

FOOD INSTAGRAM

IDENTITY, INFLUENCE
& NEGOTIATION



Edited by

**EMILY J. H. CONTOIS
& ZENIA KISH**

Food Instagram

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and Negotiation

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Posing with “the People”

The Far Right and Food Populism on Instagram

SARA GARCIA SANTAMARIA

As social media become key communication platforms connecting political leaders and their audiences, populist leaders have been experimenting with the use of everyday cultural tropes that spark emotional connection with their followers. Flipping through their Instagram posts, one such trope stands out for its familiarity: food. In fact, food has started a few battles on social media. In Italy for instance, Matteo Salvini, former deputy prime minister, sparked a “Nutella battle” in late 2019. A self-declared fan of the chocolate nut spread, Salvini announced that he would stop eating it because it contained foreign hazelnuts—not just Italian—only to pose with a Nutella jar on Instagram the next day.¹ Similarly, Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro has sparked a “poop war,” asking climate change defenders to protest less and eat less, so they poop every other day and reduce waste. These examples represent the use of food as a political tool for defending both nationalist and class-based values: national production and restraint. But they also indicate the problematic nature of using food as part of populist friend-and-foe narratives. This chapter explores a set of questions related to political communication in the digital era: How do far-right populist leaders use Instagram food posts as a way of bypassing elite and expert mediations between the leader and “the people”? How do far-right populist leaders respond to (and even instrumentalize) Instagram foodie trends? These questions are relevant for understanding how food becomes a cultural trope taken up within populist performances of class and national identity.

Food, as a cultural product, helps to create and reinforce social divisions that organize our image of the social world and our place in it. In his social critique of taste, Bourdieu considers that it “functions as a sort of social orientation, a ‘sense of one’s place.’”² The particularity of populist discourses is that they are played out in an antagonistic register of friends against foes—that is, in a moral register. “In place of a struggle between ‘right and left’ we are faced with a struggle between ‘right and wrong.’” Populist discourse constructs a coalition between the leader and the people in order to defend themselves from an outside

menace, an Other (whether the elites, a “dangerous” marginalized group, a set of policies, and so forth), that threatens peoples’ (allegedly natural) predisposition to attain well-being.³ One of the ways in which leaders achieve closeness to the people is by instrumentalizing comfort food such that it serves friend-versus-foe narratives. More specifically, comfort food becomes a tool for staging a two-way rebellion against perceived enemies: the traditional, snobbish, foodie elite but also left-wingers who sacrifice the joy of simple food in the name of health and environmental claims. Politicizing the desire for authentic, traditional food, populists advance food puritanism as an alternative to Instagram food-porn dominant aesthetics. The term “food puritanism” refers to the representation of familiar and traditional food that is stripped of all excess and embellishment, both in terms of culinary and photographic techniques.⁴

This chapter analyzes the use of food photographs in the official Instagram accounts of Matteo Salvini (member of Italy’s Lega party) and Jair Bolsonaro (head of Brazil’s Partido Social Liberal) for one year, following the beginning of their respective electoral campaigns. Both far-right populist leaders ran for office in their country’s general elections almost simultaneously in 2018 and coordinated a great part of their campaigns through social media.⁵ This chapter analyzes Instagram posts—both images and text—from a qualitative perspective, drawing on sensitizing topics of discourse theoretical analysis.⁶ Through these lenses, food appears as a familiar cultural trope that fulfills the role of an empty signifier. An empty signifier, for Ernesto Laclau, is an element that is able to encompass meaning beyond its immediate definition.⁷ Using food as an empty signifier means that food is able to stretch its immediate meaning and, in this case, to stand for “a people” in terms of national and class-belonging. Therefore, when food is mobilized in posts, so is a particular sort of people that identifies with it, whether it is Italian pizza or Brazilian mangoes.

Populist leaders do not post images of food by chance. Salvini and Bolsonaro show a clear preference for comfort food—food that is local, simple, and traditional. Comfort evokes feel-good memories of home, family, and childhood, making us feel cozy and secure. Therefore, comfort food is used as a means to perform authenticity and unpretentiousness, to defend the “democratic taste” of the common people.⁸ In Italy, a country with rich culinary capital and great national pride, the type of food represented, and the degree of elaboration of its cuisine, is different from that of Brazil, where gastronomy is less linked to national identity.⁹ Matteo Salvini uses his Instagram account to assert the symbolic power of food-as-nation, presenting himself as a gourmand fighting to defend “Italy first.” In fact, it was his leadership that helped to shift Lega from northern regionalism to an “empty nativist nationalism.”¹⁰ While Jair Bolsonaro appeals to national values, he does so by foregrounding the role of the working classes. The Brazilian president presents himself as a humble man who lives in

a modest house and has a taste for simple food, approaching food-as-class as a way of sharing the socioeconomic struggles of the common people. This is done even though his appeals contrast with his voters' socioeconomic base—statistics show that he has little support from the poor.¹¹

Food and Populism: What's at Stake?

