The disrupted moral economy:
Understanding Italy's working-class far-right shift through the legacy of E. P. Thompson

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When first introducing the concept of the moral economy, E. P. Thompson uses it to criticise the way historians have classified eighteenth and nineteenth century riots in England and France; uprisings that, at first glance, appeared disorganised or devoid of political demands. Spontaneous direct-action protests over food or bread, which erupted in nearly every English town around the 1840s, were often dismissed under the label of 'mobs'. Historians, rather than seeking deeper explanations, frequently attributed these revolts to nothing more than a desire for loot. Thompson writes that:

> [the riot for food/bread] was rarely a mere uproar which culminated in the breaking open of barns or the looting of shops. It was legitimised by the assumptions of an older moral economy, which taught the immorality of any unfair method of forcing up the price of provisions by profiteering upon the necessities of the people.[1]

The adjective 'older' here conveys more than just temporal age; it evokes a historical depth, referring to a well-established moral economy that had been transmitted across generations. This older moral framework encompassed a set of implicit norms and ethical principles, deeply ingrained within the community, and shaping their collective understanding of justice and fairness. It is within this context that, in *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson finds the term 'riot' inadequate, placing it in quotation marks. For Thompson, the term fails to convey the depth and historical significance of these uprisings, firmly rooted in popular sanctions and traditions. This critique is particularly evident in the sections where the concept of moral economy is most frequently discussed.[2] Thompson argues that, at the time, it was not wages that acted as the catalyst for political class conflict, but rather the price of bread. Every sharp increase in price sparked a revolt, and political antagonism crystallised around the cost of bread.

The 'mobs' often mobilised within an established pattern of habitual, organised, and 'self-disciplined' behaviour.[3] By reaffirming and contextualising the political significance of bread prices, Thompson attributes a deeper motivation

to the flour and bread riots, dismantling the assumption that these mobilisations were merely instinctive responses to hunger or famine.

These uprisings, among those affected, were widely regarded as acts of justice, and their leaders were seen as heroes. Such large-scale actions reflect a deeply embedded model of behaviour and belief. The significance of Thompson's work lies in his demonstration of how the working classes organised to defend their interests and moral values in the face of an industrial revolution that was imposing a new way of life: 'the final years of the 18th century saw a last desperate effort by the people to reimpose the older moral economy as against the economy of the free market'.[4]

The English working classes mobilised to preserve the moral rules of common life and of *œconomia* in its original Greek sense, in which each part is connected to the whole and each member recognises their duties and obligations. It is in this sense that the English working classes had a class consciousness, because class is 'made' historically through shared experiences, struggles, and cultural traditions; is not merely the result of economic subordination. Although Thompson did not make it a point to provide a precise definition of moral economy in 1963, he did so eight years later in the journal *Past and Present* to account for the genesis of the so-called 'bread riots' in eighteenth-century England, offering this definition:

> It is of course true that riots were triggered off by soaring prices, by malpractices among dealers, or by hunger. But these grievances operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling, baking, etc. This in its turn was grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor. An outrage to these moral assumptions, quite as much as actual deprivation, was the usual occasion for direct action.[5]

The concept gained significant traction, and thanks to the work of James Scott, it shifted from being used primarily by historians to also being adopted by anthropologists studying rural societies.[6]

What, then, is the connection between the moral economy underpinning the popular revolts of the nineteenth century and the contemporary far-right vote in Italy? Drawing on E. P. Thompson's notion of the moral economy, I argue that such frameworks are historically situated and socially constructed through collective struggles and shared norms.[7] While the rise of the far right among rural working classes is a broader European trend,[8] it is through the specific lens of this local history that we can understand how long-standing moral and political economies were formed, transformed, and ultimately eroded. The political

traditions this article focuses on, deeply rooted in collective resistance and egalitarian ideals, helped sustain solidarities, norms of reciprocity, and channels of political agency. Their progressive dismantling through different processes has opened the way to new forms of discontent and political realignment.

Traces of the old moral economy have not simply disappeared. In some cases, they have been rearticulated in reactionary terms, producing a distorted echo of past demands.

The aim of this article is to apply Thompson's theoretical lens to the political history of the Bolognese mountains in order to trace the historical construction of a local moral economy, explore its transformations over the past two centuries, and analyse how its residual logics interact with today's far-right turn. I will use data collected through ethnographic fieldwork on changing electoral preferences in the Bolognese mountains (Emilia-Romagna), along with archival material that allows for a reconstruction of the region's moral economy through cycles of mobilisation and conflict. The historical inquiry will be paired with an analysis of contemporary discourse among my interviewees, revealing how collective values persist, mutate, or disintegrate, and how this disintegration has shaped the ground for contemporary far-right support.

