



To unmask the subtle misuse of symbols

I grew up in Acqui Terme, a city located in west-north Italy, in the region call Piemonte. In 1992 Acqui Terme has been the first city in Piemonte governed by a Lega Nord administration. The ideology of the political party Lega Nord has been propagandized through the use of symbols, which have been for many of us completely naturalised in our daily life. Lega Nord is one of the most racist parties in the country. In a 2003 interview, party leader Umberto Bossi suggested opening fire on the boats of illegal immigrants from Africa, whom he described as bingo-bongos who would disembark in Italy.¹

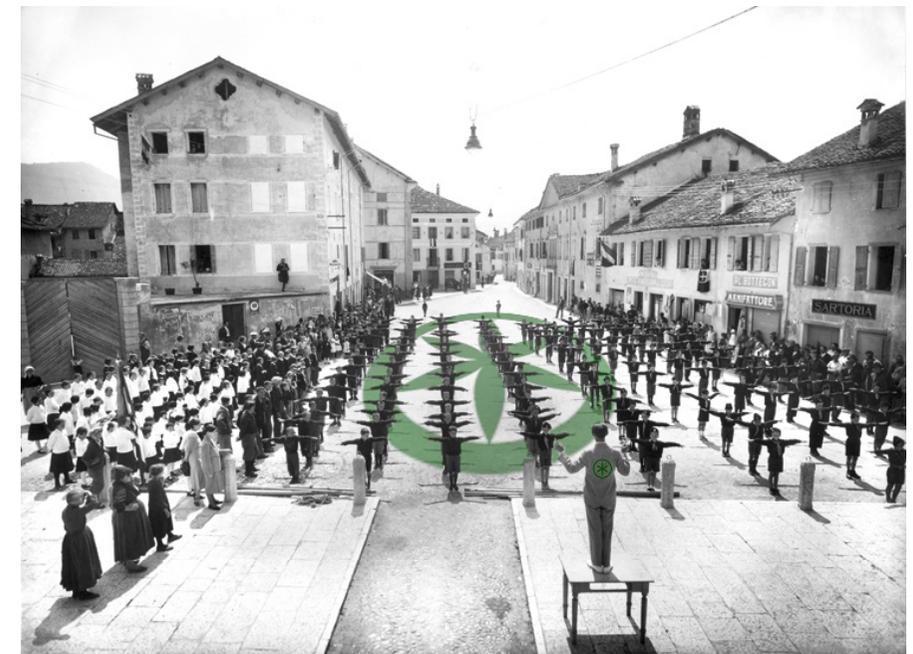
Lega Nord (North League, LN, often translated as Northern League by English language media), whose complete name is Lega Nord per l'Indipendenza della Padania (North League for the Independence of Padania), is a political party in Italy founded in 1991 as a federation of several regional parties of Northern and Central Italy, most of which had arisen and expanded their share of the electorate over the 1980s. Its political program advocates the transformation of Italy into a federal state, fiscal federalism and greater regional autonomy, especially for the Northern regions. At times it has advocated secession of the North, which they call Padania. In 1992 the *Le Nouvel Observateur* explained to the French the position of the LN party: neofascist and racist right. The League was compared by the French newsmagazine to some national populist parties of the right, including Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front, Jörg Haider's Freedom Party of Austria and the Vlaams Blok.²

The text has three parts. Part one the state of things of this ideology, entering each brick in the city and in our head. Part two is what is to be done and how we did it. Part three conclusions.

