

Beyond the State and Capitalism

The Current Anarchist Movement in Italy

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In Italy, anarchists are visible—that is, appear in the mainstream media—only when they are involved in violent protest events, such as the 27th G8 summit protest in Genoa in 2001, or in illegal activities, such as the occupation of social spaces and the sabotage involved in the resistance against the high-speed railway in the north of Italy (NO TAV movement). On the other hand, when they are not shown as terrorists or violent, they are studied as historical subjects. Indeed, if we look in specialized journals or publications like *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory*, *Anarchist Studies*, *Estudios—Revista de Pensamiento Libertarios*, *AK Press*, and so on, we can find articles and books on “the Italian knights of anarchy,” such as Malatesta (1853–1932), Berneri (1897–1937), Borghi (1882–1968), Fabbri (1877–1935), and Galleani (1861–1931). Or, we find studies on how Italian anarchist influences spread via migrant workers and political exiles to a number of countries between the 1880s and the First World War. Or, we find pieces about Italian anarchist experiences in projects and revolutions, such as the Cecilia Colony in Brazil (1890–94) and the Spanish Revolution (1936–39). Italian anarchism and anarchists are mainly studied as if they were frozen in a period from the First International to the immediate postwar years following the Second World War in Europe. In our field—social movement studies—there is no sociological analysis of the current Italian anarchist movement. To fill this gap, the aim of this article is to present a picture of the current Italian anarchist movement by answering some questions. What are the main difficulties that Italian anarchist groups face? With whom do these groups fight and share their everyday activities? How do Italian anarchists carry out their alternative projects? We will try to answer these questions based on the authors’ 20 years of experience with the Italian anarchist scene and by analyzing the interviews of 13 well-known and experienced anarchist activists involved in several groups and projects all around the peninsula.¹

For the qualitative interviews, we spoke with 13 historical activists who agreed to participate in the survey. They have a great deal of experience, ranging from 20 to 40 years, and have participated in several groups and worked on anarchist editorial press/publications and projects all around the peninsula. The interviewees were selected because they are landmark figures in several anarchist scenes—such as anarcho-syndicalism squatters, anarchist federations, eco-communes, and so on—and also because they embrace different approaches to anarchism related to different ideological references, such as Bakunin, Fanelli, Malatesta, Galleani, Gori, Borghi, and Meschi. Even though 13 interviews are not enough to cover the full Italian anarchist scene, the groups and projects in which these activists take part are important hubs in the main Italian anarchist network that is founded on sharing similar practices, values, and empathy.

We interviewed 13 activists from different groups and various generations who started their political activities between the late 1970s and the 1990s. Most of them joined anarchism in the so-called Years of Lead, which lasted two decades in the 1970s and 1980s and were a period of sociopolitical turmoil in Italy. During these decades, the interviewees participated in Italian collective movements that belonged to the “family of libertarian left social movements,” such as the Movement of 1977,² the student movement, the pro-choice abortion and feminist movement, the antipsychiatry movement, the antinuclear weapon and power station movement, the anti-conscription movement and in grassroots syndicalism activities. Others started their political

¹ The authors have taken part in several anarchist projects and experiences such as the Libera squatted social space (Modena, Italy), the USI-Modena, and then the CNT-Seville (Spain). They have also participated in two IWA congresses as USI delegates, and they have collaborated with the USI in the Flores Magon Project in Chiapas, Mexico. From 2012 to the present, they have been living between the United Kingdom and Mexico.

² Donatella Della Porta, *Movimenti collettivi e sistema politico in Italia. 1960–1995* (Rome: Laterza, 1996).

activity in the early 1990s—as the authors did—in squatted social centers, in alternative livelihood projects, or by joining the Italian Anarchist Federation (FAI). In addition to their extensive experience, all of our interviewees are still politically active in one or more projects, groups, or movements, including Sicilia Libertaria in Ragusa (southern Italy), Errico Malatesta in Ancona (southern Italy), the Libera Officina social center and the Red and Black Market in Modena (northern Italy), the Cox18 social center in Milan (northern Italy), the squatted Torre Libertaria in Parma (northern Italy), Collettivo Libertario Fiorentino in Florence (central Italy), and Laboratorio Anarchico Perlanera in Alessandria (northern Italy). Some participate in a selection of the most important and widely circulated national anarchist magazines, including *A-Rivista Anarchica* (Milan), *Umanità Nova* (Turin), *Cenerentola* (Bologna), and *v*. They also take part in several well-known grassroots movements, including NO TAV, NO MUOS, NO Ponte, the Movement for Housing Rights, the movement against Identification and Expulsion Centers (CIEs), different local environmental conflicts, and alternative farmers' networks and rural projects, such as Genuino Clandestino and the eco-commune Urupia. Finally, some of them are members of national organizations, such as the Italian anarcho-syndicalist labor union Unione Sindacale Italiana (USI-IWA) and FAI. To guarantee anonymity, we use anonymous codes rather than interviewees' names.³

This article is divided into two parts. The first provides a brief contextualization of the current Italian anarchist scene from the postwar period following the Second World War to the twenty-first century, for readers who are not familiar with the country's movement. We will then present our theoretical approach, which is founded on the cultural dimension of social movements and the prefigurative political dimension of protest and resistance studies, which includes, among others, John Holloway's, James Scott's, and Raúl Zibechi's proposals.⁴ The second part of the article has three sections: (1) the main difficulties Italian anarchic groups are facing; (2) the relationship between anarchists and other social subjects, with special attention to the participation of anarchists in grassroots movements; and (3) how Italian anarchists try to carry out libertarian projects.

