



Viewpoint

Ten years after the G8 Summit in Genoa

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Ten years on, many people are still trying to understand the reasons for the terrible violence that sections of the Italian police force inflicted on those demonstrating against the G8 summit in Genoa. Asking why is understandable but, to be frank, is not only naive but a cause for concern because it shows they do not realise the extent of the neo-conservative experiment in the management of social and political protest. They fail to recognise that acts of brutality, torture and violations of fundamental rights by a sizeable portion of the police force have become commonplace over the last decade. This may be due to narcotisation, or the “short-term memory” that the media produces.

However, when recalling episodes of police violence, we should also remember other acts of violence carried out against working people. For example, the neighbourhoods afflicted with toxic waste dumps or the residents of Val Susa affected by large public works like the *Gronda* in Genoa, [2] who are anguished by the asbestos the building programme releases into their environment. Let us also recall the blows inflicted on the l’Aquila earthquake victims (who travelled to Rome to protest to the government about the tragedy to which they have been abandoned), or the Sardinian shepherds, the residents of Quirra, or the “No dal Molin” and “No Ponte” campaigners.[3] We should also remember the students, teachers and researchers who education minister Maria Stella Gelmini branded terrorists or quasi-terrorists because they dared to express hostility towards her “reforms.” How many incidents of this kind have there been? They do not occur just in Italy - think of the police operations against social and environmental campaigns in Spain, the UK, Germany, France and elsewhere.

There are an endless amount of texts, images, videos, in-depth reports and laws surrounding the Genoa G8 summit (see <http://www.processig8.org/>)

But the research has not been given adequate resources. The considerable funds available for European research are usually directed at *embedded* research to improve military-police repressive capabilities.

Genoa Summit: Violent management of protest

The Genoa G8 summit marked a new peak in the neo-liberal/neo-conservative experiment in the violent management of protest in a so-called democratic country (see, Pepino, 2001; Palidda 2001 and 2008, as well as Amnesty, 2001). The imperative was to destroy the momentum which, from Seattle onwards, had fed an international anti-G8 movement that had gained support even among the middle classes and sections of the bourgeoisie. This was unacceptable to an international world order that expects the freedom to use its police forces to crush G8 protests and any other mobilisation expressing dissent.

Hence, the Genoa G8 was not an “exception,” a unique case or a democratic “incident,” it was not just the accrual of an unfortunate coincidence of mistakes and clumsy acts at a wretched juncture; it was the predictable outcome of a multiplicity of acts and behaviours - which may have sometimes been incidental - but were nonetheless conditioned and guided by the game played by strong actors within a framework that, in fact, explains its outcome. Unfortunately, hardly anyone predicted what this *framework*, which has been forged since the late 1970s, would produce. We were already in the context of total war that the neo-conservatives made permanent after 11 September 2001. Thus, it was “normal” for the right, which had gained power only two months before the Genoa event, to consider that it had a “duty” to do more than the centre-left, (particularly Massimo D’Alema and Gerardo Bianco) [4] had already done.

The RMA (*Revolution in Military Affairs*) also involved a “revolution in police affairs,” creating a police-military hybrid that shapes global policing and its practices (see Dal Lago and Palidda, eds, 2010). Hence, demonstrators at the G8 were treated, or likened to, supporters of the “absolute enemy” (“rogue states,” terrorists or mafias), rather than peaceful protestors to be negotiated with over mobilisations, as should be the norm in so-called democratic countries. Thus, in Genoa, we found special police units comprised of officers who had already distinguished themselves in the same zone where Italian military personnel had tortured Somalis and where Ilaria Alpi and Miran Hrovatin were slain (see <http://www.ilariaalpi.it>). These units consisted of police officers who learnt their methods in operations against mafia syndicates and hooligans or during the evictions of Roma people. They were familiar with the use of force and dubious in terms of their professional ethics.

This was accompanied by the militarisation of the terrain, the suspension of the democratic rule of law and a media campaign linking protest to terrorism. Derogation from the rule of law became legitimate, and these derogations included torture. In Italy this is an offence that is liable to incur only a light sentence (with charges such as bodily harm) that when proven is subject to the statute of limitations. Those responsible for acts of torture in Bolzaneto benefited from this, [cf. M. Calandri], as did the Parma “traffic wardens” [5] and the authors of this sort of treatment in prisons, police stations and detention centres, regardless of the so-called “fast trial” (see <http://www.osservatoriorepressione.org>, Amnesty’s annual reports, Palidda, ed., 2010). This asymmetry of power allowed the police forces to go on the rampage without hesitation or fear, certain of impunity if not reward. This scenario remains true today.

Although shared by all countries (power invariably legitimates and directly or indirectly safeguards its praetorian guards to carry out the dirty work needed to protect it), this fact seems more overt in the Italian case. The scandal of the policing of the Genoa G8 summit did not lead the Italian political and administrative authorities to produce even a token scapegoat, despite comparisons between the events at Ranieri barracks in Naples, piazza Manin, the Diaz school, Bolzaneto and Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. Moreover, police officers responsible for violence have even been promoted to important positions. This procedure, which is reminiscent of a fascist or mafia-run regime, has become customary, further heightening the impotence of those who defend the democratic rule of law.

Although never acknowledged by the respective chains of command, the tactics used by the police at the G8 lacked coordination due to conflicts and competition, particularly between the state police and the *carabinieri* (police force with military status). Each police force pursued its own strategy to crush the demonstrators, some even attacking Catholic pacifists. The freedom granted to members

of the *black bloc* was not accidental, and they were able to carry out actions that lacked the justifications proclaimed on its websites. The *bloc*’s behaviour served as a means by which to justify the actions of police forces.

