



Everyone Wants to Belong: Reflections on Nationalism, Italian Cultural Politics and The Venice Biennale 2024

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This will be a discursive essay, discussing the history and recent revival of nationalism in an Italian context. It will address the interface between the arts and politics in 20th century Italian history, and how technological modernity was ideologically conflated with fascism. It will contain a section reviewing the 2024 Venice Biennale, considering how well the exhibited works illuminated its curatorial themes, and whether, generally, such overarching themes enhance our visual experience. The discussion will then return to an examination of definitions offered for the nationalist Right, and follow this up the present, in the light of appointments made to cultural positions by the present Italian government, particularly its appointment of the new Director of the Biennale. It will reference such notable Italian thinkers as Niccolò Machiavelli, Benedetto Croce, Antonio Gramsci and Umberto Eco.





Arsenale, Venice Biennale 2024. Photo: Sue Broadhurst.

A prince should also demonstrate that he loves talent by supporting men of ability and honouring those who excel in each craft. Moreover, he ought to encourage his citizens peaceably to pursue their affairs, whether in trade, in agriculture, or in any other human activity... the prince ought to be ready to reward those who do these things and those who seek out ways of enriching their city or state...he ought to keep the people occupied with festivals and spectacles...giving proof of his affability and munificence, yet never failing to bear in mind the dignity of his position.

(Machiavelli, 2003: 86)

What a Prince Must Do to be Esteemed [Title of Chapter 21]

(Machiavelli, 2003: 86).

That is a succinct statement of a Renaissance Arts Policy. The Prince realises that his own glory is partly derived from the contributions such gifted individuals make to the state beyond his own immediate interests. But obviously he wants it publicly known

that it is *his* patronage and encouragement that enables them to do so. And he wants the entertainment industry to follow suit. If he desires authentic esteem, he should be a seemingly disinterested enabler, and not a controller. Ideologues everywhere take note.

The Prince was essentially a prolonged job application, written for the Medici successor to a short-lived restoration of the Florentine republic, of which Niccolò Machiavelli had been Chancellor. Subsequently accused of subversion, imprisoned, tortured and exiled, and, by his own admission, now spending his days down the pub, he concluded the work with an appeal to Lorenzo de' Medici to become a messianic agent, ridding Italy of foreign domination and even partially uniting it.

This quest for such liberation had been a tendency in post-Roman Italian history long before him; the epic struggle between Guelphs and Ghibellines, over whether the Holy Roman Emperor derived his authority independent of the Pope's approval, could be read as an attempt by a nascent urban bourgeoisie to forge an expedient alliance with the latter, to ensure their freedom from the old territorial aristocracy of the Empire. Before the wars of the *Risorgimento*, clerics such as Vincenzo Gioberti and Antonio Rosmini supported the cause of liberal nationalism, the former proposing that the Pope could lead a united Italy free of the post-Napoleonic Austrian occupation (Machiavelli had had similar hopes for Julius II). After the year of revolutions in 1848, however, Pius IX, formerly a liberal sympathiser, retreated into grotesque reaction.

Machiavelli could be described as an Italian nationalist before the term was coined. But it was only with the Enlightenment that the concept of nations, as entities distinct from the sovereign who rules over inherited territory, assumed greater political and cultural potency. 'Nationalism' obviously presupposes an agreed definition of what constitutes a *nation*, usually characterised by shared language, religion, history, and culture, with the first often taking precedence. But it also required a sense that 'the nation' is an entity of *natural* affinity, which the arbitrary dynastic frontiers of Ancien Regime Europe had divided and thwarted. Thus, a consequent conviction evolved in the 19th century that each nation should be enclosed in a single state's borders. Talk of linguistic nationality was culturally infectious; Mozart was at pains to describe himself as 'a German composer' at a time when the Holy Roman Empire still survived, but a united German state would not exist for almost a century.