The Current Italian Anarchist Scene

When the fascist regime rose to power in the 1920s, the violent and bloody repression of its political and social opponents forced a large number of anarchists into exile, and they resumed their activities in their new countries. For instance, many anarchists fought against Francisco Franco in the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), and others were exiled to several countries, including France, the United Kingdom, the United States, Mexico, Argentina, and other Latin American

³ When a quotation from one of these interviews is noted, it will be cited in text with the abbreviation Int. followed by a number designated to each interviewee by the authors.

⁴ See Enrique Laraña, Hank Johnston, and Joseph Gusfield, eds., *New Social Movements: From Ideology to Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans, eds., *Social Movements and Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); John Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2002); John Holloway, *Crack Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2010); James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); and Raúl Zibechi, *Autonomías y emancipaciones. América Latina en movimiento* (Lima, Peru: Fondo Editorial de la Facultad de Ciencias Sociales/UNMSM, 2007).

countries.⁵ After the Second World War and the overthrow of Mussolini's fascist regime, the difficulties for anarchists continued. In fact, the then-new republic, ruled by the Christian Democracy Party, not only maintained the same administrative and executive people who had worked with and supported the dictatorship but also kept part of the fascist criminal code (Codice Rocco, 1930) in the new Italian Code of Criminal Procedure. Similarly, most industrialist, upper-class families who supported the fascist regime continued to lead the Italian economy into the Republican era, including the Agnelli family (owner of the FIAT brand) and the Ferrari family.

In this new "democratic" scene, the reorganization of the Italian anarchist movement was not easy. In fact, the anarchists who survived the fascist repression were few and exhausted; furthermore, there was no public space for political dissidence, such as anarchist groups, in the then-new republic. Italian anarchists tried to reorganize themselves. Some groups became synthesis organizations,⁶ such as the Federazione Anarchica Italiana (FAI or Italian Anarchist Federation), others formed platformist organizations,⁷ such as the Gruppi Anarchici di Azione Proletaria (GAAP or Anarchist Groups of Proletarian Action), which later became the Federazione dei Comunisti Anarchici (FdCA or Communist-Anarchist Federation). In the 1960s, some anarchists refounded the Italian anarcho-syndicalist union USI-IWA, which had been outlawed by Mussolini in 1925. Others took part in several protests and movements all around the country, including the anti-conscription insurrection in Sicily. Despite this, it was only after the protests against the Piazza Fontana bomb in Milan and Pinelli's murder in 1969,⁸ when a new generation of young people created various anarchist groups and projects outside of the more formal organizations of the FAI and the USI, that the Italian anarchist movement gained momentum and burst onto the Italian political scene. In this new scenario, most of the new generation of anarchists preferred to organize themselves by creating several affinity groups all around the peninsula that are founded on a sense of trust, closeness, respect, and equality. Emphasizing affinity instead of adopting an "associative pact" allowed the anarchist movement to tap into the new social movements that emerged in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s, such as the pro-choice abortion and feminist movement, the ecological movement, the antinuclear movement, the protests against military conscription, movements in favor of civil rights, and so on.

After the violent repression throughout the Years of Lead, from the 1990s onward several projects were created to show that anarchists were still present and that alternatives to the system were possible. This tendency has continued into the twenty-first century and the present day in Italy.

⁵ See Pier Carlo Masini, *Storia degli anarchici italiani. Da Bakunin a Malatesta (1862–1892)* (Milan, Italy: Rizzoli, 1969); Adriana Dada, *L'Anarchismo in Italia: fra movimento e partito; storia e documenti dell'anarchismo italiano* (Milan, Italy: Teti, 1984); Alessandro Marianelli, "Avanti Siam Ribelli": *Immagini e documenti del movimento anarchico a Pisa dalla Comune di Parigi all'avvento del fascismo (1871–1925)* (Pisa, Italy: Biblioteca Franco Serantini, 1983); and Maurizio Antonioli, *Azione diretta e organizzazione operaia. Sindacalismo rivoluzionario e anarchismo tra la fine dell'Ottocento e il fascismo* (Bari, Italy: Lacaita edizioni, 1991).

⁶ Synthesis organization is a form of anarchist organization that tries to bring together anarchists of different tendencies under the principles of anarchism without adjectives (individualist, mutualist, syndicalist, or communist). These basic positions would be based on a synthesis of the viewpoints of the members of the organization, but each strand would be free to agree on its own ideas, thanks to the federal nature of the organization.

⁷ A platformist organization—*Organizzazione di tendenza* in Italian—is based on theoretical and tactical unity in which unity means unity of ideas and actions, as opposed to unity on the basis of the anarchist label.

⁸ Giuseppe Pinelli was an anarchist who was arrested and taken to the central police station to be interrogated in the aftermath of the December 1969 bombings in Piazza Fontana, Milan. He died, falling from the fourth floor of the police station on the evening of 15 December.

The anarchist movement is the only anti-authoritarian subject—in the political and epistemological sense—and is a significant grassroots and self-organized movement in the peninsula. Some representative examples of these experiences include the anarchist eco-commune Urupia in Francavilla Fontana in Puglia (southern Italy), the Federazione Municipale di Base (FMB) of Spezzano Albanese (southern Italy), and the anarchist social space Libera at Modena (northern Italy).