This chapter explores how far-right populist leaders use comfort food on Instagram as a way to appeal to “the people” both in terms of class (the common people) and nation (the national people). In doing so, it makes a series of ontological assumptions by defining populism as a specific logic of articulation of “the people” and their identity.¹² Benjamin de Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis observe that the “thinness” of populism makes it compatible with other political ideologies, such as nationalism.¹³ The importance of articulating nation and class-based communities lies precisely in their apparent naturalness, capable of quickly mobilizing people around a reservoir of shared emotions.¹⁴ Populist leaders appeal to the apparent naturalness of national comfort food as a way of evoking a shared, familiar connection that brings them closer to the people, thus mobilizing them emotionally.

Populist leaders present themselves as the authentic representatives of the people in a context in which the traditional elite seems to have distanced itself too much from popular interests. In political communication terms, populist leaders curate an image of authenticity and familiarity that allows them to engage, allegedly, in an unmediated conversation with citizens. Therefore, populist leaders have been quick to use social media for showcasing their everyday life, entering people's private space while opening the doors of their homes to their followers.¹⁵ Previous studies in Italy and Brazil have shown that populist leaders present themselves as “champions of the people” and the common “man on the street,” opposed to the elite and ostracized Others.¹⁶ While it is clear that populist leaders want to be considered part of the people, systematic knowledge remains sparse on the way in which they construct this closeness on social media. This is why it is important to understand the use of everyday cultural tropes, such as food, and their emotional power to help bind leader and followers together.

By appealing to tradition and authenticity through unsophisticated comfort dishes, populist leaders construct a popular identity that defies Instagram food porn trends. Amanda Simpson defines food porn as whatever makes you drool, inviting ephemeral consumption and creating a desire that cannot be satisfied.¹⁷ Similarly, Anne McBride looks at the concept of food porn as posting “sexy” and appealing photos of food online.¹⁸ The association of food to porn is twofold: pictures of food are shown in an unrealistically attractive way, and there is a connotation of indecency in the obsession for good-looking food in such an

unequal world. What is clear is that the idea of porn refers to “an aesthetic of excess,” of “obsession, waste and playfulness.”¹⁹ This excess is portrayed not only in the qualities of the food represented but also in the way they are curated: a “precise, delicate setting,” “bright and propped,” showing off the perfection and the glossiness of the food that is presented.²⁰

The styling of food porn contrasts with the austere performance of populist leaders’ food-centric posts, who share seemingly uncurated photos of comfort food that looks familiar yet unappealing. This can be easily seen in the analysis that follows, which examines apparently unedited pictures that are technically flawed both from a photographic and a culinary perspective. The portrayal of often-blurry images with inadequate color balances reinforces the unappetizing side of bland and messy-looking food. Embracing amateurism and imperfection can be seen as a way of reinforcing the leaders’ authentic self-representation, indicating a clear strategy rather than a simple lack of skills. The arousal of emotions through recognizability, rather than aesthetics, raises questions about how to interpret far-right leaders’ posts set against Instagram’s curated landscape of mouthwatering food. In a rebellion against “food porn,” “food populism” evokes authenticity and puritanism against the curated millennial aesthetic. In a way, Salvini and Bolsonaro’s appeals to tradition, familiarity, and austerity bring “food populism” close to “food puritanism.”

Emotions are particularly important for mobilizing people’s support for right-wing parties. While research on food and social media focuses mainly on identifying positive emotions, scholarship on populism tends to focus on negative ones. Some works suggest that invoking negative emotions is effective in appealing to the insecurities of the so-called “losers of modernization,” who some identify as the main supporters of populist leaders.²¹ More particularly, the notion of *ressentiment*, or the way in which negative emotions, such as fear, are repressed and then translated into anger, has proved an important element in far-right support. Looking at populist political strategies of emotionalization and boundary-making, Mikko Salmela and Christian von Scheve argue that *ressentiment* can be mobilized through identity-evoking symbols, and then externalized through anger toward “other” identities.²²

The data presented below show that, while food becomes an empty signifier that connects emotionally with the people, the accompanying text of food posts evokes *ressentiment*. The combination of food photographs and text sheds light on far-right leaders’ political communication strategy: first, mobilizing support through identity-evoking symbols, such as comfort food, then turning those symbols against an “other,” whether the intellectual left or activists—from Carola Rackete to Greta Thunberg.

Matteo Salvini, a Happy Italian Gourmand

Since 2013, Matteo Salvini has been the federal secretary of Lega, a far-right regionalist party from northern Italy that achieved national reach during his leadership. Salvini served as Italy's deputy prime minister and minister of the interior from June 2018 to September 2019, trumpeting Euroscepticism, nativism, and anti-immigration policies. The nationalist elements of Lega are ubiquitous in Salvini's Instagram account. There, food appears as an empty signifier that encompasses Italian nationalist values and traditions as opposed to foreign trends and perceived threats.