My sample consists of fifty interviews with voters of Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia,* FdI), alongside forty-five interviews with voters from other parties, former activists of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), local elected officials, trade unionists, and FdI activists. The interviews were carried out using a semi-structured method, with each lasting approximately an hour and a half. One-third of the sample was interviewed two or three times. The rural working-class segment I studied is primarily composed of individuals employed in agriculture and industry, with significantly less representation from the crafts and service sectors.[9]

The roots of the older moral economy in the Bolognese mountains

When I interviewed Daniele in his family house in the Reno Valley, I began by asking him to describe what life in the mountains was like when he was younger, and he began saying:

> You know, these people talk about citizenship income...[10] I'd have them talk to the people I know who went to work in the quarry when they were 11! Here you had to go to work right away. All the families had six or seven children, eh. All of them. Those who had a bit of land didn't have the right to go to the quarry... Why? Because they had food already, they had a bit of bread, the land gave them food, a cow gave them food, a bit of milk. Those

> who were six or seven, and where the father had no land... They had to give him a job in the quarry first. It's different how it is now. (…) there was a rule. And it was *just*, because everyone had to eat. There were rules... for living, some equality, let's say... So that everyone could eat. This is missing today. [Daniele, 76 years old, retired former railway worker]

In his work, James Scott introduces the concept of the 'subsistence ethic', a set of economic practices that connects Southeast Asia with Russia, France, and Italy in the nineteenth century rural areas.[11] This *ethos*, grounded in local traditions and practical necessity, ensured that everyone could maintain a dignified life. Survival was not just about individual success but about collective security. The priority was meeting basic needs and preserving social cohesion, rather than fostering economic competition.

In the interview, Daniele recounts how, in the past, when two families in the community—one of farmers with seven children, and the other landless, also with seven children—faced the possibility of a job at the quarry, a clear sense of prioritisation prevailed. This serves as an example of how the moral economy worked in the community, with norms in place to ensure that society was governed fairly, determining what was acceptable and what was not. For Daniele, 'just' meant equal, or more precisely, ensuring the subsistence of all: 'so that everyone could eat'. Daniele was a lifelong voter for the Communist Party and for all the successor parties after the PCI dissolved.[12] In the 2022 elections, he cast his vote for Brothers of Italy. When discussing their decision to vote for the far-right for the first time with his wife Pia, she tells me, 'We were never aligned with that ideology... but we like Giorgia Meloni'.

To provide context for Daniele's example, it is necessary to retrace how the community's moral economy has been historically constructed and transmitted across generations. The traditions and cultural norms that inform local economic expectations and notions of justice have deep roots, extending at least as far back as the nineteenth century, and have evolved through decades of everyday practice.

While the concept of a moral economy has rarely been addressed explicitly by Italian political scientists, similar processes have been captured through the notion of a 'red political subculture'.[13] This term refers to a system of values, identities, and political practices historically rooted in regions such as Emilia-Romagna, where the PCI developed deep organisational and symbolic ties with the population. This subculture helped institutionalise forms of collective belonging, political socialisation, and mutual support that extended far beyond formal party membership.

The mountains of the Bologna province lie within the Emilian Apennines, which have historically served as a natural border with Tuscany. This region is expansive, covering approximately seven hundred square kilometers, and

currently houses a population of fifty-thousand inhabitants. The Emilia Romagna region is often referred to in Italy as the quintessential 'red region,' a designation reflecting its strong political and cultural ties to the left. It was within this region that the PCI maintained its highest levels of electoral support and membership throughout the twentieth century. This support stemmed from the peasant movements of the nineteenth century, which evolved into robust trade union organisations. According to Robert Putnam, the region's substantial political capital can also be traced back to its long-standing historical foundations, with Putnam suggesting that Emilia Romagna's civic traditions may be linked to the Etruscan period.[14] He argues that the autonomy and participatory governance structures of the Etruscan city-states fostered a legacy of cooperation and strong local institutions, which set the region apart from the more hierarchical structures of southern Italy. This historical continuity, Putnam posits, has contributed to both the quality of governance and the distinctive associative culture found in the region.

The Bolognese mountains exhibited a proportionally higher level of support for the Communist Party than the city of Bologna itself, which served as the party's headquarters. In certain municipalities, such as Castiglione dei Pepoli, one of the most remote areas in the mountain range, the vote for the PCI reached sixty-five percent, with only two percent abstention. This figure challenges the broader Italian trend of mountain areas tending to be largely conservative and represents a unique case within the Emilian Apennines.[15] In the provinces of Parma and Modena, for example, there has never been significant support for socialist or communist parties.

According to the historian of socialism Renato Zangheri, this uniqueness can be attributed to the political consciousness that emerged during the peasant uprisings which affected the valley in the nineteenth century.[16] The Bolognese mountains witnessed three major episodes of peasant revolt: in 1809, against the Napoleonic regime, sparked by the introduction of the milling tax; in 1869, following the tax's reintroduction; and in 1898, driven by widespread economic discontent. While a few isolated studies have examined these individual events, no comprehensive work has yet connected them to one another or traced their influence on the anti-fascist resistance that would later define this region in the following century.

The available historical records on these uprisings, aside from some rare oral testimonies,[17] come primarily from State archives, particularly police reports. This dependence on official sources poses a significant limitation, as it constrains the possibility of reconstructing a truly bottom-up historical narrative. As a result, these accounts remain partial, necessitating careful interpretation and critical analysis to achieve a more comprehensive understanding.

The peasants' riots in the nineteenth century

The milling tax had never existed in the Bolognese mountains before its introduction in 1809 across the entire *Regno d'Italia* under French rule. At the time, the episodes of armed rebellion to the tax were labelled as 'banditry' (*brigandaggio*), a term that persisted in historical discourse. The insurgents mobilised in response to two key impositions by the French administration: military conscription, enforced for the first time in Italian territories, and a wave of new taxes that disproportionately burdened rural communities.[18]

The rioters burned public records, tore down symbols of sovereignty, desecrated them in defiance, and plundered both public and private holdings. The uprising against the milling tax became a crucial point of convergence between distinct social strata: the rural petty bourgeoisie, sidelined from political participation in the nascent state apparatus, and the broader popular classes, particularly sharecroppers and landless labourers, who bore the brunt of the new fiscal burdens.[19] This alliance underscores how resistance was not merely a spontaneous reaction but part of a larger struggle against economic injustice and political exclusion, foreshadowing future waves of peasant mobilisation in the region.