Urupia (1995) is one of the most important libertarian projects in Italy and in Europe. It is an anarchist eco-commune that does not believe in the power of the government and does not have hierarchies. The community produces extra-virgin olive oil, wine, vegetables, fruit and jams, bread, honey, and medicinal herbs. They also organize summer camps for young people (7–13 years of age) and are working with other national, alternative education groups to open a libertarian school.

The Federazione Municipale di Base (1992) of Spezzano Albanese is a libertarian, municipalist grassroots organization. The FMB intends to put the direct democracy of municipalism into practice in their council, where all the “citizens” can decide on their local problems (public services, environmental problems, and so on).

In Italy, self-organized and/or occupied social centers are an important part of the anarchist movement. In the areas where they are set up, they often become a new force for change by proposing alternative values and practices. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the anarchist social space Libera in Modena (2000–2008) was one of the most important anarchist experiences in Italy. Libera was violently evicted in 2008 by the municipality of the city of Modena, governed by the Italian Democratic Party (PD), which currently represents the biggest party that arose from the collapse of the Italian Communist Party. The project had been constructed on an occupied farm, which included dwellings for people who had to defend the place, a social space where the collective Gli agitati (lit. “the overwrought”) organized concerts and events to self-finance the political projects, a bread oven, two vegetable gardens, an herb garden, and several fruit trees. All the projects were developed in a horizontal and self-organized way.

In addition to self-organized experiences like these, anarchist activists also share their values with other people in different social conflicts, such as industrial disputes, members of the USI, the Movement for Housing Rights and other self-organized grassroots movements all over the peninsula, as we will see below. The presence of anarchists in these social and political conflicts allows them not only to build their own projects to show that an alternative to the current social model is possible, but also to share practices, ideas, and feelings with nonanarchist people who can experience another way of doing politics: standing together and fighting for their rights.

Looking at Anarchists: Theoretical Approaches

Following Charles Tilly, who defined “a social movement by its relationship to the nation-state,”⁹ the prevailing approaches in the study of collective action—such as the resource mobilization and political opportunity theory—are state centered.¹⁰ In other words, they define a

⁹ Frances Fox Piven, *Who’s Afraid of Fox Piven? The Essential Writings of the Professor Glenn Beck Loves to Hate* (New York: New Press, 2011), 254.

¹⁰ Verta Taylor, “Culture, Identity, and Emotions: Studying Social Movements as if People Really Matter,” *Mobilization* 15, no. 2(2010): 113–34.

social movement by its relationship to the state, legitimizing formal organizations, leaders, and activists as the only actors in the protest and recognizing structural changes as the only outcomes. As Jasper states, the political opportunity approach “ignored actors’ choices, desires, and points of view: potential participants were taken for granted as already formed, just waiting for opportunities to act.”¹¹ Beyond these approaches we find the “state paradigm,” that is, the idea that radical change is only possible by taking state power or by interacting with the state.¹² It is clear that we cannot use a state-centered theoretical framework to analyze a political subject like the Italian anarchist movement because its imagery is not characterized by a state reference point. We need different lenses to look at anarchists and their practices.

Over the last couple of decades in Latin America, several researchers have proposed new frameworks to take over from this “state-centered epistemology” of social movements.¹³ These frameworks were suggested to understand the experiences of emancipation in the South and “the social action that is less formalized in the North.”¹⁴ For instance, Holloway shows that there are millions of everyday political practices that are cracks in the system and “are invisible to the eyes of those who sit on the armchairs (or which appear to them, if at all, as changes in the pattern of the wallpaper, to which they give the name of ‘new social movements’).”¹⁵ Zibechi called these self-organized experiences “societies in movement,” in which “los de abajo” (the powerless)—or “this wide conglomerate that includes everyone, and especially women, who suffer oppression, humiliation, exploitation, violence, marginalization”—try to resist domination by themselves.¹⁶ Similarly, James Scott, analyzing several subaltern groups in Southeast Asia, highlighted that certain social structures, various forms of cultivation, and even the physical mobility of the communities analyzed, among other things, are political choices, and he pointed out how resistances are a component of people’s everyday lives.¹⁷

To sum up, what characterizes these approaches that focus on grassroots protests and resistances—and that we consider useful in our analysis to study the Italian anarchist

¹¹ James Jasper, “Social Movement Theory Today: Toward a Theory of Action?” *Sociology Compass* 4 (2010): 965–76.

¹² Holloway, *Change the World*.

¹³ See Leo Gabriel and Gilberto López y Rivas, *Autonomías indígenas en América Latina: Nuevas formas de convivencia política* (Iztapalapa, Mexico: UAM/Plaza Valdés, 2005); Norma Giarraca, Daniela Mariotti, and María Comelli, *Tiempos de rebelión: que se vayan todos: calles y plazas en la Argentina 2001–2002* (Buenos Aires: Antropofagia, 2007); Norma Giarraca and Gabriela Massuh, eds., *El trabajo por venir: autogestión y emancipación social* (Buenos Aires: Antropofagia, 2008); Walter Porto-Gonçalves, *Geo-grafías, movimientos sociales, nuevas territorialidades y sustentabilidad* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 2001); Jorge Regalado et al., eds., *Hacer política para un porvenir más allá del capitalismo* (Guadalajara, Mexico: Grietas Editores, 2012); and Jorge Regalado, “Los movimientos sociales en México. La vía autonomista y comunitaria,” in *Movimientos sociales, autonomía y resistencia*, ed. Mario Alberto Nájera Espinoza (Guadalajara, Mexico: Universidad de Guadalajara/California State University LB, California-México Studies Center, 2013), 35–45.