The contrast between national versus foreign, and traditional versus trendy foods, is palpable not only in the photos that Salvini shares on Instagram but also in the accompanying captions. His captions are actually never food related but use images of food to call attention to broader sociopolitical debates aligned with his political interests. For example, he repeatedly sets comfort food against healthy eating habits. Not only is healthy food almost absent from his posts, but he often makes sarcastic comments about his health while posting images of tasty traditional dishes. Posting a photo of gnocchi with sausage, which he jokingly refers to as "a light lunch," he addresses a question to his followers: "Will you still love me if I gain weight?"²³ Love and food go hand in hand.

As we have seen, Salvini's food posts reject conventional representations of healthy eating and go one step beyond. The leader suggests that an excessive preoccupation with health leads to unhappiness, and unhappiness is precisely what distinguishes the political left. According to this sequence, the leader poses as an unabashedly happy Italian gourmand and often mocks his opponents by stressing his enjoyment of traditional Italian dishes. Meanwhile, his political opponents, among them journalists or professors, are portrayed as depressed, starving wannabes who attack him out of pure (food) envy. Therefore, appeals to health or climate change are dismissed as the moralizing discourses of a hubristic political elite who despise the little joys of everyday life.

The recurrent posts of a smiling Salvini holding a bottle of iced beer or sniffing a steamy pasta serve as a means to construct boundaries of belonging. In one of his posts, the leader evokes unity through a cold bottle of beer from the Veneto region that reads: "Birra di tradizione Italiana" (Italian traditional beer). Salvini uses this identity-evoking symbol as an empty signifier that gets people's attention so he can pursue his real goal: to mobilize citizens' *ressentiment*. This is clear from the text accompanying the photo, in which he waves at "those who want to hurt Italy." In the post, Salvini presents himself as a leader who defends Italian heritage against foolhardy enemies: "I don't give up."²⁴ At times, the construction of an evil "other" takes a historical magnitude. For instance, in another post a smiling Salvini holds a bottle of Birra Nursia, an Italian beer, and shows off his

latest *tonno pugliese* pasta while criticizing the Yugoslavs who massacred the Italian people during World War II.²⁵ In doing so, Salvini presents himself as a leader ready to protect citizens from all their past and present enemies.

Salvini's enemies are not always clearly identified. The Other who steals people's enjoyment of Italian food is often obliquely evoked, left to people's imagination. This can be seen in the post in figure 14-1, in which a smiling Salvini poses with a jar of Nutella, the sweet par excellence that can spark Italians' joy and recall childhood memories. The jar reads: "Today will be better than yesterday"—to which Salvini replies, "Good morning Friends. For many, but not for everyone." The aesthetics of the image are in keeping with Salvini's selfies, with no filters, a canted angle and a close-up that cuts part of his face out of the frame. All these elements contribute to a narrative of authenticity by which the leader communicates with his followers in an apparently unself-conscious manner: direct, spontaneous, and seemingly uncurated.

In the examples above, Matteo Salvini appeals to classic Italian products while drawing clear boundaries of belonging between his followers—often referred to as *Amici*, "Friends" with a capital *F*—and evil enemies, who thrive by attacking the leader and, by extension, his friends. The enemy is often clearly identified as left-wingers and intellectuals. For instance, a photo of tortellini in sausage sauce appears next to a message in which Salvini paradoxically states that he doesn't want to offend any left-wing journalists or professors (which he calls *professorone*).²⁶ The word *professorone* applies not just to university professors but to those who pretend to know it all, including what is morally wrong and right. Surprisingly, the post ended up offending some of his followers who, in the name of tradition, reminded Salvini that his tortellini recipe does not exist—tortellini should always be eaten in broth. This is not the first time that ostensibly heretical pasta dishes sparked heated debates over Italian values. In fact, in October 2019, the archbishop of Bologna, Matteo Zuppi, served a chicken-stuffed tortellini (instead of pork) to the poor with the goal of making the meal more inclusive. This prompted Andrea Indini, editor of the conservative paper *Il Giornale*, to write an opinion piece defending tortellini and tradition. This op-ed supported Salvini's puritan defense of Italian tradition against ideas of multiculturalism or interculturalism—that is, nationalism against foreign values.²⁷

Salvini's eating habits and food nationalism have become a matter of public debate in Italy. In an Instagram post, Salvini holds up for the camera a newspaper article in which a doctor questions his health habits—a Nutella toast, in this case.²⁸ In the post, the journalist is portrayed as taking pleasure in the image of a sick Salvini, suffering from clotted arteries. The remedy for the left's misery? Enjoying more daily pleasures. In fact, Salvini suggests that if the "female doctor" ate more Nutella, she would be a happier person and would stop criticizing him.



