

State Repression Against Anarchists in Italy

2005–2006

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This past May, the Italian state began another round of repression against anarchists. The more sporadic state harassment anarchists had experienced over the past few years gave way to what is clearly a more focused attack. This reflects the growing repressive reality around the globe, the needs of the Italian state in the present circumstances and its attempts to find ways to strike the anarchist movement and all anti-institutional movements of resistance and revolt in their totality. Thus, these events demand more than news and calls for solidarity; they require an attempt to analyze the situation on several levels in order to develop meaningful and substantial forms of active solidarity.

The May arrests

Perhaps it would be most accurate to see the arrest of Francesco Gioia in Barcelona Spain on May 11 as the beginning of this wave of repression. Francesco is an anarchist from the Italian group Il Silvestre. He was placed under house arrest last year in relation to actions in the region of Pisa claimed by the COR (Revolutionary Offensive Cells). He escaped from house arrest last summer and went on the lam to Spain. Although “subversive association with the aim of terrorism” had not been one of the original charges at the time the arrests were first made, it was added to the charges, a fact that made the recapture of Francesco more imperative to the judiciary officials of Italy. So a joint operation between Italian *cambinieri*¹ and Spanish police under the aegis of Europol captured Francesco in Barcelona on May 11.

On May 12, in the region of Lecce, a force of 150 cops from several police forces (including special anti-terrorism and bomb units) carried out “Operation Night-time.” They raided and searched dozens of anarchists’ houses and spaces, making five arrests and issuing ten more notices of investigation. Cristian Pal-ladini, Salvatore Signore, and Saverio Pellegrino were taken to prison, while Annalisa Capone and Angela Marina Ferrari were placed under house arrest. The most significant charge is “subversive association with the aim of terrorism and subversion of the democratic state.” In addition, there were charges for attacks against the Cathedral and the home of the priest, Father Cesare Lodeserto (who had run the local Center for Temporary Residence (CPT)² until he was arrested for “private violence” and kidnapping of inmates at the center); attacks against the Banca Intesa where

¹ The *carabinieri* are the Italian national police force, a part of the military. They operate abroad as well as in Italy. For example, they have carried out military operations in Somalia and the Balkans, and the current Italian troops in Iraq are *carabinieri*.

² CPTs are concentration camps for undocumented immigrants, who are held there awaiting deportation.

the Regina Pacis Foundation (through which the CPT is run) keeps its funds; instigation to revolt due to a march in front of the CPT that ended in conflicts with the authorities; “harassment” and “defamation” of collaborators in the operation of the CPT and “dirtying” the entrance of one of these collaborators’ houses; organizing an unauthorized march against the Benetton corporation that has taken over a large portion of Patagonia where the Mapuche people have been living for centuries; vandalism against a Benetton store and against an Esso station;³ occupying the abandoned space station Capolinea; and writing on walls. Along with the searches and arrests in Lecce, there were searches throughout the rest of Italy as well.

A week later on May 19, another police operation occurred in Sardinia. Police searched over fifty anarchist houses and spaces and placed seven anarchists under house arrest. (These seven have not made their names public.) Charges include the infamous “subversive association with the aim of terrorism and subversion of the democratic state” and “propaganda favoring and celebrating subversive practices.” All of those arrested are under investigation in relation to parcel bombs that were sent to a *carabinieri* barracks in 2003 and an arson attack against the electoral office of the *Forza Italia*, party⁴ that happened in June 2004. They are charged as “members or sympathizers” of the FRARIA Center for Anarchist Studies in Caliri. Twenty-six other anarchists have been placed under investigation for “subversive association” and “propaganda and celebration of subversive practices.”