In 2010 I wrote the first of my reviews of the Biennale, entitled *Natio et Gens*, in which I asserted that now:

Nation, or even locality, no longer supplies us with closed and definable sets of shared symbols and characteristics and may not even have much of a part in our own sense

of self ... History is no longer proprietorially divided; chunks of it are available for appropriating and sharing. Cultural identity has become interpolated and diverse to a degree far beyond any naïve 'multiculturalism' ... It has gone beyond a neurotic awareness of how others represent it; rather, it is constituted *from* that awareness... Straightforward eudaemonism is no longer currency, so either... [curators]... attempt to put together shows as if national reputation, however dark, simply does not exist, or... they sell the idea to their political patrons that at least feigned self-awareness, if not historical self-criticism, is the best means of improving the brand...the content of many of the shows this year suggested that on the whole, national memory is either to be avoided in bland amnesia, or by contrast, is rather painfully interrogated ... it was almost as if most participating countries either wished to show a rarified and ... delocalised aspiration, or to dwell on their grungiest, or downright chthonic underbellies. (Broadhurst and Harvey, 2010)

Perhaps I was simply reflecting the times, in which, at least in the art world, any trace of cultural nationalism seemed anachronistic, but it is obvious that subsequent history has made a mockery of what I wrote; the sound you hear is of me eating my own words.

Nationalism, as I have implied, has invariably been represented by its adherents as a defensive reaction: the pre-existing entity of the nation needed to be asserted and rescued from those ruling powers or elites who have partitioned it, and would, by degrees, asphyxiate it. It is conspicuous that nationalists of all hues have subsequently claimed, whether validly or not, that their position is simply a morally just response to oppression or invasion. And they often have to locate its former existence in some period of recorded history, some moment of achieved 'nationhood'; for the humanist Machiavelli it was done, of course, by conflating the idea of Italy with Roman antiquity. For the lower intellect of Vladimir Putin, it lies in some neo-Slavophile historical fantasy. And for Donald Trump, in some Disneyfied past.

Since my complacent words, the resurgent nationalist Right has remoulded politics across the USA, Europe, and beyond, and is attempting a restoration of a later 19th century entailment from nationalism, that the nation state is the only natural, lawful, unit of sovereignty and self-determination ('Sovereignism'), innately opposed to any form of supranational authority. For them, it has little in its past to apologise for. The historic sense of loss mentioned above is now updated: culturally and demographically, the nation, even if stably constituted, is still everywhere threatened by the 'foreign', and this is invoked as a means to gain wide support ('Populism'). This is reinforced by the assertion that defeat is imminent, and that some prelapsarian state has already been lost. My good friend Natasha Mrdalj, in her prophetic MPhil thesis (on that dress

rehearsal for neo-Slavophile Fascism, Slobodan Milosevic's Serbia after Josip Tito's death), explored how nostalgia for such a confabulated past has often been induced by authoritarian regimes, so that its loss can then be blamed on what the psychologist Wilfred Bion called 'thieves of our happiness'. (Mrdalj, 2015).

The causes of this resurgence are well beyond the scope of this essay; de-industrialisation resulting from globalised trade is increasingly cited. But perhaps, as my title suggests, there is something more nebulous, but no less powerful: a reaction against the atomised, rootless individualism which Neo—Liberalism has encouraged (I will return to this below). *Everyone wants to belong to something*, even those in cultural life, generally on the Left, who adopt currently fashionable 'identity politics'. This may be a subconscious attempt to restore the ontological comforts of 'social nesting', the noumenal networks of self-categorisation, which conservative thinkers such as Edmund Burke saw as necessary for social stability.