The ruling power, however, deliberately framed these uprisings as mere acts of criminality, while systematically downplaying their revolutionary and political significance. Official records explicitly referred to these events as attempts at 'dissolution of the Government' and armed insurrection, yet they ignored the broader political aspirations that underpinned them. Notably, from 1809 onward (and up until the fascist regime, as Zangheri suggests), the insurgents defined themselves as *patriots,* compelled to resist the foreign occupier. In 1809, this meant opposing the French regime, which had seized control of the province of Bologna by force as early as 1796. Within the valley, the first sparks of insurrection ignited in the villages of Tolè, Zocca, Marzabotto, and Sasso—places that, more than a century later, would become symbolic strongholds of the anti-fascist Resistance. In a report to the Minister of the Interior of 1869, the city's prefect sought to explain the scale of the milling tax revolts that would erupt again in that year. He noted that brigandage had, by then, become a glorious tradition in the province, with brigands themselves remembered as heroes.[20]

The culture of insurrection was passed down to the next generations, and in 1869, a few years after the establishment of the Italian State a milling tax was introduced nationwide on 1 January. Just days later, the first revolts erupted in the Bolognese region. This tax required a levy to be collected at the moment of grain milling, making it particularly oppressive for the peasants. Around the protest movement that emerged in response to its enforcement, long-standing grievances over exploitation, land deprivation, and state-imposed burdens

resurfaced. The taxation method was especially intolerable because it was applied directly to flour production: peasants would bring their sacks of grain to the mill and be charged based on the number of rotations the millstone completed. While consumption duties were a well-established practice, they were far less unbearable—both economically and symbolically—than the direct taxation of the milling process.[21] There were uprisings across Italy, but those in the Bolognese region saw particularly high levels of participation. One possible explanation for the intensity of these movements in Emilia is the rapid transition from traditional, subsistence-based agricultural economies to capitalist forms of production.[22] However, it is important to note that in the mountainous areas, this shift was significantly slower. Local newspapers in 1975 still lamented the fact that the mule remained the primary means of transportation. If we apply Thompson's thesis to the situation in the mountains, we could indeed hypothesize that the peasants were morally rebelling against a type of production that did not respect their economic-moral traditions.

On 8 January 1869, peasants began to assemble in various parts of the upper valley, summoned to the streets by the tolling of church bells. By the hundreds and thousands, they gathered in the mountain communities, chanting 'down with the milling tax' (*abbasso il macinato)*.[23] Notably, the only written account that captures the grievances of the people was discovered in one of these villages, Camugnano. On 12 January, four hundred peasants stormed the town hall, setting fire to the King's portrait, population records, and military draft lists. They forced the town secretary to write an official report, which reads:

> The community of Camugnano has unanimously declared the following decisions: that they absolutely wish the milling tax be abolished, as it is too burdensome for the people; (…) that the seed tax on communal goods be reduced to 5 (…); that the salary of the town doctor be significantly reduced, and the current doctors be completely removed from office, with only one doctor to be appointed through a public assembly of the people; (…) that all council meetings must be open to the public so that everyone may know what the council is declaring...[24]

A series of ten demands were formulated in this petition, which was submitted to the mayor for immediate action. Notably, there is a subtle yet significant challenge to the popular authority, particularly regarding the selection of the town doctor. However, the document does not directly confront municipal authority. Nonetheless, the milling tax serves as a catalyst for raising further grievances, illustrating that, similar to the eighteenth century English bread riots, the motives behind the revolt cannot be reduced to a mere response to a *stimulus*. Rather, they arise from a deeper sense of what is perceived as just or unjust, which

is rooted in a shared cultural tradition of values and practices. This perception also integrates an awareness of class relations.

The petition was signed by the mayor, and the insurgents celebrated their victory. But in the days that followed, the police began mass arrests and the milling tax was forcibly implemented across the entire mountain region. The presence of the police was significantly increased throughout the valley. In the following months, smaller uprisings emerged, but the police managed to suppress them all. Throughout 1869, the population remained under intense surveillance, with authorities closely monitoring their movements and actions. The numerical participation of land workers in the uprisings was overwhelmingly dominant. Of a list of 723 individuals arrested by the province of Bologna by January 23, 1869, 426 were farmers and 150 were day labourers.[25]

Renato Zangheri wrote about the riots in the Bolognese province:

> The riots were suppressed, but tranquillity in the Bolognese countryside would never return. (…) what matters is the significance and consequences of this tumultuous movement within the peasant world, the changing social and civil relations that began in the countryside.[26]

The bourgeois state, still in its early stages, failed to liberate the peasants from the semi-feudal system and imposed harsh taxes. A few years would pass, and the population would learn to oppose it in the name of socialism. The experience gained by the peasants during this revolt taught them to organise, forging a solidarity between towns and villages that had previously been unknown.

It was about thirty years later that the last revolt of the nineteenth century took place. In 1898, the Prefect of Bologna reported that spontaneous demonstrations against the rising cost of living had reached the mountain villages. In Castiglione dei Pepoli, two hundred workers gathered on 8 May, marching to the town hall with flags and a banner reading 'bread and work'. Upon arriving at the mayor's office, they forced him to reduce the price of bread and flour. They also succeeded in obtaining the abolition of the tax on livestock and on work services. The police were unable to disperse the crowd. When they returned to arrest the main instigators, forty people (women and children) threw stones at them.