FIGURE 14-1. The composition of Matteo Salvini's (#matteosalviniofficial) posts deliberately suggests folksiness. February 12, 2019.

This post exemplifies how Salvini positions his visible enjoyment of unhealthy pleasures as sparking the envy, but also the reprobation, of leftist moralists.

Salvini acknowledges that he uses food pleasures as a means to overcome leftist and elitist attacks. In one illustrative example, he posts a photo of *zuppa inglese*, a desert from Piemonte, which comes to represent comfort food as a common ground that unites all Italians against daily struggles. He writes: “the more they attack and threaten me, the more they give me energy and the desire to work to defend Italians.”²⁹ After another long day, he shows off his hearty polenta to his friends, which he claims helps him disconnect from the “insults and disappointments” that he received throughout the day (fig. 14-2).³⁰

The frequency of Salvini's food posts proves a useful tool for melding his love for food and for his followers. Perhaps the clearest example of this is his post of a heart-shaped fried egg (fig. 14-3). The misshapen heart illustrates his love for Italians, a love that might look imperfect but is at least authentic. As with many of his food posts, the unvarnished picture visually conveys his relatability



FIGURE 14-2.
Matteo Salvini
(#matteosalviniofficial)
poses hearty, traditional
Italian dishes as cures for
the Left. January 26, 2019.



FIGURE 14-3.
Matteo Salvini
(#matteosalviniofficial) uses
an egg to express his love for
Italians. June 3, 2019.



FIGURE 14-4. An example of a Matteo Salvini (#matteosalviniofficial) post that connects himself to traditional values. January 1, 2019.

through a blemished aesthetics that differs from the bright, proper, and glossy characteristics of Instagram food trends.³¹ In this particular post, the dish is dirty, the egg burned on the edges and barely resembles a heart.

Shot in poor lighting, the posts in figures 14-2 and 14-3 imply that there has been no effort to make the food look appealing. Rather, they look spontaneous and authentic while hiding a carefully curated logic of unpolished comfort food and unembellished love. The post in figure 14-4 shows a vaguely unappetizing dish of *cotechino con lenticchie* (lentil stew with sausage) invoking the imperfection of homestyle cuisine. Eating lentils is a New Year's tradition in Italy, and Salvini's campaign deploys *cotechino con lenticchie* to suggest that he will protect Italian Christmas values. "You don't touch tradition!" he writes, followed by a smile emoji.³²

Italian traditions are opposed to the image of a foreign Other that is explicitly omitted from his food images but often referenced in the accompanying text. Even from a composition perspective, Salvini frequently posts photos of people the right vilifies, such as refugees, left-wingers, and human-rights defenders, among them Carola Rackete (fig. 14-5).³³ These images appear with photos of pepperoni pizza or Italian wine. This is the clearest example of Salvini's politicization of food in a way that serves his political goals. The post in figure 14-5 shows the extent to which food is seamlessly integrated into quotidian far-right



FIGURE 14-5. By juxtaposing images of left-leaning activists with traditional Italian foods, Matteo Salvini (#matteosalviniofficial) politicizes food. January 17, 2020.

visual displays of who is—and who is not—perceived as belonging in the national body.

Jair Bolsonaro, a Humble Brazilian Survivor

Jair Messias Bolsonaro is a Brazilian politician and former military officer who was elected as Brazil’s president in October 2018. Although he represented the state of Rio de Janeiro as a deputado federal (Chamber of Deputies) between 1991 and 2008, he was practically unknown nationwide, something he used to his advantage by presenting himself as a political outsider. Just like Donald Trump and Matteo Salvini, Bolsonaro despises political correctness and campaigned for the presidency on a platform of conservative values and law-and-order policies. There are in fact stark similarities between Trump’s “Make America Great Again” slogan and Bolsonaro’s 2018 presidential campaign slogan, “Faça o Brasil grande de novo” (Make Brazil Great Again). This type of nostalgic nationalism is also present in Salvini’s 2018 presidential slogan, “Prima gli Italiani” (Italians First!). While Salvini is almost twenty years younger than Bolsonaro, and might be more adept in his digital skills, both leaders represent themselves on Instagram

in line with far-right nationalistic, anti-immigration, religiously conservative, and antiliberal imaginaries. Labeled a racist, homophobe, and misogynist by some, Bolsonaro was stabbed during his presidential campaign in September 2018, which required him to continue campaigning first from the hospital and then from home.³⁴ Due to his strong social media presence, this gave Bolsonaro's followers a window into the private space of his home.