Well, resurgent nationalism certainly did not determine or influence the title of this year's Biennale, which seemed chosen deliberately to reject it: *Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*, itself borrowed, via the Claire Fontaine collective, from a Turin based group 'who fought racism and xenophobia in Italy in the early 2000s' (Pedrosa, 2024). This year's Brazilian curator, Adriano Pedrosa, explained that for him this phrase 'has several meanings. First of all, that wherever you go and wherever you are, you will always encounter foreigners – they/we are everywhere. Secondly, that no matter where you find yourself, you are always truly, and deep down inside, a foreigner.'. He continued, 'Sigmund Freud's *Das Unheimliche* comes to mind – *The Uncanny* in English, which in Portuguese has indeed been translated as "*o estranho*" – the strange that is also familiar, within, deep down' (Pedrosa, 2024)'. I feel as if my old words were not so off-beam after all.

The curated show was divided into two scattered sections: the *Nucleo Contemporaneo*, which featured queer, outsider, folk, and indigenous artists, and the *Nucleo Storico*, which examined the response to European modernism by 20th century artists from the Global South, some of whom were active in colonial times.

Pedrosa was well aware of the ripples such themes would make, particularly given the present Italian government. Interviewed, he said 'I believe this title is probably the most politically outspoken title for a Biennale in Venice...These days everything is very sensitive and there is always the possibility of instrumentalisation' (Pedrosa, 2024), by which term he presumably meant use for, or accusation of, ideological purpose. This radicalism also extended to favouring 'artists who have never participated in the International Exhibition' at the Giardini campus.



Video: 'Electric Dress'. Arsenale, Venice Biennale 2024. Artist: Puppies Puppies. (Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo). Video clip: Sue Broadhurst. <https://vimeo.com/1140562521>. (The Artist Puppies Puppies works across sculpture, installation, and performance art to address personal and political concerns. This work pays tribute to those killed in 2016 at a mass shooting that took place during a 'Latin Night' party at Pulse, a queer nightclub in Orlando, Florida).

Though I toured the main sites of the Biennale as conscientiously as I could, I do not intend here to offer a write-up of my notes. So, if you will forgive my generalisations, it seems that the radicalism, rather went no further than Pedrosa's words. His intentions were doubtless good, and he clearly was diligent in tracking down exhibitors who could be judged to be 'marginal'. But the phenomenal consequence, the 'feel' of the show, was not exactly surprising or fresh. As with Cecilia Alemani's curation in 2022, there was a sense that the exhibits were, unintentionally, pretty conservative. The problem might lie in elaborate thematic curation itself, or what could be called 'overcuration'.

The ‘theme’ can tyrannise; once settled upon it requires supporting examples rather than spectacle, and I use that term realising that some might interpret it as implicitly licencing the tawdry and superficial. But *visual* art relies upon the phenomenally *visual*. Even the driest conceptual work has at least a basic sensory presence.

Moreover, a reliance in selecting on knowledge of artists’ biographical details can occlude an assessment of whether their work somehow expresses them. An artist may ‘personally’ have as much ‘alterity’, ‘foreign-ness’ as you please, but their work may be eminently conformist. For every Caravaggio, where the man and the art seem somehow congruent, there is always a Richard Dadd, the schizophrenic killer who produced charming fairy pictures.

The *Nucleo Storico* was described by Pedrosa as:

A speculative curatorial exercise that seeks to question the boundaries and definitions of modernism ... the modernisms in the Global South remain largely unknown ... European modernism itself travelled far beyond Europe throughout the 20th century, often intertwined with colonialism, and many artists in the Global South travelled to Europe to be exposed to it.

(2024)

Unfortunately, as far as I could see, no boundaries or definitions were challenged by this show. It rather demonstrated, as he said, how derivative these works were, and how ‘colonial’ artists clearly wanted to produce work synchronically with European Modernist movements, but apparently did not add much that was ‘foreign’ to these. If one looked for fresh local inflections, one would be disappointed.

What was also ignored was how much ‘native’ art from the colonised Global South, and outside Europe generally, had stimulated the inception of these same Modernist movements. It was an era when European Imperialism, through colonial exhibitions and looted collections, presented home visitors with new and strange artifacts, and which were absorbed by avant-garde artists in several media. This is a fascinating history of encounter; a pity, if one is going to do such an historical show, that it could not have shown that the conquered *stranieri* had had such influence on their colonisers.