In Camugnano, another protest lasting three days ended with a positive outcome. A crowd of three hundred and fifty people took the mayor from his home and marched through the streets to the town hall, demanding the abolition of the compulsory road tax. It is reported that 'having achieved their goal, the demonstrators, after cheering the mayor, peacefully dispersed and returned to their homes'.[27] The success of the uprisings was most likely due to the fact that the local police forces were insufficient to control the vast mountainous territory. The sub-prefecture of Bologna, located in the town of Vergato in the mid-

valley, was still approximately thirty kilometres away from the municipalities in the upper valley. The police arrived too late, and arrests were made based on witness testimonies.

The inhabitants of the mountains had learned the importance of challenging the rulers, and the uprisings of the nineteenth century sowed the seeds for resistance against fascism from the 1920s onwards. From the early 1900s, prior to the rise of the regime, numerous instances of strikes are recorded by the prefecture which took place throughout the valley. Various socialist circles emerged across the valley, and their activities were closely monitored by the police. Political activity was not limited to workers but also extended to peasants. In the aftermath of the First World War, the first sharecroppers' leagues were established in the valley, led by several revolutionary trade unionists from the region. One testimony recounts that every Sunday, meetings were held at the Marzabotto league headquarters to discuss political issues, but also to read, study, and build a Marxist culture within the peasant class.[28]

In the years when fascism sought to take root in the Bolognese region, it ultimately failed to establish control due to the highly cohesive nature of the local population. Fascism was a movement originating within the bourgeoisie, attracting industrialists and large landowners who forged alliances with the fascist combat squads.[29] For the people of the valley, who had spent decades learning to resist the police, the large landowners, and the industrial elite, their opposition to fascism was a natural response, as it directly contradicted their deeply held sense of their moral economy.

In the section of the 'subversives' (*sovversivi*) in the State archives of the fascist era, a significant number of individuals from the Bolognese mountains are found. These were people who refused to join the fascist party and whose political activities were closely monitored. Many were forced into exile, with a considerable number fleeing to France. The political influences among them were primarily socialist, though also syndicalist-revolutionary. One of the most prominent figures was Mariano Girotti, the mayor of Castiglione dei Pepoli, a revolutionary leader who was exiled to Nice. In his memoirs, Girotti recalls that one of the most formative events of his life was his childhood memory of the 1898 uprising, as mentioned earlier. In Castiglione dei Pepoli, fascism was never able to take hold, largely due to the working-class solidarity fostered by Girotti during the struggles in the construction sites for the new highways.

The anti-fascist and communist political hegemony in the twentieth century

The opposition and resistance to fascism in the valley led the Nazis to develop a visceral hatred for the local population. On 29 April 1944, the Nazi soldiers,

who had a base in the mountains along the border between Emilia Romagna and Tuscany, decided to exterminate the *Linksbazillen* — literally, the 'left-wing germs'. Italy's largest Resistance movement had been formed in these mountains, around Monte Sole. In killing primarily women, children, and the elderly, the German soldiers carried out the largest massacre of civilians in Italy of the Second World War, murdering approximately eight hundred people.[30] This event would shape the political consciousness of the population in the Bolognese mountains throughout the twentieth century, providing massive support to for Communist Party. Locally and nationally, the Italian Communist Party was relying on an extensive network of activists. During the decades following the war, until the party declined, approximately fifteen percent of the population was registered as members, with peaks reaching twenty percent in the municipality of Marzabotto and Castiglione.[31]

The PCI was not only a governing political entity but also, and perhaps more importantly, a force fostering social cohesion. Along the entire valley, there were the so-called 'houses of the people' (*case del popolo*), built by the party and made available to the local population. These venues served as bars, small restaurants, and meeting places, where political activities blended with informal exchanges, creating a space for political socialisation in a festive environment. In the evenings, for example, elderly people could often be found playing games and discussing politics, as my interviewees recall.

There were also entirely informal PCI headquarters that have now been lost to history, often housed in private homes designated for this purpose. In Campolo, a hamlet of Grizzana Morandi, for instance, there is still a house bearing the inscription 'P.C.I. Campolo'.

The activists of the PCI also organised the *Feste de l'Unità*, festivals that took place in every municipality over the course of two weeks. *Unità* was the official newspaper of the party. Summer was thus the time when there was always a festival to attend in a nearby village, and the local population was deeply involved in the organisation. Women were primarily engaged in the kitchen, while men worked at the bar or in event planning. Even the seemingly mundane act of participating in these festivals, particularly in their organisation, served as a powerful political mobiliser.

The activities that activists carried out within the party were primarily linked to the party membership and the distribution of *l'Unità* in the mountain regions. The distribution took place every Sunday and was carried out in a highly organised and widespread manner across the entire valley. This activity not only served to disseminate political ideas, but also fostered close contact with the population, which often transformed into friendships. Joining the party meant becoming part of a network of people, thus gaining social capital. This provided individuals with greater opportunities to find work, exchange favours, and offer

mutual support. Pietro, a 72-year-old former activist, recounts how the distribution was carried out:

> We would go to see the peasants and the workers, to renew the membership. But it wasn't like I would come see them once a year. I was always in touch with everybody. So we also had to deal with a lot of criticism, and we would engage with it. This helped us say, 'Here's the situation: there is discontent about this, but this other thing is going well'. In other words, we had our finger on the pulse. Every Sunday, we would bring *l'Unità* to these people, going door to door to sell it in the morning. We went to all the hamlets, to every remote house. It was a meticulous organisation, so nothing escaped us.