When Bolsonaro posted images of his health recovery, the Other that re-surfaces is the evil enemy who stabbed him once and keeps trying to damage his persona. Comfort food is visible in the background yet is key for capturing people's attention for his divisive discourse. In one of Bolsonaro's first videos from the hospital, he poses barely covered by a hospital gown, showing some of his scars to the camera in front of a tray with unappetizing hospital food. In the accompanying text he acknowledges that most Brazilians could not afford his treatment and promises more funding. But more importantly, he uses his semi-naked, scarred body as a vehicle for thanking the federal police for the investigation of the "terrorist act" that almost cost him his life. In the posts, Bolsonaro creates boundaries of moral belonging between good and reckless Brazilians, such as delinquents, by emphasizing crime and revenge. What is curious is that felons are at the same scale of evil as his other enemies: the political left.

Like other far-right populist leaders, Bolsonaro sees himself as the victim of a leftist conspiracy against him, and against the nation. An analysis of his captions shows the degree of his deep contempt for a political and intellectual elite that is always unhappy, always fretting about negative things like sexism, racism, or climate change. A left that, with their extreme moralism, steals people's enjoyment of simple, everyday pleasures. This can be seen in figure 14-6, captioned "Too much racism and homophobia together . . . no more political correctness. Please comment and share."³⁵ The ultimate goal of the post seems to be to show that Bolsonaro has supporters of color, refuting progressive politicians and intellectuals' accusations of racism.

Bolsonaro's self-styled persona goes hand in hand with his antiestablishment discourse. In fact, images of Bolsonaro eating simple food reinforce a discourse based on economic austerity, religious ascetism, and health recovery. The president's professional *mise-en-scène* defies that of traditional politicians: posts of him working show him as often in suit and tie as working at his desk in shorts and a T-shirt, with some breadcrumbs stacked up against his computer and the aroma of coffee almost palpable. Food is never the point in Bolsonaro's posts but rather an empty signifier that directs people's attention toward his political goals, just like Salvini's. However, both far-right leaders differ starkly in how they present food. While food is visually central in Salvini's posts, with many close-ups of traditional Italian dishes, it is backgrounded in Bolsonaro's Instagram account. Bolsonaro poses with mundane commodities such as cof-



FIGURE 14-6.
 Jair Bolsonaro's (#jairmessiasbolsonaro) posts position leftist criticisms of social problems as destroying simple pleasures. April 14, 2018.

fee, bananas, a slice of bread with condensed milk, or other simple dishes. The element of comfort comes not from traditional *savoir faire* but from a simplicity that resonates emotionally with people's little daily pleasures.

While Bolsonaro's fondness for fast food is well-known, the way he curates his Instagram account is quite different. Putting health recovery above indulgence, simple food constructs his humble persona but also his victory—personal and political. Posing in a hospital bed next to a bowl of dull soup and exposing his scars, Bolsonaro embodies the wounds of a nation deeply affected by violence, insecurity, stark inequality, and economic stagnation. In this sharing of both the people's suffering and the people's small pleasures, the leader presents himself as authentically Brazilian (fig. 14-7). During his recovery, Bolsonaro expresses his yearning for “real food,” especially bread with condensed milk, which he often eats for breakfast.³⁶ Through the contrast between food posts and food yearnings, we can feel the extent to which the attack deprived Bolsonaro of simple everyday pleasures. Joys stolen by his aggressor, who directly stabbed him, but also by the political left that the attacker is associated with—and whose permanent attacks threaten the humble gratifications of his everyday life. A political outsider, Bolsonaro is himself just another victim of Brazil's somber reality. However, once home, he is able to surrender to simple comforts, such as a cup of home-brewed coffee or an ice cream on a hot day, which become markers of his recovery.

While Salvini seems to cherish food by engaging with it sensorially—by look-



FIGURE 14-7. Jair Bolsonaro (#jairmessiasbolsonaro) used his recovery to solidify perceptions of himself as a political outsider and as one of the people. February 8, 2019, and October 19, 2018.

ing at it, smelling it, and touching it—Bolsonaro displays indifference to the substance of his food. Fruit, rolls, tea, some sweets in the background . . . that is all he reveals. The only full meals he shares are ones with blue-collar workers who represent people’s security, whether policemen or firefighters. Therefore, food as an empty signifier acquires various meanings: recovery and austerity, but also a love for law and order. The post in figure 14-8 shows a Bolsonaro who loves hard-working Brazilians who work for the country as well as for his family. In return, he offers many kisses: “kkkkkkkkkk.”