The 1880’s were when the liberationist rationale of the nationalism that had united Germany and Italy, quickly turned self-assertive, in that both of these states now wanted to join other European powers with their ‘place in the sun’ out of the spoils of ‘the scramble for Africa’ licenced by the Berlin Conference of 1884. Culturally this period saw what could be called the *biologisation* of the nation, when talk of nations was often replaced by talk of ‘race’. This, with the increasing currency of Social

Darwinism (a good deal of which was absorbed by Marx) obviously justified the zenith of European imperialism. It was also the highpoint of historically defining 'national schools' of artistic production, often accompanied by generalisations as to the artistic characteristics of each 'race', a habit persisting well into the twentieth century.

In Italy, as ever, nationalism has had a political and cultural ambivalence, resisting easy assignment to the political Right or Left. Giuseppe Mazzini, a leading figure in the *Risorgimento*, was once a member of the First International, but left it, rejecting Marx's dialectical materialism. And as far as public opinion went, shared by figures across the political spectrum, the *Risorgimento* was left incomplete; Italian-speaking land in Trentino and Friuli/Dalmatia remained part of the Austrian Empire, *Italia Irredenta* (Unredeemed Italy). The Futurist movement, before 1914, with its iconoclastic attitude to past Italian culture, its belligerence, and intense patriotism, shared it too. Thus, this quintessentially Italian expression of Modernism, also rejected the cosmopolitanism that had engendered it. The Futurists originally included socialists and anarchists, but the Italian Left would divide over whether Italy should enter World War I to gain these territories. Along with some socialists, the Futurists supported intervention. When Italy finally entered in 1915, there were three young men within its military ranks: Filippo Marinetti, leader of the Milan group of Futurists, Palmiro Togliatti, future leader of the Communist Party, and the soon-to-be former socialist, Benito Mussolini. After the war, Marinetti would found a Futurist political party, which, the following year, merged with the Fascists.

I cite this history because it so clearly exemplifies how, in Italy especially, culturally avant-garde attitudes have not necessarily entailed that their bearers are on the political Left, far from it. The signatories to the 1925 *Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals*, drafted by the neo-Hegelian philosopher Giovanni Gentile (2025), included, as well as Marinetti, Luigi Pirandello, Gabriele D'Annunzio and Giuseppe Ungaretti (to digress, on the Venetian cemetery island of S Michele is buried Ezra Pound, whose wartime broadcasts for Mussolini almost incurred a US treason conviction). It is difficult for some to reconcile artistic admiration with a rejection of an artist's personality or beliefs, but, I feel, it entails a mutually insulated dualism which has to be maintained if one is not to ignore so much cultural value on 'moral' grounds. After all, we forgive those other artists who saw Stalin or Mao as heroic figures.

Moreover, the Italian Left has always maintained a local, independent conversation with other strands of contemporaneous Italian culture. Benedetto Croce, a broadly neo-Hegelian liberal (who, whilst initially supportive of Mussolini, fell out with Gentile over the latter's *Manifesto*), was influenced by Marxism, and in turn, Antonio Gramsci, one of the most eminent Marxist thinkers, was influenced by him to effectively turn

dialectical materialism on its head, rendering it consequent, not antecedent, to a metaphysically idealist dialectic. Put simply, the dialectical evolution of imaginative *Weltanschauung* predetermines and so consolidates that of material power. And, with an insight so prophetic that it now seems quite commonplace, Gramsci elucidated how class hegemony does not have to be immediately supported by brute force, but instead can rely on manipulating culture through its client media, so as to expediently narrow the ‘sense of the possible’ possessed by those it governs. Before, so to speak, the workers of the world can lose their chains, they first have to regain their imagination.