The activists organised conferences, especially with young groups of people, to discuss contemporary issues such as divorce and abortion. They read political theory, particularly the works of Marx and Gramsci. During these years of activism, those who would later become the mayors of the mountain municipalities in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s were shaped. The most recognised mayors of the valley came from working-class backgrounds and had a primary school diploma, but they all gained significant cultural and political capital through their activist experience.

Interviews with the local community revealed that having personally been involved in activism or participated in the party events over the years acted as a protective factor against the likelihood of shifting to the far right. Among the approximately fifteen people with such a history I interviewed, none had stopped voting for left-wing parties.

The dissolution of the PCI in 1991 was a traumatic event for the political and cultural life of the local population. After the party's disbandment, its political legacy split into two main currents. The majority of the party formed the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS), marking a gradual shift towards social democracy. In 1998, the PDS became the Democrats of the Left (DS). Meanwhile, a minority opposed to the reformist turn founded the Communist Refoundation Party, maintaining its communist identity. Former PCI activists in the mountains recall how this division 'split families in two'. In the 2000s, the DS merged with the Margherita party (a centrist formation with roots in the Christian Democrats) and other progressive forces to create the Democratic Party (PD) in 2007, aiming to build a large reformist party modelled on European social democracies. In the mountain region, voting percentages for Communist Refoundation remained much higher than the national average (around nine percent) throughout the first decade of the 2000s. However, the majority of the PCI's electorate followed the Democratic Party's project.

Gradually, the traditional *Unità* festivals faded away, PCI headquarters were abandoned, and activists felt deserted. Political discourse in social spaces slowly diminished over time. The PD, which became the primary left-wing force and the partial inheritor of the PCI's political legacy, managed to maintain electoral support from the communist base until the election of its secretary, Matteo Renzi, in 2013. However, following his labour reform (Jobs Act), which made workers more vulnerable by abolishing the protections against unfair dismissal, workers in the Reno Valley felt betrayed and shifted their votes toward new parties. An elderly voter of the PCI remarked, 'Renzi is the one who did the worst thing... how can one turn against the people who supported the party like that? Renzi betrayed us. I will never vote for the PD again.'

The Five Star Movement captured some of the disillusionment with the Italian political class,[32] widely viewed as corrupt and opportunistic, drawing a portion of the Democratic Party's electorate in the 2013 elections. Giulio embodies this shift. Reflecting on the evolution of his political preferences, he explains:

> I started with communism because I was a worker, all the workers voted communist there, but then I saw that it was all just a game, and nothing was actually being distributed. Politicians, in the end, always act in their own interests, even the communists, who think they do the most for the people, are really just interested in their political roles. I even voted for the Five Stars last time. The Five Stars were the biggest disappointment I've ever had, bigger than all the others. All the expectations collapsed. I liked them because they weren't tied to the political world, but it's impossible to stay clean in that world. After a year, everyone started switching sides, there were mixed groups, and they lost all credibility. [Giulio, 56, qualified worker, voter of PCI - PD - 5 Star Movement – FdI]

Between the 2013 and 2018 elections, a significant portion of the traditional left-wing electorate in the Bologna mountains gravitated towards these two parties. Then, following Giorgia Meloni's electoral campaign from 2020 to 2022, during which she positioned herself in opposition to the Draghi government, FdI managed to attract much of the mountains' electorate that had drifted away from the PD in 2013, as well as nearly all of the right-wing electorate, securing between thirty and thirty five percent of the votes in the valley during the 2022 elections, despite having no local grassroots presence.

The reactionary turn of the moral economy

The mountains, having almost entirely lost their socialist and communist political heritage, now face a profound transformation. The Democratic Party has

proven unable to sustain the ideals and mechanisms that once allowed the social fabric to remain cohesive. With the deepening effects of neoliberal transformation, the older moral economy and the values it carried have unravelled. In reference to Emmanuel Pierru's work in the Somme region of Northeastern France on voting patterns for the *Front National*: 'it is in the (de)structuring of social relations and the "crisis" of popular sociabilities that the key to these electoral outcomes in rural worlds lies'.[33] The shift away from the perspective of the 'economy of exchange' between individuals, can be observed in several facets of social and economic life that have changed dramatically over the years. Historically, this region was marked by strong networks of solidarity that regulated economic and social interactions outside of market dynamics. Small-scale agricultural production, cooperative labour exchanges, and informal forms of mutual aid ensured that economic activity remained embedded in local relationships rather than dictated by profit motives. People helped each other with farm work, shared tools, and maintained systems of collective welfare that provided stability even in times of economic hardship. These practices were not merely economic transactions but part of a moral framework that emphasised obligations toward the community.

However, this moral economy was progressively dismantled by successive waves of capitalist restructuring, from post-war industrial expansion to the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. The breakdown of mutual-support networks, compounded by the incursion of market logic into previously non-commodified domains, accelerated the erosion of reciprocal norms. Processes of extended commodification, exemplified by what Habermas describes more broadly as the 'colonisation of the lifeworld',[34] transformed collective forms of social security into individualised market transactions. Cooperative organisations, village gatherings, and party-led activism that once facilitated social cohesion, were replaced by individualised economic survival strategies. What was once exchanged through reciprocal obligations is now increasingly subject to financial transactions, whether in care, housing, or even community support itself.

