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Among the Thugs

Genoa and the new language of protest

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Compare two abandoned streets in Genoa during the weekend of the G8 summit, immediately after confrontations between protesters and police. The first, a mile-long stretch along Via Tolemaide overlooking a train yard where Ya Basta! had faced off against riot cops on July 20, was scattered with oddly whimsical debris: slabs of rubber padding, bits of mock-Roman foam armor, balloons and abandoned plexiglas shields with inscriptions like “Yuri Gagarin Memorial Space Brigade.”

The other, along Corso Marconi (one of the city’s main thoroughfares) the next day, was the sort of scene one might see in the aftermath of a riot almost anywhere: shattered glass from storefront windows, charred automobile parts, and, everywhere, spent tear-gas canisters and jagged rocks. It was the first kind of confrontation, not the second, that was anathema to the Italian police. The *carabinieri* set out to create a riot, and that was exactly what they managed to produce.

A word of background: Ya Basta! is an Italian social movement most famous for their *tutti bianci*, or “white overalls,” a

kind of nonviolent army who gear up in elaborate forms of padding, ranging from foam armor to inner tubes to rubber-ducky flotation devices, helmets and their signature chemical-proof white jumpsuits to create what Italian activists like to call a “new language” of direct action. Where once the only choice seemed to be between the Gandhian approach or outright insurrection – either Martin Luther King Jr. or Watts, with nothing in between – Ya Basta! has been trying to invent a completely new territory. The *tutti bianci* completely eschew any action that would cause harm to people or even property (usually), but at the same time do everything possible to avoid arrest or injury.

Ya Basta! – which began as a Zapatista solidarity group but has since evolved into a political network linking dozens of squats and social centers in major Italian cities – combines innovative tactics and an increasingly broad and sophisticated set of demands. To the usual calls for direct democracy, the *leitmotif* of the “anti-globalization” movement everywhere, they’ve made three major additions: A principle of global citizenship, the elimination of all controls over freedom of movement in the world (Ya Basta! especially has targeted immigration detention facilities); a universally guaranteed “basic income” to replace programs like welfare and unemployment (originally derived from the French MAUSS group); and free access to new technologies – in effect, extreme limits to the enforcement of intellectual property rights. (Most Americans assume these ideas derive from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s book *Empire*. They don’t. They got them from Ya Basta!) As an idea, Ya Basta! has been expanding rapidly: there are already offshoots in England (the Wombles), Australia (the Wombats), Spain, Finland and many U.S. cities such as New York and Cincinnati.

After the June 15 demonstrations in Gothenburg, Sweden, in which three activists were shot with live ammunition, Ya Basta! became seriously worried about what might happen

in Genoa. The organization made an offer to the police: They would guarantee no aggressive behavior of any kind toward persons or property, if the police would use only non-lethal arms – rubber bullets but not real guns. The police reply amounted to a snort of contempt: Not only would they be carrying guns, they were already ordering body bags.

Nonetheless the first day of protests, on Thursday, July 19, began auspiciously enough, and very much in the Ya Basta! spirit with a march in favor of “freedom of movement” – an estimated 60,000 people led by pop star Manu Chao and representatives of Genoa’s immigrant communities. Despite occasional attempts at police provocation, the march was entirely peaceful. “It was the first time,” a young Irish participant told me, watching lin

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e after line of marchers – Italian communists, Swiss syndicalists, Danish pacifists, all calling for Europe to open its borders – “that I actually felt proud to be a European.”

On Friday, however, more than 100,000 people were preparing to march from half a dozen different locations to the “red zone,” that section of the city surrounding the old Ducal Palace where the G8 leaders were meeting. The marchers ranged from radical labor unions and reformist groups like the French AT-TAC to pagans and a theatrical “pink bloc.” Ya Basta! itself had marshaled a column perhaps 10,000 strong. Some were simply intending to march up to the wall, others to blockade the entrances. Still others were determined to get past the elaborate fortifications. By the end of the day, every single group had been assaulted by the police. The police strategy was clearly planned well in advance. What made this situation distinctly abnormal was that this time, the police had provided a “Black Bloc” of their own. Over and over, on Saturday came reports of a mysterious group of 30 to 40 “anarchists” whom nobody else had ever seen before; huge guys, for the most part, and extraordinarily violent – willing, even, to physically assault other

(real) anarchists who tried to stop them from attacking small shops and setting fire to cars.

By the end of the day, after countless sightings of these “Black Blockers” emerging from police stations, hobnobbing with *carabinieri* or assisting with arrests, the only question left in anyone’s mind was whether one was dealing with undercover cops or fascist vigilantes working with the police. (The tendency of *carabinieri* stations to sport portraits of Mussolini and fascist insignia inside suggested this might have been a somewhat blurry distinction.)

The phony bloc would suddenly appear, smashing windows and overturning dumpsters, right next to each column the cops wanted to attack; the police themselves would show up a few minutes afterward and proceed to lob massive amounts of high-intensity tear gas and pepper spray into the area just after the phony bloc left; this would be followed by baton charges meant to break bones and splatter blood. Pacifists were charged while holding out palms painted white; a women’s march was attacked after performing a spiral dance ceremony. Ya Basta!, who came in a column headed by giant eight-foot plexiglas shields borne by padded youths in motorcycle helmets, was entirely unprepared for the intensity of the chemical warfare – much worse than anything used in Italy before. They arrived with musicians and even padded dogs, aiming simply to march up to the red zone and perhaps push at the barricades once they got there.