Which, to risk sounding trite, brings me back to Machiavelli. His Prince patronises culture because he knows it will assist the popular sense that his love of talent somehow justifies his rule; he has made himself the pedagogical assessor of what anyone of taste esteems too. He uses culture as his media, whether overtly propagandist or not. Gramsci, who studied Machiavelli, saw similar means available to the Left (Fontana, 1993); by subtly changing cultural norms it was possible to educate the workers to see that their position was not inevitable and unchangeable, that there could be another noumenal space for them to inhabit, and so, by extension, a material one too.

It does not take great insight to see how relevant this is today. Over the last decade the Right has invented the ‘Woke’ as a position, no matter how vague, to serve as a target so as to attack ‘cultural Marxists’ who are acting, they implicitly claim, on Gramsci’s advice. But in so doing they exactly follow Gramsci’s strategy, except reverse engineering it for their own purposes. The present Italian Culture Minister, Alessandro Giuli (at least so at time of writing, his Ministry is highly resignation-prone) cites him as a major influence, along with the aforementioned Gentile. It does not have to be pointed out that the billionaires of media, physical or online, have long since applied this lesson, assiduously constructing models of ‘commonsense’, ‘national character’ and, notoriously, ‘trickledown’ which attempt to disable further questioning of the status quo, and their own positions in it. And, of course, talk of ‘common nationhood’ distracts from the ‘two nations’ (Disraeli’s phrase, not Lenin’s) of wealth within it.

Three years ago, Italy elected a creaking coalition of a Centre-Right party, Forza Italia, (founded by Silvio Berlusconi, which became the refuge for the right wing of the collapsed Christian Democrats), and two others: La Lega, (originally a secessionist party of the north), and the largest component, the Fratelli d’Italia (FdI), the renamed direct descendant of the MSI (The Italian Social Movement, via The National Alliance), a remnant of Mussolini’s Fascists, refounded as a party after the war, of whom the present PM, Giorgia Meloni, is the leader. Because from 1943 to ’45 Italy was effectively at civil war, and the new republic, which replaced the monarchy, began with ‘national unity’ coalitions, there was no equivalent to de-Nazification, as in the

then West Germany. Ironically, it was the Communist, Togliatti, as Justice Minister in one of these, who amnestied those fascists accused of war crimes. Whereas the Italian Communist party of Togliatti and Gramsci had already eschewed Stalinism and embarked on a course which would later end with Berlinguer's 'Eurocommunism', the relationship of the FdI to its totalitarian antecedent is far more ambivalent. Whilst Meloni always refers to her government as 'Centre-Right', there are many who think otherwise, a situation darkened by the government's readiness to use against them an archaic and oppressive law of criminal libel (akin to the old 'seditious libel' in the UK), whose repeal has been repeatedly urged by Italian judiciary and, recently, the EU. And this is accompanied by an unexplained tolerance of overtly Fascist demonstrations, in contradiction to the Italian Constitution, not to mention a conspicuous ambivalence from some regarding that era. As an Italian remarked to me, the past of the FdI is like a bad smell of drains in the *cantina* (cellar), which won't go away.

Of course, the question arises of how, in a post World War II setting, one defines 'Fascism' or any 'Far Right' position, a difficulty on which parties such as the AfD in Germany have relied, so as to reject the accusation of being such. But that was the case in the 20's too. Croce was so appalled by his former friend Gentile's aforementioned *Manifesto*, that in 1925 he published 'The Manifesto of The Anti-Fascist Intellectuals', and though its terms of reference are very dated, it describes how, beyond a will to dictatorial power, a Fascist programme is:

An incoherent and bizarre mixture of appeals to authority and demagogism, of proclaimed reverence for the laws and violation of the laws, of ultra-modern concepts and musty old things, of absolutist attitudes and Bolshevik tendencies, of unbelief and courtship of the Catholic Church, of abhorrence of culture and sterile retching towards a culture devoid of its premises, of mystical dilations and cynicism.