When Matteo Salvini poses on Instagram wearing an informal shirt from his favorite football team, he is always well-groomed. Bolsonaro’s posts, however, are characterized by a sort of unapologetic messiness. This is reflected in his physical appearance, whether posing semi-naked in a hospital gown, shaving shirtless in the bathroom, or having breakfast with still uncombed hair. This messy aesthetic is also visible in his personal spaces, such that the leader is not embarrassed to show his dirty terrace or sink full of crumbs and food leftovers. In fact, Bolsonaro’s modest and seemingly uncurated aesthetics recall Gauber Rocha’s influential essay on the “aesthetics of poverty,” which refers to the “pov-

FIGURE 14-8. When Jair Bolsonaro's posts (#jairmessiasbolsonaro) show him eating a full meal, he is typically with blue-collar workers. October 30, 2018.



erty porn” aesthetics that permeate most foreign representations of Brazil.³⁷ Bolsonaro’s poorly taken photographs, often blurry and out of focus, either too light or too dark, are part of his performed, unstudied aesthetic; they convey his efforts to represent himself as an authentic man of the people, rather than a polished politician. By rejecting photographic skills and Instagram filters, he seems to renounce all excess, both in the food he eats and in the way he visually represents it, adding to the aura of puritanism that characterizes his social media persona.

It is legitimate to wonder, though, to what extent Bolsonaro’s social media persona corresponds with his real-life habits. A parallel anonymous Instagram account, #bolsonaro.comendo, shows the president enjoying fast food, such as a hamburger or pizza—a contrast from the bland diet he chooses to pose with. This fake anonymous Instagram account impersonates the president and is written from an ironic standpoint in which an imagined Bolsonaro makes fun of himself. While it is not openly critical, the account shows what is constantly evoked but missing from Bolsonaro’s official posts; it includes irony and humor, and reveals his “real” yearnings, which are not so healthy.

The fake account includes a few memes that combine images of Bolsonaro and climate activist Greta Thunberg. While in one post (14-9, top), they are mutually accusing each other of stealing their enjoyment—Thunberg’s dreams and Bolsonaro’s doughnuts—another post shows them sharing a Brazilian breakfast at Bolsonaro’s place in complete harmony (fig. 14-9, bottom). The casual humor of the scenes contrasts with the stark reality. Bolsonaro has in fact been widely criticized by climate change advocates for his management of the 2019 Amazon



FIGURE 14-9. The anonymous account that impersonates Jair Bolsonaro (#bolsonaro.comendo) ironically juxtaposes Bolsonaro with climate activist Greta Thunberg. September 28 and 27, 2019.

rain forest fires and for accommodating farmers' demands for more cropland, one of the major causes of deforestation.³⁸ And Greta Thunberg has been the object of Bolsonaro's hatred, just as another activist, Carola Rackete, became one of Salvini's obsessions.

The doctored posts of Bolsonaro with Greta Thunberg evoke a moralizing left that is constantly worried about virtue and political correctness. Bolsonaro's stances against what he calls "cultural Marxism," "gender ideology," or "environmental psychoses" align with his Instagram attacks against a leftist elite whose mood seems to be permanent discontent.³⁹ Some Brazilian scholars believe that Bolsonaro's creation of a symbolic culture war comes from the lack of a clear political program beyond championing guns and police control—something otherwise common among populists. Therefore, Instagram food posts can be seen as Bolsonaro's strategy for presenting himself as a humble, authentic leader who cares for the people, calling attention to everyday cultural tropes that connect with the people while backgrounding his political inconsistencies.

From Food Porn to Food Populism

This chapter examines the use of food posts in the official Instagram account of two prominent far-right populist leaders: Italy's former deputy prime minister, Matteo Salvini, and Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro. The analysis has shown that political leaders' food posts are never just about food. Salvini and Bolsonaro both take an exclusionary populist and antielitist stance by posting food images in the name of "the people"—that is, a nation represented as a mythical unified whole that existed in a past era in which cultural habits and conventions did not need to be justified. Far-right politicians' Instagram accounts use food as an empty signifier to invoke both positive emotions of familiarity and negative emotions of *ressentiment* against the political and intellectual elite. The emotional appeal of food serves as a way to connect with citizens who feel compelled by both the enjoyment of tradition, or "food puritanism," and fear of a globalizing world that seems to be leaving them behind—such as the food porn images of exotic, good-looking dishes that are beyond their reach.

The analysis reveals that, while we can find elements of national pride and popular culture in both cases, Salvini uses his Instagram account in a way that foregrounds the symbolic power of food-as-nation, as a return to a pre-globalization era that values nativism, heritage, and products "made in Italy." In Bolsonaro's case, shared images of food become a strategy for positioning himself on the side of the humble Brazilian masses, as someone who shares their socioeconomic struggles in a quasi-aesthetics of "hunger."⁴⁰ Therefore, the images of Salvini, the Italian glutton, and Bolsonaro, a humble Brazilian

president, construct food as a cultural trope that mediates the symbolic connection of far-right leaders with their voters.