¹⁴ Lisa Thompson and Chris Tapscott, *Citizenship and Social Movements: Perspectives from the Global South*, (London: Zed Books), 14–15.

¹⁵ Holloway, *Crack Capitalism*, 9.

¹⁶ Raúl Zibechi, *Territorios en resistencia. Cartografía política de las periferias urbanas latinoamericanas* (Buenos Aires: Lavaca, 2008), 6. The book was translated and published by AK Press in 2012: *Territories in Resistance: A Cartography of Latin American Social Movements*.

¹⁷ See James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985); and James Scott, “Resistance without Protest and without Organization: Peasant Opposition to the Islamic Zakat and the Christian Tithe,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29 (1987): 417–52.

movement—is that the state is no longer center stage but an actor. It is an actor that is often threatening and dangerous, against which people resist and despite which people continue to empower themselves and build their own projects and society. To break away from the state-centered vision of protest, we need to shift our gaze from powerful to powerless subjects and understand the deepest and least visible dynamics of protest. This “non-state-centered” approach, which places the experiences of self-organized people (such as anarchists) at the center of the analysis, represents a look toward the inside capable of capturing all the underlying and invisible processes. This can only be achieved through a long process of involvement in movements.

Our approach allowed us to present an analysis of the Italian anarchist movement from the inside, that is, from the everyday experiences of the subjects considering that, as Piven and Cloward claim, “it is the daily experiences of people that shapes their grievances, establishes the measure of their demands, and points out the targets of their anger.”¹⁸ Moreover, the daily experience of people participating in politics encourages the process of redesigning and redefining values, beliefs, and identities—a process that leads them to raise awareness about aspects of reality that up to that moment they had not considered, to change their perception of reality, and, finally, to act in consequence, as shown in Epstein’s research about the antinuclear movement campaigns in the United States.¹⁹ In particular, we will show in the analysis that the political activity of the Italian anarchist movement involves prefigurative political acts in which people redefine their way of seeing the world and move in an “other-doing, an activity that is not determined by money, an activity that is not shaped by the rules of power,”²⁰ an alternative doing in which “the means reflect the ends.”

Prefigurative politics has, since Boggs, been closely aligned with anarchism.²¹ In fact, by looking at the Italian anarchist movement, it is possible to observe how their practices are characterized by affirming *hic et nunc*, “here and now,” that is, their means reflect or are somehow equivalent to their ends. Following Breines, Rucht, Epstein, and Franks, among others, anarchist organizations and practices to a certain extent anticipate or enact an “alternative world” in the present, something that has already been achieved.²² Prefiguration tends to involve an alternative or additional set of practices to political activities, including horizontal and antihierarchical organization; decision making through consensus; direct action; do-it-yourself, self-managed, cooperated, and self-reliant projects; and so on. In particular, prefigurative politics highlights how everyday life is turned into a political dimension or, as Regalado states, “what collective and individual subjects do day in day out, every day, that is intensely political.”²³ Moreover, as Martín-Barbero has

¹⁸ Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 20–21.

¹⁹ Barbara Epstein, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

²⁰ Holloway, *Crack Capitalism*, 3.

²¹ Carl Boggs, “Marxism, Prefigurative Communism and the Problem of Workers’ Control,” *Radical America* 6 (1977): 99–122.

²² See Wini Breines, *Community and Organization in the New Left 1962–68: The Great Refusal* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989); Dieter Rucht, “Themes, Logics and Arenas of Social Movements: A Structural Approach,” *International Social Movement Research* 1 (1988): 305–28; Epstein, *Political Protest*; and Benjamin Franks, “The Direct Action Ethic: From 59 Upwards,” *Anarchist Studies* 11 (2003): 13–41.

²³ Jorge Regalado, “Notas deshilvanadas sobre otra epistemología,” in *Hacer política para un porvenir más allá del capitalismo*, ed. Jorge Regalado et al. (Guadalajara, Mexico: Grietas Editores, 2012), 176. Trans. from Spanish by authors AP and TG.

stressed, in anarchism the relationship between resistance and everyday life has always been present, as has the importance of informal resistances.²⁴ To sum up, prefigurative politics involves a process of creating political alternatives here and now, as Maeckelbergh points out in her studies on the so-called alter-globalization movement.²⁵ Nevertheless, discussions about prefigurative politics raise various theoretical and empirical questions. In fact, as Yates states, “it is often not clear if prefigurative politics is a tactic, orientation or way of doing protest, an alternative type of movement activity or a combination of these, and it is rarely apparent where distinctions with other types of political activity ought to be made.”²⁶

Regarding the Italian anarchist movement, those questions melt away because the coherence between means and ends is not a strategic decision but, as underlined by Spanish anarchist Tomás Ibáñez, is rather one of the fundamental anarchist values.²⁷ Anarchist prefigurative politics, therefore, unlike left-wing practices, are turned into a method that bridges the gap between the future egalitarian society—*il sole dell'avvenire*²⁸—and anarchist practices at present, and one that redefines anarchism as a continuous and dynamic process leading toward a free society. For this reason, for Italian anarchists, “debates over different ways of organizing and struggling have always taken priority among anarchists over controversies about different models of the future society.”²⁹

The remainder of this part of the text will present the main difficulties that Italian anarchic groups face, the relationships among anarchists and between anarchists and other Italian social subjects, and the ways Italian anarchists try to carry out their projects.