(Croce, 1925)

In 1995, Umberto Eco, with characteristic, and (I keep using the word) prophetic acuity, produced an essay 'Ur-Fascism' or 'Eternal Fascism: Fourteen Ways of Looking at a Blackshirt' (1995). It enumerated these as characterising all historical manifestations of it, but treated them in the manner of Wittgenstein's 'family resemblance concept', not as a single, mutually coherent *intension* of predications, but rather a disparate collection, only one or some of which are satisfiable in order to admit something as an *extension*. It is helpful to summarise them in paraphrase: 1) The cult of Tradition as being closed and final; 2) Rejection of post-Enlightenment 'modernism', excepting technology; 3) The cult of anti-intellectual 'action for action's sake'; 4) Regarding intellectual dissent as treason; 5) Fear of difference, as often projected onto foreigners

and immigrants; 6) Appeal to middle class frustrations; 7) Obsession with plots and conspiracy theories; 8) Regarding targeted elites as at once overmighty but feebly decadent; 9) Life as permanently belligerent; 10) Contempt for the weak, both by subjects for others, and by their leader for themselves; 11) The cult of heroic death; 12) Male machismo, misogynistic contempt; 13) 'Selective populism, with the leader as sole interpreter of popular will; 14) 'Newspeak', the promotion of impoverished language to limit expressible criticism (Eco, 1995).

Can I already sense the reader ticking some or most of these off as presently shown by regimes and parties in Europe and the US? But, for the sake of clearly examining connections between them and Fascist antecedents, it is as well to look at that recent movement within the Right, with which the Hungarian, Italian and US ruling parties identify, and in whose international gatherings they participate, 'National Conservatism'. Now, inasmuch as one can abstract from the rag-bag of (sometimes contradictory) positions constituting it, this tendency tries to distance itself from Fascism, which it considers, like Liberalism and Socialism, a 'modernist' deformation. It emphasises strong national cultural identity, opposes immigration, rejects constitutional restrictions on governments of its own hue, and considers talk of universal human rights as a poisoned legacy of the Enlightenment. It upholds 'family values', criticising feminist emancipatory movements, and, in John Henry Newman's words, vaunts religion as 'the consecration of the principle of nationalism'. It generally favours forms of economic protectionism and closed national markets, and sometimes advocates state intervention in, and/or control of, financial enterprises. It is militaristic and is 'sovereignistically' sceptical to the point of hostility towards supra-national bodies like the EU or the UN.

Such a tendency can be seen as the result of an internal split within the Right over the last 40 years. The Thatcher-Reagan regimes attempted to harness three tendencies: elements of economic neo-liberalism, not always consistently applied; political, assertive nationalism; and social reaction. It is now incontrovertibly evident that the last two have become fiercely opposed to the first. Moreover, the Blair-Clinton regimes of the Centre-Left, in practice annexed, or at least came to terms with, the first as well.

This summary does not, I think, indulge in *ignoratio elenchi*, that is, so caricaturing positions such that subsequent critique is inapplicable. Therefore, my own verdict is that National Conservatism satisfies, theoretically, 1), 2), 4), 5), 8) and 13) of Eco's criteria, and in practice, 3), 6), 10), 12) and 14). Do remember that Eco stated that all these do not have to be satisfied for an extension to be admitted. I leave it to the reader to decide for themselves. One could also add that whilst parties aligning with it remain friends in opposition, in power their will to national assertion drives them to mutual conflict, as they have found with Trump.

So how does my digressive progress relate to the present state of Italian culture? Well, one can certainly hear Croce's 'abhorrence...and sterile retching...' in the Trumpist noises coming from some sections of the ruling parties: we are wresting culture back from the Left, and so on. Most countries tend to ensure generally compliant appointees to arts and cultural positions, but in Italy, particularly under this government, preferment has been given to those whose political views actively concur with it, although they are usually not as ludicrously ignorant as Trump's stooges. Some have also made it clear they wish to see such positions filled in future by Italians. But even this has its strange exceptions: Eike Schmidt, who in 2015 became the first non-Italian (and well respected) Director of the Uffizi, and who in 2024 moved to the Capodimonte in Naples, also stood the same year, unsuccessfully, as the ruling coalition's candidate for the Mayoralty of Florence, a move which, some Neapolitans considered, compromised his due future impartiality.