The disintegration of the PCI's political structures, which had once provided not only ideological cohesion but also practical social services, left a void that the Democratic Party failed to fill. As local structures of collective belonging weaken, new forms of political alienation emerge, making these regions susceptible to reactionary electoral shifts. In this way, the contemporary crisis is not only about economic precarity but about the loss of a social fabric that once defined rural life. To refer back to the interview with Daniele, (see above):

> In the past, people helped each other, families helped each other, there were few things, but they helped each other nonetheless. If there was grain to sow, people helped each other, they all went to sow. (...) The other day, I went to

> friends' house in the mountains, in the other valley, who has a farm isolated from everything. The head of the family is sick and I went to help him, not because they asked me, but because it used to be like that, there was no need to ask. I went to help them sow potatoes... I was the only one. No one else had gone... It's sad... They cultivate everything themselves and do everything by hand. The grandmother made tagliatelle afterward. We were happy, it's a joy... Today, everything is lost.

The practices of sharing that fostered a network of relationships were fundamentally structured around the moral economy of the community. When the dynamics of household labour shifted, so too did the social fabric. Many of my interviewees recounted, for example, how the homes they inhabit were constructed collectively, with friends and community contributing every weekend. The traditions and practices of reciprocal obligations tied to manual labour and reproduction were not merely the product of shared moral values, but, more crucially, they were the foundation of the community's economic reproduction. These practices, deeply rooted in the rural world, were primarily carried out by workers who, despite transitioning to factory work, preserved peasant traditions and engaged in various forms of upkeep and maintenance.

In this regard, there is a dialect expression that is difficult to translate into English, or even standard Italian: *fèr a zêrla* (*fare a zerla*), which referred to the collaboration among farmers in carrying out specific tasks, particularly during the sowing and harvesting seasons, when the physical strength of the workers on those plots of land was insufficient. The entire process operated within a framework of reciprocity. In other words, it was a form of mutual aid—a spontaneous collaboration traditionally practiced among neighbours. The term *zerla* had dual meanings: it referred both to the yoke used to pair oxen together and to a worker who temporarily substitutes another.[35] The term would therefore seem to figuratively refer to the use of additional labour power, much like the practice of adding extra oxen to the team when necessary for tasks requiring more pulling strength.

Another significant shift occurred with the increasing bureaucratisation of ecological land management over the course of the twentieth century. As regulations intensified, local inhabitants were no longer allowed to intervene in the maintenance of forests, streams, and other natural features of the mountain. This change had a profound symbolic impact on the way the residents understood their relationship to the land and to nature itself. It also influenced how they spent their time and engaged with their environment. The prohibition on interacting with the mountain's flora played a role in the growing individualisation of working-class life throughout the century.[36] This shift not only restricted access to land but also reshaped the collective, social and cultural practices tied to it.

In his work on the subsistence ethic, James Scott emphasises a critical point: that the moral economy was a defining characteristic of all pre-capitalist rural societies. He argues that it was the rise of the welfare state that fundamentally changed this dynamic. With the state taking on the role of guaranteeing economic well-being, the traditional forms of solidarity and mutual aid gradually diminished.[37] People, now operating within a system of state-provided support, began to adopt a more profit-maximising approach. In Italy, the introduction of the welfare state in the 1970s triggered significant changes, including the migration of agricultural workers to industrial sectors and the subsequent depopulation of the mountain regions. As Daniele observes:

> The farmers had no health insurance, no vacation time, and worked from morning till evening. Industrial workers began to receive benefits like health insurance and paid vacations, people in the mountains, who had nothing of the sort… They moved to the city or emigrated. Among them were individuals who were incredibly skilled at manual labour…

The subsistence ethic in this rural society, as in many others, was grounded in the principle that everyone had to contribute to the reproduction of society. The possibility of subsistence, particularly for those living on the margins, relied on the utilisation of one's body as labour. It was unthinkable for either men or women to disengage from the generational and material reproduction of the labour force. However, with the evolution of the labour market, the rise of unemployment, and later the economic crisis of the 2000s, this traditional model began to erode. At the same time, the importance of welfare provisions ceased to be collectively defended or politicised. In the absence of strong political or union actors rooted in the territory, no one stepped in to reframe state subsidies as a legitimate form of social protection. This is illustrated in an interaction recorded at the home of Laura and Pino, with their daughter Giovanna:

> **Pino**: 'When I worked up there, in Castiglione, the son of one of us would come to plant fir trees up on the ridge. And the father would say, 'I sent you to school for eight years, you cost a fortune, look at where you are now.' [laughs] That's how it was. But you see, at least this boy was admirable, because he said, 'Rather than staying home, I'll work. Even if they send me to plant trees and cut roots.'
> **Giovanna**: Especially now, with the citizenship income, many people say, "You know what? I'll just stay at home. Why go work? They give me 1000 euros a month".
> **Laura**: It's right that they took it [the Citizenship Income] away. We need more meritocracy. I mean, I understand people who really need it, but not a twenty-five-year-old who spends the whole day with his

> PlayStation. [Pino, 76, retired and former bricklayer; Laura, 68, retired and former factory worker; Giovanna, 39, factory worker.]

The conversation captures the evolving relationship between work, welfare, and social expectations in this rural context. While the interviews still reveal remnants of a moral economy based on mutual aid and collective labour, it seems that the disappearance of a politicising agent has caused a shift toward a more reactionary stance. Within the community, no efforts have been made to politicise the issues surrounding the citizenship income. Instead, misinformation was spread about the amounts of these social benefits, fraud cases were exaggerated and 'average recipients' stigmatised. In fact, studies have demonstrated that the citizenship income primarily supported individuals who were excluded from the labour market and struggled to re-enter it.[38]

New voters of Brothers of Italy think it is immoral and unjust for people to receive money from the state without 'giving anything in return'. Thus, many welcomed Giorgia Meloni's proposal to eliminate the subsidy. In interviews, there is a frequent suggestion that these recipients, whose average monthly payments were around four hundred euros, should be put to work in service of the municipality, performing tasks beneficial to society. The working classes feel that by voting for someone who prevents 'dishonest' people from exploiting state funds, they are acting in their own interest and promoting justice, calling for greater meritocracy.