The Difficulties the Current Italian Anarchist Movement Faces

Analysis of the interviews highlighted three aspects that the different groups face in their everyday activities: first, repression by the state and its institutions during their different demonstrations; second, generalized feelings of resignation, disappointment, and powerlessness that the interviewees feel are spread around the country; and last, conflicts and suspicion between the various groups and individuals.

Repression has been constant in the Italian anarchist movement, so it is not surprising that one of the main difficulties that anarchist movements find when performing their activities and projects is the weight of repression by the state. The police's repression strategies have been backed by laws like the fascist criminal code and later by special antiterrorism laws passed during the Years of Lead. The increase in repression is reflected in “police charges, fines, etc. Every demonstration is searched for ‘misdemeanors’” (Int. 2) and “the use of control devices by the Ital-

²⁴ Jesús Martín-Barbero, *De los medios a las mediaciones. Comunicación, cultura y hegemonía* (Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 1987), 14–30.

²⁵ Marianne Maeckelbergh, *The Will of the Many: How the Alterglobalisation Movement Is Changing the Face of Democracy* (London: Pluto Press, 2009); and Marianne Maeckelbergh, “Doing Is Believing: Prefiguration as Strategic Practice in the Alterglobalization Movement,” *Social Movement Studies* 10, no. 1(2011): 1–20.

²⁶ Luke Yates, “Rethinking Prefiguration: Alternatives, Micropolitics and Goals in Social Movements,” *Social Movement Studies* 14, no. 1(2014): 1–21.

²⁷ Tomás Ibáñez, *Anarquismo es movimiento. Anarquismo, neoanarquismo y postanarquismo* (Barcelona: Virus Editorial, 2014).

²⁸ Verse in the Italian anarchist song “Il canto dei malfattori” (1891).

²⁹ Davide Turcato, *Making Sense of Anarchism: Errico Malatesta's Experiments with Revolution, 1889–1900* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 244.

ian secret services and police has increased, including cellphones, Facebook, cameras in private and public places, and even DNA evidence” (Int. 2). In addition to these more traditional forms of control by the state, repression takes other forms, for example, undermining the projects and groups more subtly, as one activist from the Errico Malatesta group in Ancona explains:

It’s hard to carry out libertarian and anarchist projects in Italy because any project always faces a dilemma: become part of a legal context compatible with the institutions and ruling classes or be criminalized and destroyed. The forms that repression takes are different (violent, legal, economic, etc.) but the final result is always not allowing these experiences to become a permanent reality and an alternative to the ruling system. (Int. 7)

While repression and “the lack of spaces and structures to give rise to any project” (Int. 10) have been a constant for decades, recent years have seen the emergence of another issue. As one occupier of the Torre Occupata social space in Parma says, “one of the problems we have faced recently is a lack of collective imagination” (Int. 8). Since the 1990s and the breakup of the two political parties that had formed the hegemony for more than 50 years, Democrazia Cristiana (Christian Democracy Party) and Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian Communist Party), the economic, social, and cultural crisis that followed the corruption scandals, the impunity of the ruling class, and so forth have made people suspicious, as one anarchist from Bologna says: “The biggest difficulty is caused by suspicion. Few people believe it is possible to change society. And even fewer think that it’s possible and right to build a society of free and equal humans. This is in part because the defeat of so-called ‘real socialism’ has led to the belief that a fair society cannot be achieved, and that the dominant system continually demands that today’s society is the only society possible” (Int. 5).

The new generations brought up in the midst of the crisis are, according to the interviewees, “very depressed and don’t believe in the possibility of changing current society” (Int. 11). Another interviewee adds that “resignation and depression lead new generations not to believe in their own abilities and so not to believe in any opportunity for change” (Int. 12).

This analysis brings us to the third problem faced by groups when doing their everyday politics: internal political, organizational, and personal disputes among anarchists or between them and other groups. As one interviewee sums up,

The greatest obstacles come from the system we confront, but often a lack of understanding among anarchists hasn’t let these libertarian projects become a reality. The divisions between “the good” and “the bad” in some libertarian communities, and the marginalization of the USI-IWA by *Umanità Nova* [the mouthpiece of the FAI] until the start of this century, for example, has slowed down the number of new anarchists joining the union. (Int. 4)

Internal ruptures within groups often occur because of “not properly sharing responsibilities, individualism in tasks, little rotation in positions, etc.” (Int. 13). In addition, there is another aspect that exacerbates relations between groups with different positions on how to do politics: “Political antagonism becomes a distinctive aspect for some groups and produces a constant warlike confrontation against the state and its institutions. ‘Fighting’ becomes the favored component

for some groups and it characterizes their actions while obfuscating the most important aspect for me: the collective ability to give life to new forms of living and relating to one another” (Int. 6).