Part one: the state of things

Today the ideology of political parties is not only written in their statutes but the ideology permeates bodies down to architecture. The ideology of Lega Nord is that deep and embedded in us that we almost don't realize it. The symbols of this ideology have the purpose to normalise the intrinsic message they diffuse. They appear to us unwittingly as a simple decoration, urban furniture, and for this reason they are usually not brought into question. It's never too late to go back up on such an issue, especially when it's about a political authoritarian act of appropriation of public space supported by an almost absent reflection of what is going on, that is coming near to resignation toward the propagandist usage of those symbols. It's almost for two decades that Acqui Terme is the laboratory of a political power imposition that is taking place through the subtle misuse of symbols in public spaces. In 1998 a huge cement building, an amphitheatre (see IMAGE 1), was built in the middle of the historic centre of the city. The intention of this construction is clear, the place was supposed to be used for cultural and artistic purposes, but instead was transformed in a space of pure political propaganda; in fact on the pavement, between the stage and the stalls, the symbol depicting Lega Nord has been built in big dimension. The supposedly cultural building presents a spatial practice of pure political corruption. During a year the landscape is transformed under the perpetual imposition of political symbols. In the summer season the bleachers are covered with removable plastic green chairs (green is the representative colour of LG) and the stage is set up with a removable roof furnished with a plaque on which stands in green the name Giuseppe Verdi theatre. On another Giuseppe Verdi theatre plaque, the one visible during the all year and placed on the wall of the cement building, is written Padania, term used by Lega Nord to define a political-administrative abstract entity that corresponds with northern Italy.

The name and the music of Giuseppe Verdi have been appropriated by Lega Nord and used to spread the



7. Photomontages installation.



Religione politica padana

L'ideologia e l'appropriazione della nostra esistenza sono così profonde e radicate in ognuno di noi, che quasi non ce ne accorgiamo. Nella città di Acqui Terme l'ideologia è stata propagandata attraverso l'utilizzo di simboli che sono stati per molti di noi completamente naturalizzati nella nostra quotidianità. E sono proprio i simboli, così come i monumenti per esempio, che hanno lo scopo di normativizzare il messaggio intrinseco che loro stessi portano. La gente vedendoli tutti i giorni li trasforma inconsapevolmente in una semplice decorazione, in un arredo urbano, e per questo motivo non sono messi normalmente in discussione. Attraverso questo evento vogliamo creare un'opportunità per riflettere insieme su quello che ci succede intorno, nel luogo in cui abbiamo vissuto o in cui viviamo - questa situazione non è visibile esclusivamente ad Acqui Terme ma è diffusa ormai dappertutto - su come le nostre vite sono controllate, su cosa possiamo fare insieme per uscire da questo stato di ipnosi dilagante e risvegliare una coscienza e un sapere critico in noi così come nelle persone che ci stanno vicino.

Invitiamo i cittadini e le cittadine di Acqui Terme a partecipare alla conferenza che si terrà presso la Sala del Palazzo Robellini alle ore 21:00 di domenica 19.09.10

† ITALIA †

6. *Postcard.* English translation of the text: “The political religion of PadaniaIn the city of Acqui Terme the ideology of the political party Lega Nord has been propagandized through the use of symbols, which have been for many of us completely naturalised in our -daily life.The ideology of Lega Nord is that deep and embedded in us that we almost don’t realize it. The symbols of this ideology have the purpose to normalise the intrinsic message they diffuse. They appear to us unwittingly as a simple decoration, urban furniture, and for this reason they are usually not brought into question.Through this event we want to create an opportunity to discuss and reflect together on what surrounds us, on the place where we lived and where we live. It is necessary to exit from this pervasive state of hypnosis and to awaken in ourselves and in those around us a critical consciousness.We invite the citizens of Acqui Terme to attend the lecture-performance that will be held at the Palazzo Robellini at 21:00 on Sunday 19.09.10.”

sense of belonging to the party. Va pensiero, the most popular opera chorus by Verdi, is the official Lega Nord anthem which Lega Nord proposed to use as the national anthem, and is broadcasted everyday on Radio Padania; it is as well used as music-background of the municipal telephone answering machine in Acqui Terme. Lega Nord adopted Va pensiero with the justification that the librettist Temistocle Solera was a member of the neoguelphism movement, an Italian movement from the 19th century that seeks the active presence of the Catholic Church in politics and that sustain the federal system which is at the base of the political program of Lega Nord.