As social and economic practices have evolved, while there remains a desire for social cohesion within the community, it is no longer directed outward but inward. The focus has shifted to protecting those perceived as belonging to their group; those who embody the values of labour respectability upon which the community's social identity is based.

In the last decade, the local workforce in the mountains has decreased by an average of 25%, forcing workers and employees to move to the city, resulting in a loss of quality of life due to long commutes. Faced with the fear of social decline, the community adopts hostile behaviours towards welfare recipients. This reaction reflects a deepening divide, where those who still hold on to their jobs and routines view welfare recipients as a threat to the limited resources available, fuelling resentment. The perception that those who rely on state aid are not contributing to the community's welfare creates a sense of unfairness, reinforcing the idea that only those who 'earn their place' in society deserve support.

A hypothesis is that calling for a more meritocratic society implicitly suggests that the standard of living achieved by these individuals – and especially that of their children – has not been proportional to the efforts they made throughout their lives. In a region undergoing heavy deindustrialisation, with diminishing job opportunities, fewer services, rising rents, and living costs, members of the

working classes tragically perceive the deterioration of their economic situation for the incoming generation. The mountain area of Bologna is one of the economically and socially most fragile regions these days, whereas, during the previous century, it had been a key location for the development of the metalworking industry. Workers, employees, small business owners, artisans, farmers, and retirees alike have seen their economic conditions worsen since the 2008–2009 financial crisis. For those still in the midst of their working lives, it is very difficult to understand how they can achieve a decent standard of living without the help of their parents, who can assist them financially or leave them real estate that was acquired during a more economically advantageous time. The generations now in retirement have reached a relatively stable level of security, but they fear for the future of the generations to come, as they hold little hope for what lies ahead.

The erosion of these collective bonds, exacerbated by economic precarity, has made individuals more susceptible to narratives of division and resentment. The new voters of the post-fascist far-right blame the left for failing to defend the 'workers' and for prioritising the protection of minority groups (migrants and the LGBTQI+ community), abandoning issues of labour and precariousness. These new voters are convinced that 'the politicians' are doing everything to make them to leave the mountains and their homes. Faced with the objective deterioration of living conditions due to the crisis, the decrease in services in mountainous and rural areas, and the reduction of local businesses that has turned entire town centres into ghost towns, the mountain population feels abandoned. The far-right vote feeds on the anxiety of precariousness, relegation, and exclusion. This sense of marginalisation, in turn, fuels a narrative that positions the far-right as the only political force capable of protecting the locals' interests and restoring a sense of belonging and security.

Conclusion

Although the set of values and shared beliefs that once sustained the moral economy is still present in the community, it has undergone a reactionary turn. The demand for equality now often takes the form of resentment toward those perceived as abusing the system, particularly welfare recipients who are not seen as contributing through labour. The centrality of physical labour, once vital to the reproduction of the community, becomes a symbolic marker: a way for individuals to position themselves as those who 'do their part' while morally condemning others who receive aid. This stigmatisation of welfare is a symptom of the depoliticisation of social demands, a process tied to the absence of political actors capable of giving voice to working-class grievances.

Voters from working-class and leftist backgrounds have grown disillusioned with the left, viewing its failure to defend labour rights and tackle economic insecurity as a betrayal. In their eyes, the left's focus on marginalised groups has led to the neglect of core working-class concerns, such as job instability, vanishing public services, and the decline of local economies. The far-right's rhetoric, emphasising meritocracy and portraying welfare recipients as undeserving, resonates with this electorate, offering them a way to reaffirm their own moral worth amid rising rents, crumbling infrastructure, and shrinking opportunities.

It is important to note that this shift does not necessarily signal a permanent or stable transition to far-right parties. This may merely be a phase, one that has not yet solidified into a lasting political shift. In the valley, there is still the potential for political realignment or the resurgence of solidarity-based movements that reconnect these disillusioned communities with a renewed sense of collective purpose and belonging. Without such efforts to rebuild solidarity and address the underlying economic grievances, the cycle of disenchantment and political fragmentation may only deepen, further entrenching division and exclusion in the social and political fabric of the region.

Notes

1 Edward P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth, 1991, p.63.
2 Ibid., p.63-67.
3 Ibid., p.64.
4 Ibid., p.67.
5 E. P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past & Present*, 50 (1971), pp.76-136.
6 James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*, New Haven, 2000.
7 For a synthesis of Thompson's critical methodology and a grounded examination of the explanatory reach of the moral economy concept in contemporary social sciences, see: Federico Tarragoni, 'La méthode d'Edward P. Thompson', *Politix*, 118(2) (2017), pp.183-205.
8 See for example: A. Mamonova, M. Françesa, and D. Brooks, 'Right-Wing Populism in Rural Europe: Introduction to the Special Issue', *Rural Sociology*, 85(1) (2020), pp. 1–10; K. Arzheimer, 'Falling Behind Whom? Economic Geographies of Right-Wing Populist Support in Europe', *Geographical Journal*, 189(2) (2023), pp.255-271.
9 It was decided not to anonymise the studied geographical area, as the article would lose its meaning without the specificity of the local history. This decision aligns with the approach of my thesis, which relies on a monographic method that includes a historical dimension so unique that it would remain identifiable

even if anonymised. Nonetheless, the identities of the individuals have been protected using pseudonyms and by omitting sensitive data.