The ruptures within groups are not generational, and there are anarchists from different generations present in every group. In the Italian anarchist scene, it is common to find activists who fought against fascism in the same group with people who took part in the Movement of 1977 and younger activists. The rifts are the result not of different values but of differing political practices, organizational styles, and approaches to interacting with society. As one interviewee mentions to us, “groups that have different positions don’t talk to each other, and when they do they insult each other” (Int. 2).

Despite the situation described above—characterized by control and repression by the state, resignation among people that “undermines the foundations of the entire objective of rooting anarchism in society” (Int. 8), and the differences among groups and “the ‘anarchic-aesthetic’ actions [that] make it hard to recover the credibility [of the anarchist movement]” (Int. 8)—what the interviewees believe and say is that “we must not despair” (Int. 6). Indeed, many of the anarchists interviewed, although they point out these difficulties, agree that this is currently a good time to carry out political activity, as this extract demonstrates:

It is simpler now to create libertarian, anarchist projects than it was in the past, while political parties and the state have been delegitimized. That is why there is more room for maneuver in society. While the development of anarchist, libertarian projects is not very visible, this is not the fault of anarchists, who remain anti-organization. (Int. 1)

The widespread delegitimization of the political system and the economic and social crisis mean that “the spaces for spreading anarchism are getting wider...Many resistance and struggle movements have libertarian characteristics. In general, this is a new attention on anarchist practices” (Int. 3). Nonetheless, as the same interviewee says, divisions within the movement “diminish our strength and make us miss opportunities that this historical age offers to develop anarchist projects for social change” (Int. 3).

There is no doubt, based on our experience and the interviewees’ reflections, that the greatest strength shown by the current Italian anarchist movement is the ties it still has with the Italian grassroots movements.

The Relationship among Anarchists and Other Social Subjects in Italy

Anarchist groups in Italy still ascribe great importance to struggles that come from below—from common, everyday people. It becomes clear from the interviews that there is no specific social or political subject with which to engage (as could be the case of immigrants, students, etc.). Instead, the values and practices that each subject carries with him/her are important, as one anarchist from the Libera Officina, a project in Modena that arose after the violent eviction from the Libera social space, tells us: “there is no difference in engagement between the different subjects who fight. What is important is the perspective and collective imagination of those fights that are anti-state and bonded to society” (Int. 1)

For that reason, it is easy to find anarchists “in all self-organized situations, interacting and sharing the practice of self-management” (Int. 12). As one historic activist in the Sicilia Libertaria project, which has existed for over 40 years, tells us,

It is now important to fight and build projects—and this happens everywhere—with local struggle committees and all those situations that develop resistance against the system’s environmental and social attacks... Not all these struggles call for a specific objective, but they generate self-organization experiences and for that reason they are struggles that are sensitive to our anarchist practices. In almost all grassroots movements present in Italy today, anarchists have a significant, recognized presence. But more important than the anarchist presence is that these struggles take on horizontal organization based around assemblies, the practice of self-management and direct action, a rejection of hierarchies, delegation or a party structure. We are seeing a potential for libertarianism that hasn’t been seen since the distant year of 1968. That is why an anarchist today cannot stay out of these struggles. (Int. 3)

Among the hundreds of protest-from-below experiences that include a significant anarchist presence, we highlight the struggles to defend migrants, whether irregular or otherwise, and environmental struggles. Although Italy is a country of immigrants, it has never stood out as a country that welcomes immigrants and is instead rather racist. The relationship between anarchist groups and irregular immigrant groups has strengthened thanks to the joint struggle against CIEs and, later, thanks to some immigrants becoming integrated into other struggles (e.g., the struggle for the right to housing). A recent example of these struggles is the case of Casa de’ nialtri (Our Home) in Ancona (2013). Immigrants from Afghanistan, Algeria, Burkina Faso, India, Morocco, Nigeria, Niger, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, and others, together with the anarchist group Errico Malatesta and the local section of the USI-IWA, occupied a house (which had been designated as housing for immigrants) for more than 44 days. The occupation was self-managed and demanded the right to dignified housing for all. The occupation ended on the orders of the local government run by the PD with a violent eviction, the deportation of the immigrants, and criminal charges against the anarchist activists involved. These types of experiences create bonds and learning, as one of the protagonists of the Casa de’ nialtri occupation describes:

I believe that we have all changed since this collaboration. After the occupation experience of Casa de’ nialtri, I always say that nothing is like it was before. For the occupying immigrants who lived in extreme poverty before, who were only looking for help from the institutions, the collective experience, the assemblies, the self-management practice has enabled many of them to mature. For example, being aware of their rights and having the chance to build something dignified and different together. This experience has influenced them by giving them greater strength to face difficulties less individually and more collectively, with greater solidarity. (Int. 7)

The other situations in which anarchist groups are heavily involved are environmental conflicts, which are characterized by confrontation between the local population and the state and private interests. Despite the prejudices that common people may have against anarchists, thousands of people are learning what anarchist practice entails thanks to anarchists’ participation in several environmental, social, and political struggles. For instance, in experiences like the NO

TAV and NO MUOS movements, there was interaction between nonanarchist and anarchist people, which can be observed both in documents, as happens in the NO MUOS movement where “the declaration of intent of the committees is clearly libertarian” (Int. 3), and the use of practices such as direct action and sabotage. This ever-closer relationship between Italian grassroots movements and anarchism is also due to the direct experience of the people fighting. In fact, these struggles to defend the territory, like many others, have not been supported by the main institutions, political parties, and unions, which promote facilities and infrastructure projects like the high-speed train (TAV), the U.S. Army base in Niscemi (Sicily), and the megabridge between Sicily and Calabria. The reason anarchists are accepted in many grassroots movements may be because of “our [anarchist] disinterest in ‘taking the power,’ which is seen as a guarantee [for the grassroots movements not to be used by other forces] and as a coherent position which is greatly appreciated by non-anarchist people” (Int. 3).