The LegaNord symbol,³ the so-called Sole delle Alpi/Sun of the Alps, seems to have Celtic heritage and has been used as decoration (on ceramic, closet, tiles, etc.) in the popular tradition of communities that live in the Alpine arc. The Sun of the Alps has been introduced in the urban symbolism of several cities in Italy, administered by Lega Nord. In the city of Lecco, the city council Giulio de Capitani, member of Lega Nord, proposed to have the Sun of the Alps in the local flag. The provincial coat of arms has been approved by the President of the Republic Decree on the 4th September 1996.⁴ Also in another city Civate al Piano (in Bergamo’s province) the Sun of the Alps has been designed in the central square of the city, in front of the town all, despite the protest and the petition (589 signatures, which corresponds to more than the 10% of the population) of a committee of citizens.

The majority of Lega Nord politicians which use the party symbols in public places deny that the Sun of the Alp is a political symbol while claiming that is just an historical one. This strongly propagandistic act cannot be masked behind any kind of legitimization that what is at stake here is for artistic/cultural/decorative use. The ideological imposition of the party must be publicly denounced and condemned.

The cases are numerous coming down to the most common life, as on August 1997, a roundabout with in the middle the depiction of the Sun of the Alps was built in Acqui Terme (see IMAGE 2). The city administration has imposed its political power in Acqui Terme not just on the architectural level, but also on the administrative, working with most subtle ideological impositions, as the use of green stamps and ink on documents, certificates, identity card (see IMAGE 3), etc. issued by the Acqui Terme city administration. Or, Acqui Terme hosts since many years the regional selection for the Miss Padania beauty contest, which takes place in the Grand Hotel delle Terme. Miss Padania is a sexist, transphobic and racist contest where the “padania feminility” is stressed. The requirements to be admitted to the Miss Padania contest are implemented in the 5th article of the general policy.⁵ The candidates must have Italian citizenship and be living in Padania since at least 10 years, be of the same sex written on the birth’s certificate, never be involved in facts against moral values, do not declare anything against the Padania ideology. Moreover, during the contest they have to show knowledge in the traditional cousin, knowledge of the dialect, knowledge and adherence to the Lega Nord ideology and to have physical peculiarities.

In the local Christian newspaper L’Ancora, I found articles that display how Acqui Terme is a laboratory of the Lega Nord ideology’s experimentation and intensification of racism. Just an overview of some articles published already more than a decade ago show that racist and fascist policy is continuously elaborated. On September 1997, Lega Nord organised an anti-immigrants signatures collection in the pedestrian city centre with which to spread hate against immigrant citizens and more, the city

administration proposed a reward, offering at that time about 2000 euro, to whoever collaborated helping to “repatriate” clandestine Albanians. The major Bernardino Bosio said: “This is not a reward, but just an amount of money as a reimbursement of expenses for this effort.”⁶ On January 1998, the major proposed to create a Padania’s elementary and secondary schools for indoctrination to the Lega Nord ideology. On July 1998 the city administration used green fireworks in the celebration day of the saint patron of Acqui Terme in combination with the Va pensiero as music background and a group of Sinti was ousted from a temporary camp in the local territory. On February 2000 were introduced in the city Padania guard that means party police institutionalised by the law Pacchetto Sicurezza and grounded on segregationist and racist measures and more, change of the city toponomy with names of Lega Nord historical figures to mark further on the Acqui Terme territory.

Part two: what is to be done and how we did it

After decades of Lega Nord ideology intoxication. Years of self-alienation. Months of research, by choice and by urgency it arrived the time for me to act radically in the city.

