

Migrants as activist citizens in contemporary Italy

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1. 2010-2012. A new cycle of migrant struggles in Italy

'We will be remembered'; whoever wrote this on the wall of an abandoned industrial site near Rosarno, in the southern Italian region of Calabria, did not know how right he would be. The anonymous writer was one of the hundreds of migrants from many African countries working in this region as orange-pickers during the winter. Year after year, they

transformed an old olive oil factory into a highly precarious and uncomfortable shelter. The sentence on the wall appears like a message in a bottle, sent before the authorities removed almost all Africans from the town 'for their own security'. It refers to the [tumult](#) that exploded on 7 January 2010 in Rosarno, where hundreds of migrants rebelled after two of them were injured by three Italian youngsters in a drive-by shooting. The rioting workers set on fire rubbish bins, destroyed shop windows and cars, engaged in urban guerrilla clashes with the police, and finally they became the target of a 'black man hunt' unleashed by the resident population: during the same night many migrants were beaten with iron bars and two were shot. In the next three days, with the excuse of protecting them from the rage of Italians, about 2,000 African workers were either moved from the site by the police or fled voluntarily.

On 7 January, 2012 many grass-roots associations, anti-racist and social justice movements, collectives of workers and neo-communist parties met in the sites of the unrest and announced the beginning of a new campaign – [SOS Rosarno](#) – against exploitation, underground and criminal economies, and unsustainable projects for local development. The protagonists of those days are especially remembered, not simply because of the explosion of their indignation against systematic racist violence – the shooting was just one of countless acts of oppression against them. The significance of their actions does not only lie in that fact that they revolted against the 'Ndrangheta (the local Mafia which dominates the fruit and vegetable businesses besides controlling drug and arm trades) and denounced to the police fraud, extortions and killings in a way that Italians have never dared to do. They are remembered chiefly because through their words and acts they called into question the dominant public discourse on immigration as a security and border control problem.

Their actions were an unexpected protest against the hypocrisy of an affluent (formally democratic) society based on the de facto legalized exploitation of disposable people.

They spoke out against their inferiorization through institutional and everyday 'democratic racism'. They contested the dominant discursive frames that depicted them either as a *threat*, a *resource*, or *victims* of adverse circumstances. They proved that they could claim and exercise rights even if they were not entirely entitled to them, according to positive law or common sense. They collectively demonstrated that it is possible to stand up and ask for respect even when you live under the continuous risk of being deported.

The highly political nature of those events was so clear and their potential for emulation so explosive that a former Italian Minister of Interior and member of the virulently anti-immigrant Northern League, tried to restore the mainstream view affirming that: 'There's a difficult situation in Rosarno, like in other places, because for years illegal immigration – which feeds criminal activities – has been tolerated and nothing effective has ever been done about it'. As these words suggest, fear of the possible spread of the revolt was apparent in the Minister's order to carry out a complete cleansing of the site, making of Rosarno 'the world's only entirely white town'. In spite of repression, the unrest in Rosarno became a symbolic reference point and an extremely powerful stimulus for all subsequent migrant struggles in Italy.

In fact, it is true that the idea of an Italian 'Day without immigrants', inspiring the first migrant general strike on [1 March 2010](#), had been in circulation even before the events of Rosarno; but it is also true that in a chain of struggles communicating with each other from the North to the South of the country, the migrant general strike became the fundamental antecedent for many other mobilizations: a [campaign against undeclared work](#) was launched in the countryside of Nardò (Apulia) in Summer 2010 and 2011; [the occupation](#) of a 115 feet construction crane in Brescia (Lombardy) was carried out from 30 October to 16 November 2010 by six migrants claiming their right to regularization; a two-week [strike](#) was organized by migrant farmworkers against illegal gang-masters in Summer 2011, again in Nardò. These key struggles inspired many other similar mobilizations throughout the whole country. Acts of occupying public sites continued for months, producing the occupation of two industrial towers in Milan in [November 2010](#) and in [September 2011](#), and two churches in [Padua](#) (Veneto) and in [Massa](#) (Tuscany) respectively in February and May 2011. The migrant general strike on 1 March was repeated in 2011 and 2012, even if with less success than in its first year.