Under past, Social Democratic regimes, the police often seemed rather bemused by such games; under newly elected President Silvio Berlusconi, however, the attitude was completely different. Police cut off the march before they reached Bringole Station and started a major gas attack, lobbing shells like mortar fire well behind the front lines; people started collapsing and vomiting behind their shields; at the front, police were firing gas canisters like bullets directly at people’s heads and, eventually, shooting live ammunition.

Will it succeed? This remains to be seen. Signs in Europe are actually rather hopeful. The media have begun to tell the real story of what happened. The governments of France and Germany are putting intense pressure on the Italian government to explain what happened to their nationals in Italian jails; huge marches have occurred in every major Italian city. It is a bit sobering, however, to observe that the U.S. media ultimately proved far more willing to defend fascist thuggery than their counterparts in the actual lands once governed by Petain, Hitler and Mussolini.

With the march stopped in its tracks, many people (myself included) started exploring side streets looking for a way around; carabinieri helicopters were dropping tear gas canisters like bombs overhead, but their numbers on the ground, in those twisty streets and tiny piazzas, were much smaller. Angry protesters, and even angrier local residents who did not appreciate the massive use of chemical weapons on their apartments, started throwing stones; on several streets, the police had to beat a hasty retreat; in others, there was veritable hand-to-hand combat. It was in the ensuing chaos that Carlo Giuliani, a local kid, was shot and killed.

As soon as they heard that someone had died, Ya Basta! pulled their people out. This was not the sort of battle they had come for. But battles continued to rage for the rest of that day and into the next. Near the convergence center at Kennedy Plaza, people started setting fire to banks; what was supposed to be a peaceful march on Saturday ended in a pitched battle where hundreds of people threw rocks and bottles at the *carabinieri*, who could only dislodge them by bringing up a tank. That evening ended with a midnight raid on the Independent Media Center, in which the police's fascist auxiliaries were unleashed on sleeping activists.

No one is quite sure why the Italian police raided the IMC. It might have been a sheer act of terrorism. It might have been because they were aware that videographers inside had compiled a good deal of compromising footage of the phony Black Bloc working with police. The latter would explain why, once inside, they put so much energy into appropriating every video cassette in sight. (If so, it was all to no avail – footage of “anarchists” emerging from a police station appeared on the nightly news in Italy a few days later.) The IMC itself was a five-story building – donated, oddly enough, by the city government – which contained a clinic, space for press conferences, radio stations, offices for writers, film editing, and one suite being used by the Genoa Social Forum, an umbrella group that coor-

minated arrangements for the protests, and which had mainly concerned itself with managing a nearby welcoming center and sponsoring an ongoing five-day lecture series about democratic alternatives to corporate globalization.

There, the amount of damage the police could do was limited by the fortuitous presence of a Minister of the European Parliament. (“When she held out her identity card,” one eyewitness reported, “it was like holding up a cross to vampires.”) They still held everyone in detention for most of an hour while they appropriated films and documents. Across the street, however, was a “safe space,” an unused schoolhouse in which at least a hundred activists were sleeping and preparing food; there, the police allowed their allies to take off their black sweatshirts (revealing “*polizia*” T-shirts) and go on a total rampage, beating sleeping teen-agers, leaving shattered bodies, broken bones and pools of blood.

Everyone inside was arrested, many carried out in stretchers (according to unconfirmed reports, at the time of writing 18 activists are still unaccounted for). Like almost everyone arrested in Genoa (many of them actually removed from hospital beds and carried off to jail), they returned to their own countries reporting systematic torture. The police justified it all by saying they were raiding the offices of the Genoa Social Forum, nerve center of the violent Black Bloc activity. And sure enough, the next day Reuters headlines affirmed: “Genoa Police Raid Headquarters of Violent Protesters.”

The very existence of something called the IMC was not even mentioned in any mainstream American reporting that I have seen so far. All of this is in accord with common journalistic standards, whereby the word “violent” can be attributed, generically, to protesters on the slightest provocation, but never, under any circumstances, to forces authorized by the state. But it is a matter of no little irony that even in Italy, where much of the press is actually owned by Berlusconi, the

coverage was far more skeptical of the official version than in the U.S. media.

What is called the anti-globalization movement (increasingly, people within it are just calling it the “globalization movement”) is trying to change the direction of history – ultimately, the very structure of society – without resort to weapons. What makes this feasible is globalization itself: the increasing speed with which it is possible to move people, possessions and ideas around.

What politicians and the corporate press call “globalization,” of course, is really the creation and maintenance of institutions (the WTO, G8 summits, the IMF) meant to limit and control that process so as to guarantee it produces nothing that would discomfit a tiny governing elite: Tariffs can be lowered, but immigration restrictions have to be increased; large corporations are free to take profits wherever and however they like, but any ideas about forms of economic organization that would not look like large profit-seeking corporations must be strictly censored, etc. The threat of real global democracy is probably their greatest fear, and the unprecedented growth of the movement – Seattle was considered huge at 50,000 protesters; Genoa, a year and a half later, drew perhaps 200,000 – must seem utterly terrifying.

This is why the battle of images is so strategic. Ya Basta! understands that “protection” for activists can never consist primarily of foam rubber padding. When the state really wishes to take off the gloves, it can. Violence is something states do very well. If their hands are tied, it is because centuries of political struggle have produced a situation in which politicians and police have to be at least minimally responsive to a public that has come to believe that living in a civilized society means living in one in which young idealists cannot, in fact, be murdered in their beds. It is precisely this kind of padding that the rulers of our world are now frantically trying to strip away.