On May 26, operations were carried out in the vicinities of both Bologna and Rome, involving 110 searches, 10 arrests and 21 others being put under investigation. All of those arrested were charged with “subversive association” with the usual aims. The seven arrested by the Bologna justice system (Lucia Rippa, Mat-tia Bertoni, Elsa Caroli, Teo Tavernese, Marco Foresto, Danilo Cremonese, and Valentina Speziale) were accused of being members of an organization that claimed certain bomb attacks, the Informal Anarchist Federation (FAInformal) and of spreading subversive propaganda through the Anarchist Black Cross bulletin. The DIGOs⁵ closed down the local ABC website. Meanwhile, the Roman public prosecutor issued arrest warrants for five anarchists, two of whom – Danilo and Valentina – also had arrest warrants in •Bologna. The other three are Stefano Del Moro, Massimo Leonard!, and Claudia Cospito. Along with the usual “subversive association” charge, they have charges relating to bomb attacks against the minister of Justice of Viterbo and to the sacking of a McDonald’s that happened toward the end of a demonstration in 1999.

³ The European branch of Exxon, suppliers of fuel for the Coalition forces in the war in Iraq and Afghanistan.

⁴ Right-wing party to which Italian prime minister Berlusconi belongs.

⁵ Italian political police

The arrests have come up before the so-called Courts of Liberty of the various regions where the judges determine the legitimacy of the arrest warrants. These courts upheld the arrests everywhere except in Bologna where the judge in charge concluded that the evidence was simply too weak. So five of the comrades arrested in Bologna were freed. Danilo and Valentina, who also had arrest warrants in Rome, remain in prison.

Various solidarity activities have been going on steadily since these arrests, ranging from benefit concerts and dinners to marches and demonstrations to occupations of buildings to attacks against police property and the property of Italian multinationals like Benetton and Fiat. Alongside the ongoing activity in Italy, anarchists in Greece and Spain have been particularly active in support of those arrested. It is not surprising, in this light, that the repression spread beyond the borders of one country.

On June 25, in Barcelona, anarchists held a demonstration in solidarity with the people arrested in Italy. Police attacked the demonstrations, causing many injuries. Seven anarchists were arrested and beaten. Two were released that night, and over the next couple of weeks, all but one were released. Alberto Bettini, an Italian anarchist, remains in the men's prison in Barcelona.

The context of the repression

This round of repression against anarchists is not just a state whim of the moment. There are reasons why it is happening now and being carried out in the way it is. First of all, over the past few decades the capitalist social order has undergone changes creating precariousness and a lack of place within the existing social world for more and more people and threatening all except those at the top. Newly dispossessed indigenous people, undocumented immigrants, the homeless, temporary workers, unemployed youth, refugees from war, poverty and disaster, inhabitants of shantytowns that represent the place of greatest growth in the burgeoning metropolises of this world — here is a growing underclass that does not fit within the framework of citizenship or consumerism and thus has no place in this world. Inevitably, this underclass is restless.

It is impossible to claim that the social consensus necessary to the democratic state is there, unless these undesirables are excluded. This process of exclusion includes both the blatant physical creation of spaces of exception, such as the CPTs in Italy and their equivalents throughout the world, and the more subtle use of propaganda to drive wedges between those at the bottom and those who still manage to maintain a precarious hold on a place within this society. Undocumented aliens are particularly singled out as threats to the jobs of the “native-born” exploited

and as potential terrorists. In this way, the state and its media seek to keep the exploited from seeing their common condition and finding the ways to intertwine their struggles against this condition.

Nonetheless, the restlessness that precariousness imposes has led to rebellion. In Italy, immigrants both within and outside of the CPTs have been rebelling. And anarchists have been there acting in solidarity. This is not at all surprising. If undocumented immigrants have had the condition of being strangers everywhere in the world thrust upon them, it is a condition that anarchists, who desire a life so utterly different than that which is imposed on us, know quite well. And the recognition of this potential (and frequently actualized) complicity between undocumented immigrants and anarchists certainly plays a role in the state's attempt to isolate anarchists from the general populace as well, portraying them as "terrorists."

In Italy, the democratic state has its allies in the various neo- and "post"-fascist groups. These groups help to raise hysteria about the "invasion" of foreigners, often participate in police raids in immigrant neighborhoods and, over the past few months, have made several attacks against anarchist spaces and individuals. It is important to recognize here that these fascists are serving the interests of the *democratic* state to keep the exploited in their atomized roles as citizens, producers and consumers, and to demonize those of the exploited who cannot or will not fit into these roles.