Finally, what anarchists are doing when they are fighting with non-anarchist people is sharing their practices—that is, the practice to decide collectively in assemblies, to involve every individual, not to reproduce power relationships or promote direct action, and so on. In Italian society, people are accustomed to delegating the main aspects of their lives to parties, unions, and other institutional organizations, so the idea of going beyond these actors can be frightening. What self-organized anarchist groups and individuals do is show people that there are alternatives beyond the state and capital and that self-organization is possible. For instance, anarchists organized in the USI, the Italian anarcho-syndicalist union member of the IWA, help people organize themselves to defend their rights in their workplaces through direct action, such as strikes, boycotts, workplace occupations, sit-ins, and sabotage, rather than delegation, leadership, charity, or guidance from government or business. Unlike the biggest unions, which are vertically and hierarchically organized, USI is horizontal and independent. There is no delegation in this anarcho-syndicalist organization, so workers organized in the USI have to learn how to defend themselves and solve their own problems, acting locally with the support of other sections and comrades.

The common ground between anarchist groups and grassroots protest experiences is the space in which an alternative lifestyle is created, where everyone can experience a different form of social relationship, not based on hierarchical structures but on mutual aid, solidarity, and respect. As one interviewee states, “[we] share common needs, expectations, and dignity” with other experiences that are based on an “empathy of practices” (Int. 4). This is what allows anarchists and ordinary people to fight together. Our interviewees have claimed that common people discover what anarchism is through those relationships, and they “learn another way to live in the society. They are living the anarchist practice” (Int. 12).

How Italian Anarchists Try to Build Alternatives

For Italian anarchist groups, the present challenge is “to build a revolutionary, self-managed network that can, in solidarity, coordinate anarchist projects that cannot be assimilated into the hegemonic system, with the aim of producing a true social transformation” (Int. 7). In fact, the Italian anarchist movement includes several solidarity networks that have medium-to long-term perspectives. An example of this cooperation is the network of groups, unions, and projects that form the Fiera dell’Autogestione e delle Autoproduzioni (Self-Organization and Self-Production

Fair), which has—in different formats and places—spent a decade proposing projects and alternatives to the capitalist system for life and production, from producing and installing solar panels to generate electricity, eco-building courses, sustainable farming, and the creation of open software to self-defense workshops and political polling workshops. These are joined by the recent Genuino Clandestino project organized by different social subjects who are generating an alternative to exploitation farming, promoting instead the shadow farmer market among “clandestine farmers” and townspeople.

Italian anarchist groups fight against “the system” by participating in local and national struggles, but they also spread their ideas by distributing propaganda, publishing books and magazines, creating new spaces like self-organized libraries, Atenei Libertari, and squatted social centers; in other words, they are creating new projects that are “social and local activities, libertarian in the practice” (Int. 13). Through these projects people can experience a different way to live everyday life and face authority collectively, and they can start to believe that a different way of organizing and living is possible even in the current system. In fact, as we have described, one of the problems that anarchists deal with is the resignation felt by people, especially young people. This hopelessness is a consequence of the repressive Italian system. As Della Porta claims, the violent and constant repression by the Italian system, which has also nourished a “counterculture of an image of a ‘violent’ and ‘unfair’ state,” has produced passiveness in some people, while in others it has awoken the need to act violently against the state.³⁰ Hopelessness is a consequence of learned helplessness, a psychological state in which people feel powerless to change themselves or their situation.³¹ Learned helplessness can prevent any action, but it can also produce destructive, rather than constructive, behavior, and for this reason some groups prefer to embrace violent direct action rather than carry out social projects.

To understand how Italian anarchists try to overcome this sense of helplessness, we asked our interviewees to compare the Italian situation with that of Latin American countries such as Mexico. The Zapatistas and other Mexican autonomous experiences have actually built a bridge between Mexico and Italy, and several Italian anarchist groups in the last 20 years have supported diverse autonomous Mexican experiences and protests such as the rebellion of the Zapatista indigenous communities, the Oaxaca Insurgency, anarchist social centers, anarchist libraries, and so on, sharing and learning different ways of doing politics.

The interviewees highlighted that, in their opinion, the level of state control is higher in Italy than in Latin America, and there is no room for free spaces. Moreover, unlike Latin America, the political dimension and everyday life practices in Europe, especially in Italy, have been separated for many years, and only recently projects in which the two dimensions are fused together have begun to spread. For this reason, Italian anarchist projects are created to demonstrate that self-organization is possible and that other worlds can be created in the shell of the current one. Places like Urupia, FDB, or the Libera social space allow people to experience anarchist practices and ways of life, and they are so important because there are few spaces where people can do so.

In the Libera social space, for instance, in 2007 anarchists organized “schools of self-management” for young people. Not only do these activities, similar to the Little Zapatista Schools (Escuelitas Zapatistas), which opened in 2013, show people existing self-managed

³⁰ Donatella Della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 158.