The trials

After a decade of trials, the *carabinieri* and *guardia di finanza* (customs and excise police) emerged unscathed. As for the media, they supported preparations for the G8 summit by stirring hatred against the “no globals” among the police rank and file and encouraging the fears of conformists. During and immediately after the G8, reports of police violence were given attention; but once the emotion had passed the chorus against violent demonstrators started up again. In the prosecuting magistrate’s final address, 25 demonstrators were held responsible for all of the violence and destruction committed at the summit, rather than just the offences for which there was evidence of their guilt. In the final court case, six were convicted and given sentences that ranged from seven to 15 years for acts of destruction rather than violence against people (such lengthy sentences are rare in cases involving killings not to mention serious financial, health or environmental damage caused by white-collar workers). The outcome of the trials served to confirm that the justice system was deferential towards the police forces. Only on appeal was there a partial atonement by some of the investigating magistrates. Ten years on, the trials corroborate the message that the police forces are always right (cf. the legitimate defence ruling on the killing of Carlo Giuliani) and that any violent gesture by demonstrators is unacceptable, even if in response to unlawful violence by the police.

In Italy, this view is so widely held that it attains near unanimity in media outlets and among political parties and opinion leaders. The Italian justice system did not have a word to say about whether the police upheld the democratic rule of law, thus endorsing justicialism (a fascistic theory of government in Argentina under the Peron administration involving government intervention and economic control to ensure social justice and public welfare) in which abuses are carried out “with good intentions.” It is the logic of the new champions of “law, order, hygiene, decorum and morality,” of zero tolerance to create a conformist citizenry. It strikes at the weak, the first victims of genuine insecurity. It follows the logic of the oxymoron (“just” or “humanitarian wars”), of philosophers descended from Tocqueville who prescribed the extermination of Algerians who were refractory to French civilisation.

In Italy there has never been a liberal-democratic tradition (not to be mistaken for a neo-conservative free trade policy). The left seems to have turned to justicialism and is uninterested in effective democratic control of the police forces, whereas the right is reactionary, defending the police and military powers to the hilt. Most politicians seek to

indulge these coercive forces in order to win their favour. Therefore, Italy has little respect for the human rights that are often violated by police forces, which mainly harm the weakest social subjects. It should be noted that so-called victimisation surveys are merely telephone inquiries of a sample that only includes holders of telephone landlines. They are conducted in Italian and therefore the marginalised, the Roma and migrants (especially those termed “illegal”), who are most likely to be victims of abuse and violence, are never “surveyed.” None of the questions acknowledge the possibility that an author of a violent act could belong to the police force.

Despite exasperation at the asymmetry of power, the weakening of political representation and the trade unions, there has been a revival in mobilisations in some western countries and even more in other countries, for example the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere. However, power in the dominant countries appears “armoured” or “immunised” (see, A. Mastropaolo), unaffected by protests thanks to the heightened asymmetry of power that is nourished by a weak parliamentary opposition that is influenced by *think tanks* advocating free trade. Nonetheless, collective dynamics have re-emerged with a growing section of society no longer able to bear the consequences of free trade policies.

Protest and dissent

Meanwhile, at a supranational level, at a time when there is no single political authority, a “European gendarmerie” is being formed (<http://www.eurogendfor.eu/>, see, A. Iacuzzi, <http://www.altrenotizie.org/esteri/4005-la-stranapolizia-europea.html>). This development has been ignored, not just by the public, but also by parliamentarians. What is of concern is that *Eurogendfor* is not known for its democratic principles or its transparency but is being shaped, despite being a force dependent on a military hierarchy, to carry out a role in managing public order and to intervene against demonstrations and uprisings.

The neo-liberal claim to manage dissent by ruling out negotiations to promote the peaceful management of protest, cannot last. Even those who work in this field realise that the police forces have been distracted from many of their competencies over the last 20 years. These tasks are indispensable for their survival as social institutions and require a degree of popular support, or at least social neutrality. Without this, the outcome will be an increase in underground economies, tax evasion, work-related injuries and diseases, pollution, environmental mafias, etc. Thus, real insecurity is produced. However, this is concealed by the dominant discourse on insecurity that blames those who are marginalised or “subversive”, and who must be persecuted.

This current neo-conservative juncture is destined to end, but it is an illusion to believe that we may be

heading towards a new “New Deal” (as Barack Obama’s election in the USA led some to believe). What is clear is that it is impossible for the majority of the population to passively suffer the devastating effects of neo-liberal policies. Like in Bourghiba Avenue, Tunis or Tahrir Square, in Puerta del Sol (Madrid) and other European squares, new hope is being primed. The practice of peaceful (although not pacifist) resistance shows that the asymmetry of power can be overturned - albeit partially and temporarily - through mass political action without the need for heroism or extremism, or for leaders and large traditional organisations.

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Endnotes

1. This text was first published in Italian in Alfabeta magazine, July 2011. Publication of a more extensive analysis by the author, "Twenty years of distraction of the police forces and justice system from effective protection of the democratic rule of law", is forthcoming from Statewatch.
2. A large motorway project involving extensive works.
3. The first against the expansion of a U.S. army base, the second against a large high-speed railway development in Val Susa in Piedmont.
4. Two leading figures in the centre-left government coalition when a demonstration in Naples was violently repressed in March 2001.
5. By beating him.

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