In short, the precariousness that defines every aspect of life in the present world also puts the state and capital at risk. They can only operate on a perpetual defensive, going from one emergency measure to the next. If the restlessness that dominates most of existence is not channeled into ethnic, racial, or religious conflicts, representing the fear of the unknown, and portraying the state as the purveyor of stability, it might break out as rebellion against the horror of the known, a rebellion that recognizes the unknown as the realm of new possibilities for creating a different way of living. And this is what the state fears.

In this light, we can understand the focus of the Italian state on anarchists and others who choose to oppose it in a consistently self-determined, anti-institutional manner. It is certainly not the strength of anarchists that it fears, but its own weakness, and the capacity of anarchists to see their own condition in that of all of the excluded and to bring to that condition an embrace of the unknown that can move rebellion beyond sheer desperation to the exploration of possibilities for action, complicity and the creation of life. Since the huge and growing number of those who do not fit into the social order has made it impossible for the democratic state to maintain social consensus, an increasingly heated social war is inevitable. Thus, the democratic state is forced more and more to operate within a "state of exception" — so much so that the "exception" is proving to be the rule. And this could easily lead to the situation where the lie of rights and the "rule of law" are exposed

as simply one specific form of the arbitrary rule of the state. Only by the creation of the “other” — the supposed threat of the foreigner, the criminal, the terrorist, etc. that can justify this situation in the eyes of those who continue to see themselves as “included” — can the state put off this exposure of its nature. And those who are quick to point out its real nature, like anarchists, must be among those who are made “other.” The rise of the “war on terrorism,” the new laws passed in Italy and in Europe increasing police and judiciary powers in the face of the “terrorist threat,” the complete complicity of mass media with the state and the various associative laws already on the books, provide the state with the framework for pursuing this endeavor.

The methodology of the repression

There is a common thread that runs through all of these arrests as well as through the notices of investigation issued to so many anarchists who were not arrested. That is the charge of “subversive association with the aim of terrorism and subversion of the democratic state.” In fact, the evidence supporting any of the other charges is quite flimsy, but this charge is broad enough to require very little evidence. So it’s worth our while to look at it more closely.

The law against subversive association is article 270 of the Italian legal code. It was put into effect by Rocco, attorney general under Mussolini. The law was not rescinded when Italy reestablished a democratic state. Instead it has been amended a couple of times to give it more bite. One such amendment, added in the 1970s to counter the increasing use of insurgent violence against the Italian state, is paragraph 270bis dealing with “subversive association” with the aim of terrorism and “the subversion of the democratic order.” Nothing in the wording of this law requires those charged with it to ever actually carry out an act of violence against the state in order to be convicted. They only have to propose such actions. Thus, there is a certain flexibility to the law that is useful to the state.

The law has not yet been used successfully against anarchists, but starting with the Marini trial, its use has been increasing rapidly over the past several years, and not just against anarchists. In fact, more than 8,000 people have been charged with subversive association for various struggles that have happened in the past two years, and as social conflict heats up in Italy, this number could go into the tens of thousands.

The Italian state has had a problem trying to strike the anarchist movement in the country as a whole. The piecemeal approach involving convictions for specific acts was not enough. When Marini decided to go after the anarchists, he decided to make associative crimes the center of his investigation and prosecution. This was the first use (at least in recent times) of paragraph 270bis against anarchists. His hope (and that of the Italian state) was that this would prove to be a tool for striking the entire anarchist movement at once. Although the Marini trial certainly

drained a lot of energy in anarchist circle in the years and years that it dragged on, ultimately no one was convicted of 270bis or any other associative charge. The law had been written in a different time, when highly structured organizations were the most common form for insurgent groups to take. So with the disintegration of those forms of organization, the law became more difficult to apply.

In current struggle in Italy, whether anarchists are involved or not, the activity is carried out mostly by individuals or small, barely structured, usually temporary groups. As they had been previously applied, article 270 and paragraph 270bis were not able to deal with such a phenomenon. But those in power are experimenting in order to refine this repressive law. Interior minister Pisanu wants to add a new paragraph to article 270 that would specifically criminalize anarchists and other revolutionaries who cannot be repressed with the three existing paragraphs.