³¹ Martin E. P. Seligman, *Helplessness: On Depression, Development, and Death* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1975).

projects and practices that demonstrate that people can self-manage their lives but they also allow young people to gain firsthand experience with managing an assembly, deciding collectively and organizing an event, starting the self-empowerment process, and so on.

In addition to these well-known experiences, there are several spaces self-managed by different anarchist collectives, such as *Atenei Libertari* and *Centri Sociali*, libraries and archives, and so on. These spaces are extremely important landmarks, both locally and nationally. Anarchists use these places to organize themselves, make assemblies, organize activities to collect funds, and so forth. In these places, people can do political activities together but they are not normally living and working spaces where people can create a new life project, unlike the experiences mentioned before. Moreover, hundreds of individuals in their workplaces and territories are spreading anarchist practices. For instance, there are many people working on pedagogical issues, and the labor of these individuals is nationally and internationally recognized, with several projects on the way. However, there is no libertarian school in Italy like *Paideia* in Spain or *Summer Hill* in the United Kingdom. Many people who are working on pedagogical issues are members of the *USI*; there is also a libertarian pedagogical network and a new school will open soon at *Urupia*. This project in particular is one of the most famous examples of self-managed work and organic farming. Like *Urupia*, there are several projects all around the peninsula that are managed by anarchists and common people and created to respond to specific needs. These projects include farms, eco-communities, and horizontal networks like *Genuino Clandestino*, which are islands of resistance in a state that does not allow farmers to sell their own products directly without private intermediaries.

Last, we would shortly underline that another element characterizing anarchist projects and protest events is the role played by emotions such as joy and happiness. What Jasper calls the pleasures of protest are very relevant in Italian anarchist groups.³² Indeed, to empathize with people, anarchists have to deal with and break the sense of sacrifice and feeling of guilt and sin that characterize both Catholicism and Marxism and have permeated contemporary Italian culture. Furthermore, following Hochschild, we could say that Italian anarchism broke with this hegemonic Italian feeling rule that has characterized Italian political activism since the Years of Lead.³³ Nowadays, it is common to see carnival parades, some elements of a circus, street theater, and people wearing masks during anarchist event protests and demonstrations in which anarchists are involved. An example of this was in 2006, when the anarchist space *Libera* organized a carnival parade against its eviction in which more than 3,000 people took part. By bringing joy and happiness to political activism and by legitimizing the right to express anger, ironizing on the death of rich and powerful people, redirecting emotions such as contempt and hate toward powerful people—spreading “subversive counter-emotions”³⁴—anarchists are defying ideological stances “not simply by maintaining an alternative frame on a situation but maintaining an alternative set of feeling rights and obligations.”³⁵

³² James Jasper, *The Art of the Moral Protest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

³³ See Arlie Russell Hochschild, “The Sociology of Feeling and Emotion: Selected Possibilities,” in *Another Voice: Feminist Perspective on Social Life and Social Science*, ed. Marcia Millmá and Rosabeth Moss Kanter (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), 280–307; and Arlie Russell Hochschild, “Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure,” *American Journal of Sociology* 85 (1979): 551–75.

³⁴ Helena Flam, “Emotion’s Map: A Research Agenda,” in *Emotions and Social Movement*, ed. Helena Flam and Debra King (London: Routledge, 2005), 1940.

³⁵ Hochschild, “Emotion Work,” 575.

In short, Italian anarchist groups try to empathize with self-organized protest groups to spread anarchist ideas and hope for a new society. With their practices, anarchists in Italy try to show other people that it is possible to move past the state and capitalism.

Conclusion: Italian Anarchists toward a New Political Horizon

Despite the repression perpetuated by the state, we observed that it is not a bad time to spread anarchist ideas, values, and practices in the Italian peninsula. Anarchists have to face resignation and hopelessness, especially in young people, but the principal problem faced by anarchists is the complicated relationships among groups that have different political positions and practices. Our research shows that in spite of these problems and the fact that anarchists are a minority in Italy, anarchists are actually present in society, struggling alongside self-organized grassroots groups. From this relationship, both anarchists and common people are enriching themselves and creating free spaces where people can experience self-organization.

Our analysis also shows that the prefigurative character of the Italian anarchist projects and politics aims to create alternatives here and now. These alternatives take place in and around the spaces of everyday life, showing that political meanings, knowledge, and alternative forms of social organization are continually being developed, cultivated, and redesigned with non-anarchist allies. Moreover, in Italy, anarchist practices are themselves politically expressive and prefigurative, with multiple layers of latency and visibility identifiable in several political forms, all of which allow for networks of mutual support among anarchists and several self-organized grassroots groups.

The Italian anarchist movement is far from homogeneous—due to marked differences between the different individuals, collectives, and organizations—but projects and experiences in which Italian anarchists are involved are creating cracks in the Italian system in the way Holloway has viewed them. In other words, there has been “a moment in which relations of domination were broken and other relations created” and also “the acting-out of a world that does not exist, in the hope that by acting it out, we may really breathe it into life; or rather, in the knowledge that this is the only way in which we can bring it into life.”³⁶ We might conclude that Italian anarchists “are trying to develop a form of being a society” (Int. 4) in which the means are coherent with the ends and are showing that a new political horizon beyond the state and capitalism is now possible.

³⁶ Holloway, *Crack Capitalism*, 31, 37.

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