Making familiarity-based arguments allows political leaders to create boundaries by demarcating authenticity as a marker of inclusion, while excluding the foodie, intellectual elite who are accused of failing to properly perform nationalism.⁴¹ In fact, the simple and apparently spontaneous aesthetics of the posts contrast starkly with Instagram's highly polished and curated images of food porn. Salvini and Bolsonaro operate within a sort of food puritanism: both are committed to tradition, authenticity, and immediacy beyond aesthetic values. Both Salvini's self-indulgence and Bolsonaro's abstention are characterized by raw, unappealing aesthetics. Far-right populist leaders demonstrate how Instagram can be a site for food porn, but also for food populism—that is, for the use of food as an empty signifier that embodies polarizing populist discourses. Food is not the message itself, but a means to convey the leaders' political stances.

Matteo Salvini and Jair Bolsonaro are not alone in doing this: Nigel Farage in the United Kingdom and Tomio Okamura in the Czech Republic also use food as an empty signifier. And of course, using food as a means of bonding with “the people” is not only a far-right strategy. One only has to follow U.S. representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on Instagram to realize the importance of everyday popular culture, such as food, in connecting politicians with their followers. All in all, this analysis underscores the need to consider the role of cultural tropes, from food to sports to pets, in connecting politicians and their followers, and positioning them against elites. The politicization of everyday familiar symbols sheds light on the use of popular culture as an empty signifier that serves populist, simplistic yet flashy recipes for solving people's problems: to stop eating Nutella if you can, or to poop every other day, if you can. This is just as important as understanding whether cultural tropes can also be mobilized in a way that supports “authentic” democratic politics.

Notes

1. The popular hazelnut spread Nutella belongs to the Italian brand Ferrero, which uses Turkish hazelnuts because Italian production was insufficient for meeting Nutella's demand.

2. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 466.

3. Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 5, 16.

4. In Anne E. McBride, “Food Porn,” *Journal of Food and Culture* 10, no. 1 (February 2010): 38–46, food critic Richard MAGEE delineates the idea of “food puritanism” in reference to traditional, conservative ways of representing food, such as that of Martha Stewart.

5. The Italian elections were held on March 4, 2018, and the Brazilian ones on October 7, 2018.

6. Nico Carpentier and Benjamin de Cleen, "Bringing Discourse Theory into Media Studies," *Journal of Language and Politics* 6, no. 2 (January 2007): 265–93.

7. Michael Kaplan, "The Rhetoric of Hegemony: Laclau, Radical Democracy, and the Rule of Tropes," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 43, no. 3 (January 2010): 253–83; Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 71. Signifiers can only represent totality by stretching their own meaning, losing their specific sense and becoming what Laclau calls an "empty signifier."

8. Emily Contois, "Welcome to Flavortown: Guy Fieri's Populist American Food Culture," *American Studies* 57, no. 3 (January 2018): 150, 152.

9. Sara Garcia Santamaria, "The Italian 'Taste': The Far-Right and the Performance of Exclusionary Populism during the 2019 European Elections," *Tripodos* 49, no. 1 (2021): 129–49.

10. Daniele Albertazzi, Arianna Giovannini, and Antonella Seddone, "No Regionalism Please, We are Leghisti! The Transformation of the Italian Lega Nord under the Leadership of Matteo Salvini," *Regional and Federal Studies* 28, no. 1 (September 2018): 1–27.

11. Andres Schipani, "Brazil: Jair Bolsonaro pushes culture war over economic reform," *Financial Times*, August 24, 2019, www.ft.com/content/f470734e-c41a-11e9-a8e9-296ca66511c9, accessed September 10, 2019; Daniel Aldana Cohen, "Stop Eco-Apartheid: The Left's Challenge in Bolsonaro's Brazil," *Dissent* 66, no. 1 (November 2019): 23–31. Bolsonaro's austere eating habits cannot hide his politics of "eco-apartheid" that have sparked a war over the Amazon's natural resources, including food production, threatening the livelihood of the poorest.

12. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 153.

13. Benjamin de Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis, "Distinctions and Articulations: A Discourse Theoretical Framework for the Study of Populism and Nationalism," *Javnost—The Public* 24, no. 4 (July 2017): 301–19; Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 48, no. 2 (September 2004): 542–63.

14. Margaret Canovan, *Nationhood and Political Theory* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 1998), 68.

15. Sven Engesser, Nicole Ernst, Frank Esser, and Florin Büchel, "Populism and Social Media: How Politicians Spread a Fragmented Ideology," *Communication and Society* 10, no. 8 (2017): 1109–26; Nicole Ernst, Sven Engesser, Florin Büchel, Sina Blassnig, and Frank Esser, "Extreme Parties and Populism: An Analysis of Facebook and Twitter Across Six Countries," *Information, Communication and Society* 20, no. 2 (May 2017), 1–18.

16. Wendy Hunter and Timothy Power, "Bolsonaro and Brazil's Illiberal Backlash," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 1 (January 2019): 68–82; Roberta Bracciale and Antonio Martella, "Define the Populist Political Communication Style: The Case of Italian Political Leaders on Twitter," *Information, Communication and Society* 20, no. 9 (May 2017): 1310–29; Engesser, Ernst, Esser, and Büchel, "Populism and Social Media."