2. Understanding the new migrant struggles as "acts of citizenship"

Why did the unrest in Rosarno function as a turning point? How do these struggles and the specific acts performed by their protagonists contribute to deepening our understanding of citizenship, seen not as a legal status related to a given set of rights and civic habits, but as a contested 'ground of battle' in which all kind of actors may re-negotiate their way of 'being political'? How did these struggles contribute to changing migrants' living conditions and Italian society as a whole?

Contemporary migrant struggles, like those which have occurred in Italy especially in 2010 and 2011, are potentially re-configuring and re-inventing the very premises and conditions of being political. Traditionally intended as national and reserved to 'qualified' members of the state, the political space is actually under pressure from many processes of post-nationalisation and de-nationalization. In this scenario, migrant struggles have a complex

and partially contradictory relationship with citizenship: on one side, citizenship is contested as a nation-centred, differentiating, stratifying and filtering mechanism, aimed at preserving the historical privileges of western populations; on the other side, citizenship becomes a site of conflict for those aiming to re-negotiate its meanings and to open its boundaries, taking advantage of the open nature of citizenship as an 'institution in flux' and as an 'incompletely theorized contract' between state and population.

Engin Isin's 'acts of citizenship' offer a suitable theoretical approach for exploring the question of *how subjects become claimants of rights and responsibilities, under surprising conditions or within a relatively short period of time*. This is exactly what is at stake in the new cycle of struggles: maybe for the first time in Italy, in the context of the global economic crisis, migrants enacted in the clearest way their autonomous political subjectivity. Acting as citizens, migrants become part of a broader social movement that opposes the neoliberal model of citizenship. Against such a racialized, exclusionary, competitive and post-democratic idea of being political, they contribute to the production of a new global citizenship from below. On the other hand, this perspective deliberately breaks with all the simplification and the undervaluation of migrants' political agency. It rejects the ethnicization of social conflicts and reaffirms the need to rethink history in terms of class politics in order to write about the present.

3. Acts of citizenship as signals of a new cycle of migrant struggles

The economic crisis and the newly exacerbated 'war' on irregular migration stimulated a new cycle of struggles in 2010. The difference between this new cycle and the previous one can also be found in its peculiar political and subjective quality: the wave of protests started in Rosarno is characterized by an unprecedented production and diffusion of acts of citizenship.

There are many facts that justify the use of Isin's categories. Above all, migrant struggles in contemporary Italy enacted an unexpected rupture of the established political patterns, through acts of self-identification, self-organization and self-representation. Almost nobody in the country was ready to face tumults against everyday racist violence, Mafia oppression or over-exploitation. When the migrant general strike was announced, following the example of 'A day without immigrants' organized in the United States and in France, only a few believed that it could be possible.

Nobody had ever had the idea of a campaign or a strike denouncing systematic irregularities in the rural labour market, before migrants themselves launched it in Nardò, with the support of two solidarity and anti-racist organizations that opened there a hosting camp during the watermelons and tomato harvests. No migrant had ever dared to carry out such radical political acts as occupying a construction crane in the centre of a city like Brescia, denouncing frauds during the amnesty or claiming 'the *right* to stay for everyone'. It was unexpected that people living under the constant threat of being fired, attacked, over-exploited, criminalized or deported, could claim fundamental rights as workers and as human beings. They enacted new political sites for struggle: not only in global cities, such as Milan, but also in small towns and in the countryside. In their stand, migrants rejected the paternalistic approaches of trade unions, NGOs and political parties that saw them as

unable to act autonomously, because of their subaltern condition and their poor cultural and political resources.

The migrants exhibited unsuspected powers of self-organization, self-representation and alliance-building capacities. They were successful in opening a new political scene, through the re-appropriation of classical practices of struggle, such as strikes. They made their voices heard and their bodies visible: they took advantage of the media sensation to gain general attention, and they used blogs, [independent radio stations](#), mobile phones, [video](#) and file sharing, in order to present their own stories without intermediaries. They were finally no longer 'strangers' (*stranieri*), 'non-EU people' (*extra-comunitari*) or 'illegals' (*clandestini*): they gained individual identities, faces and names, instead of generic, abstract and prejudicial labels – this is exactly what happened to Arun, Papa, Sajad, Jimi, Rachid and Singh, the six occupants of the crane in Brescia.