The present Culture Minister, Giuli, was previously Director of Maxxi, the National Museum of Twentieth Century Arts in Rome. He was appointed, in Meloni's ominous words, 'to continue the action of relaunching national culture, consolidating that discontinuity with the past that Italians have asked of us' (Conti, 2024). So, he was meant to be an agent of change. As reported by the Milanese *Corriere Della Sera*, his 'political heart has always beat, explicitly and even proudly, on the right' (Conti, 2024). He joined the Youth Front at the age of 14, and then Meridiano Zero, an extreme right-wing movement started in 1991. He made his name as a journalist and philosopher of 'the new generation of the Italian right'. But he is also, as said above, a keen student of Gramsci, publishing an essay on him in 2024. He describes Fascism as:

A storm of steel, fire and mud that, in the post-war period, condensed into a series of puddles that were never completely dried up. The only way is to make them evaporate in the light of day of a party-form that proposes an alternative political narrative that is up-to-date with the times.

(Conti, 2024)

Giuli regards the present FdI as 'a mass liberal-conservative party', which can do that (Conti, 2024). Definitely in the Meloni groove, then.

Now, I am not long enough in Italy to judge whether this degree of political shaping of culture is anything new. However, with the Biennale, its recent Presidents have come from the political centre. The most successful one, Paolo Baratta, was the very type of the Italian technocrat, on the boards of banks and Italian State Railways. But he was, as I can personally attest from his extempore performances at press launches, someone

of great cultural and philosophical breadth and depth. Under him the Biennale's attendance greatly increased and its average age decreased. Exceptionally, he was invited back to serve a second four-year term.

In 2023 the previous Culture Minister, Gennaro Sangiuliano (who resigned after a messy scandal), appointed Pietrangelo Buttafuoco to be the next President of the Biennale. A personal friend of Meloni, he rose from leading its Youth Front, through various bodies in the MSI-AN-FdI affiliates, writing for those parties' papers and other Rightwing publications. He has latterly been a theatre director and novelist, receiving, so I read, prizes for his work. There was consternation throughout the international Art Press. As the London *Guardian* reported at the time:

“Buttafuoco affirms a change of pace that the Meloni government wants to imprint in every cultural and social centre of the nation,” said the deputy parliamentary leader of Meloni's Brothers of Italy party, rejoicing at the appointment. Curators who have worked on previous iterations of the biennale, meanwhile, fear the 60-year-old's appointment could follow a pattern familiar from Poland or Hungary, where rightwing populist governments have drafted in ideologically aligned polemicists. (Oltermann and Tondo, 2023)

One can see how the art world would think something close to *Gleichschaltung*, to use that sinister term from the German '30's, was imminent.

But, so far, they would not be correct. Dissenting from some of the more xenophobic FdI positions, and a convert to Shia Islam, Buttafuoco hardly fits the bill of 'Christian Nationalism', (his conversion lost him the chance to stand for his party in the election for the Governorship of Sicily). He has written for Liberal and Leftwing papers too. Francesco Rutelli, the former Centre-Left mayor of Rome has said of the Biennale's historic role as an instrument of freedom, 'I am certain that Buttafuoco, a free spirit, will be able to continue this and interpret it in the best way'.