Part two: step one

In the summer 2010, temporarily back in Acqui Terme from Vienna, the first thing to do was to provide a space for discussion and analysis primarily on the research I’ve done, that date back in the history politic of the city up to the present time. This immediately triggered the necessity to speak up about many other issues that have to do both with the local territory and on a wider frame with the national and transnational social-political situation. Because this space has been created and because there was an urgent desire, among the people that took part in the debates, to develop some common strategies to wake up the citizens, we established the B/SOGNO COLLETTIVO (it is a coinage in between two words bisogno (need) and sogno (dream). B/SOGNO COLLETTIVO declares the common need (bisogno collettivo) and at the same time the dream (sogno) to start and share a new constructive political/artistic path in the city of Acqui Terme. B/SOGNO decided to start with a political intervention in the public space (see IMAGE 4).

We went, during day time, through the streets of Acqui to wipe racist and fascist statements off, from the walls of the city, which since many years “decorated” the urban landscape. During the action flyers with the statement of the collective were distributed to the people walking by. Citizens and tourists stopped us to ask for information about the action. Despite the many cameras surveillance and the new multimedia repressive stations, no police pressed us in that very moment. This is a peculiar situation, indeed.

Why? As Acqui Terme is a laboratory of ideological hegemony. In the summer 2010 the city has been equipped with the newest technology for social control. The multimedia device is called Totem (see IMAGE 5) and is part of the city Safe Spot (Punto Sicuro) project. The Totem is endowed with 360° video surveillance system able to record day and night what is term “anti-vandalism.” It has a 46 inch High Definition LCD touch screen that provides a direct contact with the security forces 24 hours a day, different buttons that allow to activate an alarm system (red siren light and sound), etc. It is eight such Totems located in different spots of the city.

The power mechanism of social control, surveillance and repression are issues on the agenda of the



4. *B/sogno collettivo first intervention flyer.* English translation of the text: “We are a group of young people in Acqui Terme with in common the will to do something constructive for this city. A city where the various city administrations in recent years have always been deaf, blind and mute in relation to certain issues. From the lack of space aggregation for young people, through the exaggerated social control (surveillance devices) up to the absent cultural and political youth valorisation. Time has come to mobilize, develop an alternative to what is proposed and decided by the municipal institutions. We want to start this path with an intervention in the city, for us very important. Today we take brushes and paint to cover the various swastikas, Celtic crosses and racist statements, which in recent years have appeared on the walls of this city. The city is a public space and should remain so. Without party and political symbols - especially when those represent extremist factions that bring nazism and fascism to mind - which in recent times seem to have become an integral part of the urban landscape, a visiting card for tourists! Keep your city clean!”



5. *Totem.* In the summer 2010 the city of Acqui Terme has been equipped with the newest technology for social control. The multimedia device is part of the city *Safe Spot* project. It is eight such Totems located in different spots of the city.

On the walls of the stairway leading to the conference room I installed different photomontages (see IMAGE 7). I combined photographs I found in the archive from the Opera Nazionale Balilla organization (Balilla was a name given to the Fascist youth and this was the Italian Fascist youth organization functioning, as an addition to school education). On each historical photograph I inserted the LG Sun of the Alps symbol. This photomontage was as well my direct reaction to what happened few days before the presentation, in Adro city, in Brescia province. Every corner of the new elementary school, inaugurated at the beginning of the school year from the Lega Nord major of the city and with a written statement from the minister of education, has been studded with seven hundred⁸ Lega Nord symbols depicting the Sun of the Alps. It occurs on the roof of the school, on the welcome mat of the school's main entrance, on the ashtrays, on the desks, on the glass windows, in short, everywhere.

The question that is urgent to be asked is what kind of history will be taught to the pupils of this school? And also in other schools of the northern Padania?

Apart from this, the school has been dedicated to Gianfranco Miglio, who along supporting the hypothesis of the transformation of the Italian state into a federal or even confederal unity, is regarded to be Lega Nord main ideologist. During the lecture-performance I read a text that I've found on the web site of the Italian national partisans association, with the title: "The school during fascism."