The mobilizations evoked a new kind of solidarity in the population, going beyond the militant milieus and also involving non politicised organizations and people. This was particularly evident in Brescia, where the occupation of the crane was supported by a permanent sit-in around the construction site. The sit-in was started by anti-racist movements and neo-communist parties, but was also supported by the local Catholic Caritas, other volunteering groups and inhabitants of the neighbourhood, who provided occupants with warm food and dry clothes. Solidarity was strongly political: significantly, one of the most widespread slogans of that time was 'we are all on that crane'. On the other side, the mobilizations were generally repressed by [police charges](#), deportation of the more active members of the movement and incrimination of militants. The only exception was represented by the local government and the police in Nardò, who usually cooperated with the campaign against undeclared work. The mobilizations also stimulated the open and violent hostility of many far-right movements, which demanded the prohibition of all migrant manifestations in the country. [The killing of two Senegalese workers](#) in Florence on 13 December 2011 by a neo-fascist militant apparently had no connection with the new cycle of migrant struggles: nevertheless, it may be considered as the result of a specific racist attitude, which deprecates migrant activism as a refusal of silenced subordination.

4. Migrants subverting "democratic racism"

In their struggles in contemporary Italy, migrants challenged, in a more or less intentional way, the ideological and institutional frame of 'democratic racism'. They rejected the essentialized image of migrant as outlaw and as a threat to the local population, by denouncing the many forms of illegality or irregularity widespread in the country and affecting them *and* the large majority of Italians as well. For instance, in Rosarno they contributed to the fight against the underground economy and the local Mafia. In the general strike, they denounced the mechanisms of the [Bossi-Fini law](#) as criminogenic, in the sense that they create undocumented migrants that risk to be trapped in illegal markets and irregular behaviours in everyday-life. They also contested the so-called '[security packages](#)' passed by the Berlusconi government in 2009 and 2010, which introduced: the crime of illegal entry; the possibility of deporting foreigners in case they were sentenced to more than two years; more severe punishments for irregular migrants who committed a crime; imprisonment for migrants who didn't respect the expulsion

decree and sanctions against those who rented a house to irregular migrants. In Nardò they contested the practice of illegal gang-masters (*caporali*) typical of many rural areas in southern Italy. In Brescia they denounced the frauds they suffered during the 2009 amnesty, revealing the existence of an underground market of fake documents and blaming the incongruence of the law.

One aim of the migrant general strike was to reject the discursive frame which presented them as a threat to the well-being of Italian society. Taken together with the buy boycott, the 'Day without immigrants' demonstrated how the country largely depended on them working, paying taxes and spending money. At the same time, the political aim of the strike was to contest the subordination of migrants' right to stay, and consequently all other rights, to whether they had a job and thus were 'being useful'. Through this claim, migrants also rejected the idea of being just a resource, connected with the neoliberal discourse of merit as the principal criterion for accessing rights. Finally, all those autonomous mobilizations subverted the paternalistic image of migrants as victims, as passive recipients of 'our' policies or 'our' solidarity or as politically apathetic, willing to be satisfied with the little they had. Instead of an irreducible 'otherness', they stressed the similarities between their conditions and those of the majority of the Italian population, under the effect of the same economic crisis.

5. Migrants generating solidarity against the system and the crisis

Considerable evidence shows that migrant struggles in contemporary Italy have generally produced a solidaristic attitude in the public, especially in other workers or social categories which were also experiencing a growing precariousness as an effect of the crisis and the austerity measures adopted by the government. I suggest this solidarity was produced across fragmented and originally opposed groups, also because these acts were oriented toward the creation of a new 'regime of truth', i.e. a new discursive frame aimed to affirming a new 'hegemony' in the society as a whole.

Denouncing hypocrisy as functional to the dominant economic, political and legal system, migrants speak of their unjust conditions and of the unjust functioning of Italian society at the same time: they activate the 'mirror-function' typical of migrations, according to sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad, i.e. their power to single out what is latent in the political order of the destination society, 'thus unmasking what is masked, revealing what should be ignored (...), shedding some light or enlarging what is usually hidden in the social unconscious and therefore destined to be kept in the shadow, as a secret'.

