist and Northern independentist, has now assumed populist, sovereignist and nationalist positions. Subsequently, its leader, Matteo Salvini, became interested in gaining the consensus of the people of Southern Italy as well – people who in the past were represented as enemies and inferiors by the propaganda of his party, the Lega Nord (Northern League). To gain the support of electors in Centre and Southern Italy, Salvini often creates gastro-posts celebrating the cuisine and food typical of those areas of the country. Generally speaking, the food porn used by Salvini is based on gastro-nationalism: to enhance the nationalist sentiments, the gastro-nationalist rhetoric uses food as a metaphor of national belonging, transforming the food tradition and the authenticity of products and recipes in issues of political identity. From this point of view, the choice to eat in an Italian style and to consume “made in Italy” products becomes significant in the support of sovereignist and nationalist positions. By his gastro-posts, Salvini wants to appear as a man coming from the common folk, but most importantly he wants to play a role characterised by a traditional masculinity. The analysis of Salvini’s gastro-posts has shown that some tendencies - identified by Jonatan Leer (2016) - about the models of masculinity present in food TV, may be found in other programmes of the food porn media: as for instance the de-chefisation, the reconstruction of national myths, and escapism.
- 37 Furthermore, the emphasis on Salvini’s overweight body helps to speak about a laddish masculinity, very far from the refined aesthetics of the metrosexual masculine repertoires. The show of Salvini’s body, often naked, working at the barbecue or eating in open spaces, reminds of the macho aesthetics of Benito Mussolini, who liked to be photographed and filmed shirtless while working hard in the fields, to represent and embody the ideal of the “Father of the Country”. Both constitute the repurposing of hegemonic masculinities: the first for a society of production, the second for a society of consumption.

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Figure 13: Fascist propaganda pic of Mussolini at work in the fields



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NOTES

1. With the notions of “exaggerated masculinity” and “caricature of masculinity” we refer to models of staged masculinity that emphasise its authoritarian and smug traits (Cicccone 2019) to adhere to the features ascribed to hegemon masculinity (Connell 2005).
2. According to Baudrillard (1987), under the “spotlights” of information there are no more staging, no more dramaturgy and illusion, thus everything ends to be immediately visible and, consequently, “obscene”.

3. For “new lad” we mean a repurposing of the traditional hegemonic male model, characterized by behaviours considered virile: informal clothing, everyday life language and a general lack of seriousness (Boni 2020).
 4. In the 1950s and 1960s the term backlash was used in the United States to describe the political reaction against the integration of blacks in American society.
 5. The most famous example is Rambo, a Vietnam war veteran – very macho and hyper-muscular – who rights the wrongs and gets justice done.
 6. According to Nicola Morra, President of the parliamentary Anti-Mafia Commission, kissing the rosary means also recognising the power of the ‘ndrangheta, the most powerful Italian criminal organisation, especially if this is done in Calabria, the region where the organisation was born, or in Lombardy where it manages most of its business (Ilgiornale.it – 20.08.2019).
 7. For an overview of the anti-gender movements at European level, see Kuhar & Paternotte (2017).
 8. About this topic, a few years ago, a video where Salvini sang a kind of hooligan refrain “*Can you smell how they stink? Even dogs run away... Neapolitans are coming*” got viral. See <https://video.repubblica.it/politica/quando-salvini-cantava-senti-che-puzza-arrivano-i-napoletani/291156/291766>.
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ABSTRACTS

As a crucial component of « Italianicity », food is a common topic in the political discourse in Italy. The diffusion of the grammars and practices of food porn media offer new possibilities for political communication: in Italy, it's especially the sovereignist and populist parties who use such a language. In this article we will focus on the application of food porn as a gastro-nationalist device by Matteo Salvini, leader of the right-wing party Lega. In Salvini's specific aesthetics of food porn, we can detect a « lo-fi » strategy - based on the counter-position with « high cuisine » -, which resonates with the rejection of the intellectual elites' attitudes and know-how. Furthermore, with his food porn production, Salvini aims to celebrate the material and pragmatic elements typically associated with the traditional masculinity supported by the « anti-gender » movements in Italy and elsewhere. Thanks to the representation of food and meals, Salvini thus proposes an image of himself as a typical Italian male, ready to defend the borders of nation, tradition and gender.

En tant que composante essentielle de l'« italianité », la nourriture est un argument commun dans les discours politiques en Italie. La diffusion de grammaires et pratiques du *food porn* dans les médias offrent de nouvelles possibilités à la communication politique : en Italie ce sont surtout les partis souverainistes et populistes qui utilisent ce langage. Dans cet article nous allons focaliser l'attention sur les applications du *food porn* en tant que dispositif *gastro-nationaliste* de la part de Matteo Salvini, leader du parti de droite Lega. Dans l'esthétique spécifique du *food porn* de Salvini nous retrouvons une stratégie « lo-fi » – basée sur une contre-proposition avec la haute cuisine – qui fait écho au refus des attitudes et savoir-faire des élites intellectuelles. Avec sa production de *food porn*, Salvini veut, entre autres, célébrer des éléments matériels et pragmatiques qui sont normalement associés à la masculinité traditionnelle, soutenu par les mouvements « anti-genre » en Italie et ailleurs. Grâce à la représentation de nourriture et de

repas, Salvini propose ainsi une image de lui-même comme homme italien typique, prêt à défendre les frontières de la nation, de la tradition et du genre.

INDEX

Mots-clés: food porn, gastro-nationalisme, masculinité traditionnelle, Salvini

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