"Unless you don't know what Fascism is, can be difficult for the contemporary youth generation (which not only didn't experience personally the war, but they also don't have the direct evidence through their grandparents or parents stories, as the youth from the previous generation could have) to understand the reason why so many Italians (intellectuals, students, workers, soldiers, politicians) decided to stand out against the fascist dictatorship, joining the ranks of the Resistance and paying this choice with their one's life. What was happening in Italy in March 1925? By that time the fascist regime was into power. The freedom of the press is subjected to restrictions. Arrests, trials and assaults on anti-fascists lasted out for the whole year. In the following years the freedom of the strike was abolished and a special Court was constituted. Overbearing punishments are provided for the reconstitution and the involvement on associations, organisations and parties dismissed from fascism. The school became the most efficient tool to organise the mass consensus. And it is precisely the elementary school the first and most important step of a long process of regimentation and indoctrination and which primary goal was to build future soldiers, man blindly ready to 'believe, obey and fight.'"⁹

The case of the school in Adro fully fitted another hard-core institutional decision proposed by the military general of Lombardia Army and supported by the minister of defence Ignazio La Russa and the minister of education Maria Stella Gelmini, that took place few days after my presentation. In the secondary school study plan for the region Lombardia it is established a new theoretical and practical course, called "allenati per la vita" (training for life), valid as a school course credit. The program includes the division of students in patrols, lessons of archery, of shooting with the gun (air pistol), survival courses and military-gymnastic routes. At the end of the course a competition between patrols of students follow. On the Armed Forces web site stands: "These activities allow the institution of the school to approach, in a innovative and involving way, the Armed Forces, the State Bodies, the Civil defense."¹⁰

Part three: conclusions

In a society where isolation and individualisation are pushed in every sphere of our life, the way out to overcome our immanent social death is to find out common strategies of local struggles and to share them among the oppressed, the members of our community.

Although there are positions in our society that are more affected than others by the regime we live into, first of all migrants, we all breath under repressive and ideological mechanisms. Our social behaviours are controlled and regulated both in the public and in the private life. In the family, at school, at work, at university, in private and public institutions, through administrative and bureaucratic measures, through video surveillance and media.

In a society that has become asocial, where its members don't feel anymore connected, where there is an acceptance of the state of things, where we have been dispossessed from self-reflectivity, urge the moment to develop a collective political practise of dissent, to fight the passivity and the alienation of city-dwellers, to resist taking into consideration our time and place. "Making the paralyzed citizens understand that if they do not join the war they are part of it anyway"¹¹.

With such interventions the intention is to involve citizens to understand what happen all around through a process of politicisation. To let the citizens not be passive consumers – resigned, disinterested, disengaged – but to be integral part of the decision making processes that concern the all community, as we are all political subjects. It is necessary to get out from this rampant hypnosis state and to regain a critical and reflexive consciousness in us and in the people around us, in order to consider the events and the actual schizoid dynamics, within a local and global approach, by preventing fragmentation and isolation.

1 "Bossi prende il cannone," Il Manifesto, June 17, 2003, Accessible on: http://web.archive.org/web/20060218090812/http://it.geocities.com/ilgruppodellatanadelgiaguaro/forum_libero/messaggi/58.htm, retrieved on December 18, 2010.

2 "Un giornale francese lo mette nella casa europea dei Le Pen," Corriere della Sera, April 19, 1992. http://archivistorico.corriere.it/1992/aprile/19/giornale_francese_mette_nella_casa_co_0_9204193761.shtml, retrieved on December 18, 2010.

3 <http://www.padanino.it/statuto.htm>, retrieved on December 18, 2010.

4 http://www.provincia.lecco.it/home_attivita.php?IDAttivita=574, retrieved on December 18, 2010.

5 <http://www.misspadania.com/09/requisiti.html>, retrieved on December 18, 2010.

6 http://archivistorico.corriere.it/1997/settembre/24/sindaco_ordina_denunciati_co_0_97092412477.shtml, retrieved on December 18, 2010.