Certain steps have already been taken to refine this law. Since no large association exists, it is essential to find small associations. Thus, in 2001 in Taranto, some revolutionaries were prosecuted for a local 270bis. It was claimed that a local organization existed to commit crimes in the local area. This went almost unnoticed at the time within anarchist circles, and that is too bad. The situation was a testing ground for trying out the capacity for resisting a qualitative leap in the field of repression. The non-response among anarchists and other rebels opened the door to further experiments by the state.

That same year, a further step was taken in the investigation called "Rebel South." Rather than speaking of structures, the state spoke of a "coordination" among various organizations that shared a few objectives, the chief one supposedly being to bring the real conflicts of southern Italy and the world in general to Genoa. Though some resistance developed against this repressive operation, it faded quickly, and soon local investigations for 270bis began to proliferate.

Public prosecutor Vitello decided to take the experiment in a rather different direction. He opened the Cervantes investigation based on his hypothesis that there is already a national association for carrying out attacks, but that it is not organized according to the old norms. Rather, he claims, it functions according to the model of affinity groups. To build up the evidence for this "national association" Vitello encouraged public prosecutors to open local investigations in their regions. Vitello opened the first such investigation on February 17, 2004, against the Citizens' Committee Against Prison and Social Repression in Viterbo. Besides the usual 270bis, he claimed that the comrades were involved in the crimes cited in the Cervantes investigation. Then he included some of the anarchists of the Committee in the Cervantes investigation. And so public prosecutors all over Italy began to open local investigations for 270bis with the aim of combining them into one great investigation that could open the door to a specific law against "anarcho-insur-rectionalists," as the prosecutors, Pisanu and the media love to label these rebels.

The media plays its role by portraying the “anarcho-insurrectionalists” as terrorists second only to Al-Qaeda in terms of the danger they threaten to let loose. The authorities, in fact, play on the “war on terrorism” throughout, both because it permits the use of draconian measures and because it creates the image of the anarchist as a dangerous “other” against which the state defends its good citizens.

Even if the attempts to prosecute anarchists for 270bis should fail again, those arrested on this charge can be held in prison for up to two years without a trial, thus effectively taking them away from their lives and struggles, and this at a time when the deterioration of social conditions is stoking the fires of social conflict in Italy and elsewhere.

There is much more about of the methods of the Italian state and why they are doing this now that could be examined, but I am hoping that Italian comrades will write in to correct and supplement these comments.

Showing solidarity

Solidarity is not an obligation, but a choice based in mutuality. If I choose to express solidarity with any struggles, comrades or prisoners, it is because I see my struggle to take back my life and live it on my terms within them. This is why the most essential aspect of solidarity is to continue the struggles and revolts we share with our comrades where we are.

Understood in this way, solidarity is never with the suffering of others — that would merely be pity, not true solidarity. Rather we act in solidarity with the ferocity that they have shown in refusing to accept their suffering. This is why questions of guilt or innocence are of no importance in relation to solidarity with arrested and imprisoned comrades. What matters is that we know that they are fighting the state and its servants and that currently the state has chosen to strike them fiercely for attacking it.

‘The comrades arrested and placed under investigation in Italy, along with those whose homes were invaded by cops, all recognized what their daily rebellion shared in common with other exploited people. All of these comrades acted in their own way to express their complicity and solidarity with the rebellions of those in the CPTs and throughout Italy, in Patagonia, in Iraq, and throughout the world.

In the same way, solidarity with the anarchists arrested in Italy would need to start from a recognition of complicity and mutuality, recognizing our own rebellion in theirs. Thus, the greatest acts of solidarity would be to find the places where our struggles interweave with those they were involved in. Thus, also to find where they interweave with the revolts of wildcatting transit workers, fare

strikers, undocumented immigrants, all those fighting dispossession, the portions of Iraqi resistance that remain free of sectarian and nationalist rackets... And so the threads weave farther and farther.

And the forces of domination, exploitation, and repression are the same here as in Italy and the rest of the world even if the specific methods of their functioning vary due to specific circumstances. We can find the links in the chain of exploitation that connect us with the comrades in Italy and with all the exploited and dispossessed in revolt and aim our attacks at these points. And this is true solidarity, which gives substance to any support we may choose to give the arrested comrades, showing its basis in complicity rather than charity or duty.

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