Buttafuoco has said 'I am not a Fascist, I am something else' (Oltermann and Tondo, 2023), the 'something else' he occupies could be defined as being on the vague but maverick Right. Clearly of wide literary erudition, the nearest I can find to his political position is from an interview in the *Corriere della Sera* (11 Aug 2024):

Right and left have been supplanted by a new class struggle between above and below. Below are the now former poor countries, new Marxists rich in children and technology, from China to a part of Africa. And above that are the Trotskyists, those of the establishment, including the so-called “woke” culture. This is the new conflict,

because the twentieth century is over and the West does not feel so good. And in fact, on the level of confrontation we have moved from racism to classism.

(Scorranese, 2024)

This only reminds me of my above quote from Croce; apart from vaguely identifying what it opposes, the Right seems unable to articulate what it proposes. Inasmuch as I can make any sense of the above, he appears to offer a variation on the ‘liberal elites’ thesis, familiar to anyone who has encountered Brexiters. Quite apart from his politics, there was a suspicion that a literary figure might not be at home in running what is largely a visual arts and performance festival, and that his managerial experience in theatre was too limited for handling the Biennale budget.

Does all this matter? The Presidency normally last only four years, and the national pavilions are curatorially autonomous. I still think it does. The President selects the overall Curator of each Biennale, and it is they who determine its thematic direction. Buttafuoco has written a wordy, but cordial and grateful tribute to Pedrosa, appointed, as I said, to the 2024 Biennale by the previous President. But who was to be his choice for 2026? There was a lot of suspense, and a lot of probing of his sincerity.

In December 2024, he appointed Koyo Kouoh, a black Cameroonian-Swiss woman whose very distinguished career had included raising the quality of the South African Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (Zeitz MOCAA), and who had been active in demanding post-colonial cultural restitution. Her curatorship was to have been entitled ‘In Minor Keys’.

How sadly apposite. In May 2025, after a recent cancer diagnosis, she died.

In a posthumously published article written for *The Guardian*, with a strong call for a truly global, non-Western biased curatorial perspective, she concluded:

Ultimately, my role as the first African woman to curate the biennale is not about personal legacy ... I hope my appointment sets a precedent rather than becoming an exception. My vision is for a future where such milestones are no longer remarkable, simply because so many others have followed. The real measure of progress is not in being first but in ensuring the door remains wide open for those who come next.

(Kouoh, 2025)

The Biennale has declared that 2026 will go ahead ‘in strict accordance with the plan she defined’.

Last year, before her appointment, my draft of this article had the working title ‘Buttafuoco, Quo Vadis?’. He has since seemed to be going in a laudable direction, doubtless to the chagrin of some of his party colleagues. One is tempted to ask, ‘what’s

a decent chap like you doing in a party like yours?'. But it may be more than decency; as someone apparently far more intelligent than those colleagues, Buttafuoco doubtless knows the Biennale could never be an introverted celebration of national 'Italian values' (as is now happening in the USA), of interest only to the electoral base of the Right, who seem to have only vestigial culture anyway. He must ensure that it engages with the wider world if it is not to fall into disrepute and irrelevance, which would make his own reputation worthless currency beyond Italy. And as a convert to Islam whose self-commentary has evinced a kind of cultural nostalgia for the Sicily of the pre-Norman Khalifate, he is ineluctably himself part of that cosmopolitanism, which is a result of repeated invasion. As a friend of ours from Calabria, adjoining Sicily, said of his region: 'first Greeks, then Romans, then Byzantines, then Arabs, then Normans, Angevins, Bourbons ... when was the *terminus post quem* where "native Italians" ceased and "invaders" began?'. As said above, the idea of a 'national *Geist*' which can be definitively located at some point of history, is a willed mirage.

We all await the choice of Curator for 2028, which might be at the end of Buttafuoco's tenure, and, indeed, of the present Italian government. Perhaps, like Machiavelli, exiled after the fall of Florence's republican interlude, he realises that equivocation is expedient. Last New Year's Eve I was chatting to a stranger in a restaurant about this (and such cultural matters are headline news here). He shrugged, 'He's Italian, he plays for both sides'.

If so, long live such equivocation. E viva la repubblica antifascista.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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