17. Yasmin Ibrahim, "Food Porn and the Invitation to Gaze: Ephemeral Consumption and the Digital Spectacle," *International Journal of E-Politics* 6, no. 3 (July

2015): 1–12; Simpson in Cari Romm, “What ‘Food Porn’ Does to the Brain,” *Atlantic*, April 20, 2015, www.theatlantic.com, accessed October 16, 2019.

18. McBride, “Food Porn.”

19. Tisha DeJmanee, “‘Food Porn’ as Postfeminist Play: Digital Femininity and the Female Body on Food Blogs,” *Television and New Media* 17, no. 5 (December 2015): 2; Krishnendu Ray, “Domesticating Cuisine: Food and Aesthetics on American Television,” *Gastronomica: The Journal of Critical Food Studies* 7, no. 1 (February 2007): 58.

20. Stephanie Shih, “Current Food Photography Styles and Trends: A Cake Case Study,” *Desserts for Breakfast* (blog), June 12, 2012, www.dessertsforbreakfast.com/2012/06/current-food-photography-styles-and.html, accessed January 12, 2019.

21. Mikko Salmela and Christian von Scheve, “Emotional Roots of Right-Wing Political Populism,” *Humanity and Society* 42, no. 4 (October 2018): 434–54; Minkenberg, “The Renewal of the Radical Right: Between Modernity and Anti-Modernity,” *Government and Opposition* 35, no. 2 (April 2003): 170–88.

22. Salmela and von Scheve, “Emotional Roots.”

23. Matteo Salvini (@matteosalviniofficial), Instagram post, February 17, 2019, www.instagram.com/p/Bt_Ih5ZBYar/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

24. Matteo Salvini (@matteosalviniofficial), Instagram post, July 7, 2019, www.instagram.com/p/BznaSj8IMMH/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

25. Matteo Salvini (@matteosalviniofficial), Instagram post, February 8, 2019, www.instagram.com/p/BtoiSM6Bajt/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

26. Matteo Salvini (@matteosalviniofficial), Instagram post, December 22, 2018, www.instagram.com/p/BrsAxFPhK0x/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

27. Andrea Indini, “In Difesa dei Tortellini (e della Tradizione),” *Il Giornale* (blog), October 1, 2019, <http://blog.ilgiornale.it/indini/2019/10/01/in-difesa-dei-tortellini-e-della-nostra-tradizione>, accessed October 21, 2019.

28. Matteo Salvini (@matteosalviniofficial), Instagram post, December 27, 2018, www.instagram.com/p/Br55sewBOW6/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

29. Matteo Salvini (@matteosalviniofficial), Instagram post, May 6, 2019, www.instagram.com/p/BxHGwWrn-le/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

30. Matteo Salvini (@matteosalviniofficial), Instagram post, January 26, 2019, www.instagram.com/p/BtHBBcTh6xO/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

31. Shih, “Current Food Photography.”

32. Matteo Salvini (@matteosalviniofficial), Instagram post, January 1, 2019, www.instagram.com/p/BsGt7yNhjyx/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

33. Carola Rackete became the target of Matteo Salvini’s anger when the German ship captain, who rescues immigrants at sea for Sea-Watch, docked a rescue ship with fifty-three migrants in Lampedusa, Italy, without governmental authorization on June 29, 2019.

34. Elaine Brum, “How a Homophobic, Misogynistic, Racist ‘Thing’ Could Be Brazil’s Next President,” *Guardian*, October 6, 2018, www.theguardian.com, accessed September 17, 2019.

35. Jair Bolsonaro (@jair_bolsonaro_presidente), Instagram post, April 14, 2018, www.instagram.com/p/BhjmDOxDplA/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.
36. Jair Bolsonaro (@jair_bolsonaro_presidente), Instagram post, February 8, 2019, www.instagram.com/p/B29uiwrHx5u/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link; Jair Bolsonaro (@jair_bolsonaro_presidente), Instagram post, October 19, 2018, www.instagram.com/p/BpHLNk_nZtV/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.
37. Gauber Rocha, "Uma Estética da Fome," *Revista da Civilização Brasileira* 3, no. 1 (July 1965): 165–70.
38. "Amazon Fires Increase by 84% in One Year—Space Agency," BBC, August 21, 2019, www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-49415973, accessed October 28, 2019.
39. Schipani, "Brazil."
40. Rocha, "Uma Estética da Fome."
41. Tuukka Ylä-Anttila, "Familiarity as a Tool of Populism: Political Appropriation of Shared Experiences and the Case of *Suvivirsi*," *Acta Sociologica* 60, no. 4 (2017): 342—57.