7 Emilio Gentile, *Fra democrazie e totalitarismi*, Laterza, Bari, 2001, p. XXII.

8 Cf. <http://www.rainews24.rai.it/it/news.php?newsid=146210>, retrieved on December 18, 2010.

9 <http://anpi-lissone.over-blog.com/article-12011651.html>, retrieved on December 18, 2010, translated from Italian by author.

10 Cf. www.forzearmate.org/sideweb/2010/.../Allenati_per-la-vita-09.pdf, retrieved on December 18, 2010.

11 Tiquun, "How is to be done?," reprinted by the Inoperative Committee, 2008, <http://tarnac9.files.wordpress.com/2009/01/how-is-it-to-be-done.pdf>, retrieved on December 18, 2010.



1. *Giuseppe Verdi theater*. Winter and summer version. The symbol depicting Lega Nord, the *Sun of the Alps*, stands in the centre of the pavement, between the stage and the stalls.



2. *Roundabout S. Guido* with in the middle the depiction of the *Sun of the Alps*.



3. *Identity card* with green stamp issued in 1999 by the Acqui Terme city administration.

ruling classes in Italy as well as in many other countries. The elaboration of techniques of social control has been and it is of primary importance especially under neo-liberal conditions. Video surveillance and other similar devices are instruments to control, criminalize, isolate, discipline and sort out people. Although we came to know that after a couple of days the police headquarters were checking information about us, without fear and regret doing our first intervention, the collective was after few days publicly presented in the frame of the project “Unmask the subtle misuse of symbols” that I realised in Acqui Terme.

Part two: step two

In the realisation process of the project we had to choose and get a space where we could present it. I opted for the conference room of Palazzo Robellini, a building owned by the city, located on the opposite side of the town hall, used to host artistic and cultural events.

The decision to use this space was strategically important to me in order to question the city administration business in the core place that politically and culturally represents it. To use this space I had to write a formal letter addressed to the major. The request, that was giving a very general idea about the topic of the lecture-performance, I planned to held there, was immediately accepted. Because of my white, female, young appearance the content of the letter was not questioned at all and at the same time it was not taken seriously. As what will be the possibility for somebody other, of colour, for example, or speaking broken Italian, in approaching the city administration with such a request? I'm pretty sure that these people would be repressively excluded or at it best they should have paid to rent it.

After this move I could print the invitation postcard (see IMAGE 6) for the event.

I decided to use this format because Acqui Terme is a touristic city (known because of its thermal baths), and the postcard well represents this aspect. The postcard works on a double level: on one it helps to show in the mode that is near to the tourists the darker side of the city and on the other it is used, by distributing it in the mail boxes of the Acqui Terme citizens, to gain their attention on a issue that regard their own surrounding, for some completely neglected. The front side of the postcard, a photomontage of the Acqui Terme main cathedral, displays the Sun of the Alps symbol instead of the original rose window. On the back side, stands: in green, the title “Religione politica padana” (The political religion of Padania), followed by a short texts that describes how the Lega Nord ideology subtly permeates our body. The postcard was as well the invitation to the lecture-performance in the Palazzo Robellini. The decision to use religious symbols in combination with the Lega Nord ones was because, as Emilio Gentile stated that, when a political entity is transformed in a holy entity that means when is to be conceived as a transcendent, unquestionable, untouchable and it is placed at the centre of a system of beliefs, myths, values, rituals, symbols, becoming an object of faith, or a cult, then it is to be considered as a political religion.⁷ The Lega Nord party represent itself as the political spokesman of Christian values and incorporates in its liturgy the rites of the Catholic Church (it acts in defence of the crucifix that cannot be removed from the traditional sites such as the school. It is also based on an anti-Islam campaign; on the refusal of the minarets, etc.). Although the two powers, the religious and the political one, share the same ideology, they want to keep a great autonomy from each other. The overlapping of those symbols cause a clash both from the power relations point of view and for the citizens one, that want to think of both powers as being separated, and behave as they are separated.