For instance, the unrest in Rosarno revealed to a large audience what many militants, journalists and professionals already knew: our [Christmas oranges](#) were, in reality, the '[fruits of hypocrisy](#)'. Migrants brought to the public debate the unsustainable functioning of the rural economy in southern Italy, where competitiveness and profit have been based more and more on low wages, over-exploitation and criminalization of migrant workers, and often also on subsidy frauds committed against the European Union. These arguments became central in Nardò, during the campaign against undeclared work and the strike against illegal gang-masters. Migrant farmworkers succeeded in denouncing at the same time their slavery-like working conditions and the collective damages of the underground economy. They asked for the respect of workers' rights protected by the

existing labour laws in terms of minimum wage, maximum working day, unemployment benefits, security provisions and decent living conditions.

During their general strike, migrants denounced the Bossi-Fini law as a labour-market law aimed at blackmailing migrant workers, while at the same time exposing Italian workers to social dumping. They contested as a pure hypocrisy the discourse of a natural competition between workers, as this was artificially created by immigration laws and by the non-application of general legal rules for decent work. They argued therefore that the abolition of a strict link between work and permit to stay were a common struggle of all workers living in Italy.

In order to modify their social and political conditions, migrants have to interact with the law as the fundamental normative structure of modern power. I propose interpreting migrants' acts of citizenship in contemporary Italy as based on their determination to prove their claims to rights and responsibilities as legitimate, against the failures and contradictions of the existing legal framework. The mobilization in the countryside of Nardò was centred on these kinds of acts: the claim of a regular recruitment contract (*ingaggio*) and the decision not to work without it were used by migrants to enforce some basic labour and human rights included in the National contract for farmworkers and in many ILO Conventions.

As a partial victory, after the self-organized migrant strike in Summer 2011, the Italian Parliament adopted a new law transforming [gang-mastering](#) from an administrative violation to a crime, punishable by eight to ten years of imprisonments and a 1,000 to 2,000 euros fine per each worker hired illegally. Something similar happened with the mobilizations in Brescia and other towns for the right to be regularized. Many migrants accessed legal remedies to contest the legitimacy of the ministerial note excluding already expelled migrants from the 2009 amnesty. In May 2011 the Italian [High Administrative Court](#) finally ruled in their favour so that many procedures were re-opened. Further legal actions are still ongoing, involving requests for the regularization of all the victims of document frauds. Moreover, in July and December 2010 the [Italian Constitutional Court](#) ruled against two provisions of the 'security packages', namely the more severe punishments for irregular immigrants who committed a crime and imprisonment for migrants who didn't respect the expulsion decree. And in May 2012, after migrants' denunciations to the police, about twenty persons [were arrested](#) in Nardò, including several gang-masters and a landowner, charged with accusations including illicit work intermediation, trafficking of human beings, labour exploitation, extortion, and induction of people into slavery.

6. Conclusions

Migrant struggles in contemporary Italy should not be overestimated in terms of immediate advances in people's material and legal conditions. As a matter of fact, after almost three years the situation in Rosarno has not sensibly improved. If it is possible, after the unrest it has become even worse: migrants' previous shelters were destroyed by the police and no safer housing conditions were provided by local authorities. In Summer 2012 the campaign against illicit work in Nardò ceased because the local authorities didn't support the [reopening](#) of the hosting camp for seasonal workers. Bearing this in mind, it is crucial to

stress the role that the new cycle of migrant struggles had in opening up the constraints of neoliberal citizenship.

First, migrants qualified as claimants of rights and responsibilities by contesting the mainstream view that depicts them as criminals. They denounced exploitation even at the risk of being deported, thus refusing the dominant discourse that presents them as a mere economic resource and as people ready to accept all kind of working conditions in order to earn money. Finally, their activism contested the paternalistic image of migrants as passive victims, subverting discourses that racialize and orientalize them in order to inhibit their political agency.

Second, migrants produced unprecedented solidarity among themselves and with other groups, going beyond anti-racist militancy or humanitarianism, because they raised a demand for justice that questioned neoliberalism as a whole. With this in mind, acts of citizenship may be said to produce actors that speak the truth against hypocrisy and thus become answerable to justice against injustice, generating new forms of solidarity.

Third, acting as activist citizens, migrants contested their role as mere addressees of legal measures that subordinate human rights to border controls, market-oriented selections and ethnocentric considerations. In particular, they recalled to everyone the danger of being bereft of one's human dignity and real democracy under pure market rules. They became the legitimate claimants of rights and responsibilities, not necessarily in the name of existing law, but in the name of real democracy.