10 The citizenship income (*reddito di cittadinanza*) is a social welfare program introduced by the Five Star Movement in Italy to provide financial support to low-income individuals and families. It aimed to reduce poverty and encourage employment by offering a monthly allowance to those who meet certain income and residency criteria, while also requiring recipients to participate in job training and job-seeking activities. It was abolished by the government led by Giorgia Meloni in 2024.

11 Scott, *The moral economy,* p.2.

12 After the dissolution of the PCI, the successor parties included the Communist Refoundation Party, the Democrats of the Left (PDS), the Democratic Party (PD).

13 Mario Caciagli, 'Fra storia contemporanea e scienza politica: le subculture territoriali', in *Partiti e movimenti politici fra Otto e Novecento*, ed. by Gianfranco Pasquino, Bologna, 2004.

14 Robert D. Putnam, Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton, 1993.

15 For a broader comparative argument showing why mountain zones frequently develop political trajectories that diverge from national majorities, see : James Scott, 'La montagne et la liberté', *Critique internationale*, 11(2) (2001), p85-104.

16 Renato Zangheri, *Agricoltura e Contadini Nella Storia d'Italia*, Torino, 1977, p.189-240.

17 Stefano Cammelli, *Al suono delle campane. Indagine su una rivolta contadina: i moti del macinato (1869)*, Milano, 1984.

18 Giovanni Natali, 'L'insorgenza del 1809 nel Dipartimento del Reno', *Atti e Memorie della* R. *Deputazione di Storia Patria per l'Emilia e la Romagna*, XV.II (1936-1937), pp.43-109.

19 Ibid.

20 Camera dei Deputati in *Documenti presentati dal ministro dell'interno (Cantelli) nella tornata del 20 gennaio 1869 intorno ai fatti avvenuti nelle province dell'Emilia in conseguenza della legge sul macinato*, Firenze, 1869, p.53.

21 Zangheri, *Agricoltura,* p203.

22 E. Sereni, *Il capitalismo nelle campagne (1860-1900),* Torino, 1947, p.115.

23 From the note of 'Sottoprefetto di Vergato to prefetto, 8 gennaio' in ASB, Prefettura. 1869. Affari di Gabinetto.

24 In Italian : '(…) la comunità di camugnano ha dichiarato unanime di deliberare e volere quanto segue : che vogliano assolutamente soppressa la tassa sul macinato perché sono troppo gravose ai popoli, (…) che la tassa sementi sui beni comunali sia ridotta a 5 (…), che assolutamente sia ridotto lo stipendio del medico condotto e gli attuali medici condotti siano assolutamente levati d'impiego e che vi sia in comune un medico solo, il quale sarà nominato in adunanza del popolo (…) che le adunanze del consiglio debba essere sempre pubblica perché ognuno possa sapere cio che il consiglio dichiara…' Ibid.

25 'Carceri giudiziarie di Bologna. Stato nominativo degli individui stati arrestati per ribellione alla legge del macinato', in ASB Questura. 1869. *Agitazione pel macinato*, mazzo 58.
26 Zangheri, *Agricoltura*, p.236.
27 Prefettura di Bologna, Gabinetto, (1859 - 1928), IV 282. Legione dei Carabinieri di Bologna, 17 maggio 1898. Oggetto : dimostrazioni avvenute in Camugnano.
28 Interview with Laura Veronesi, in : Remo Sensoni, Vinicio Ceccarini. *Marzabotto nel primo dopoguerra*, Milano, 1999, p.29.
29 For the anti-fascists in Emilia, it was already clear that the Resistance was both a class struggle and a civil war. The historian Claudio Pavone was the first to strongly support this thesis, a position that would earn him considerable criticism from his fellow historians at the time. Claudio Pavone, *Una guerra civile: saggio storico sulla moralità nella Resistenza*, Torino, 1991.
30 Andrea Speranzoni. *A partire da Monte Sole: stragi nazifasciste, tra silenzi di Stato e discorso sul presente*, Roma, 2016 ; Luca Baldissara and Paolo Pezzino, *Il massacro : Guerra ai civili a Monte Sole*, Bologna, 2010.
31 Archivi del Partito Comunista Italiano (Fondazione Gramsci), Fondo 'Zona montagna', Statistiche elettorali del 1986.
32 The Five Star Movement (*Movimento Cinque Stelle*) is an Italian political party founded in 2009, known for promoting digital direct democracy and advocating for a universal basic income as a means to reduce social inequality and reform traditional politics.
33 Emmanuel Pierru and Sébastien Vignon, 'Comprendre les votes frontistes dans les mondes ruraux. Une approche ethnographique des préferences électorales', in Gérard Mauger, Willy Pelletier ed., *Les Classes Populaires et Le FN: Explications de Vote*, Vulaines sur Seine, 2016, p.86.
34 Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, Boston, 1987.
35 Pietro Mainoldi, *Vocabolario del dialetto bolognese,* Bologna, 1996. Many thanks to Gian Paolo Borghi for the reference and providing valuable insight on this matter.
36 Olivier Schwartz, *Le monde privé des ouvriers. Hommes et femmes du Nord.* Paris, 1990.
37 Scott, *The moral economy*, p.10.
38 ISTAT, *Condizioni di vita e reddito delle famiglie*, Roma, 2023.