Luca Calafati
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Understanding the Return of Violent Protest Policing in Europe: Some Reflections Provoked by the Italian Case.

Introduction

The past decade saw the return of confrontational protests in Europe. Militant forms of civil disobedience, occupations of public spaces, destruction of private property, violent clashes with the police have characterised protests of marginalised youths in Paris and London, Spanish Indignados, Greeks anti-austerity movements, German citizen groups fighting against large-scale requalification projects, Italian autonomous workers movements, Danish alterglobalisation action groups at anti-G8 Summits protests. The list could go on.

State reaction towards this upsurge of 'unruly politics' (Tadros 2011) was not mild. In 2012 Amnesty International published two reports highlighting the disproportionate use of violence by police forces during protests (Amnesty International 2012a, b):

> 'Amnesty International has documented incidents involving the use of excessive force, abuse of "less-lethal" weapons, obstructing access to medical assistance and arbitrary detention in several countries including Greece, Romania, and Spain. In many cases, officers have repeatedly hit peaceful demonstrators with batons, including on the head and neck, and caused serious injuries. Despite calls on the authorities across the region, these violations persist' (Amnesty International 2012b: 2).

Although anthropologists have widely studied violence and its consequences in numerous different contexts, the issue of police violence during contemporary political protests has been almost ignored. Not surprisingly, apart from few exceptions (Juris 2005, 2008a, 2008b), there are no anthropological accounts of the recent comeback of violent protest policing in Europe. Situated in this literature gap, this paper aims to outline a set of concepts that might guide an anthropological empirical research on police violence during protests. The paper is grounded on a critical assessment of police violence during protest policing in Italy over the past decade.

In the first section of the paper I will review the politological literature on police violence in Europe, with particular attention on the Italian case. I will focus on this body of literature since political scientists have produced the most complete account of this social phenomenon. I will outline the politological understanding of violent protest policing during protests. Furthermore, I will concentrate on the difficulties that politological accounts of police violence encounter in conceptualising the recent upsurge of brutal protest policing in contemporary Italy.

In the second and third sections, building on the

recent comeback of violent protest policing in Italy represents a challenge that political scientists have failed to meet.

relation to autonomous social movements, ‘research of de-escalation’

2001). Secondly, the exception narrative is weakened by the mild consequence faced by the officers leading police operation in the Genoa incidents. Although formally sentenced, the top-officers of the

‘(…)

tendency of Italian police during protest policing. As we

will criticise the tendency of politological studies to think about violence in terms of repression. In contrast, following Foucault, I will argue that the notion of 'production' will enhance our understanding of violence. Furthermore, I will discuss some empirical studies that show how looking at violence from the 'production perspective' can significantly enrich accounts of violence during protest policing.

Della Porta and Reiter (1998b: 3) define a police that 'prohibits a wide range of protest activities, and intervenes with a high degree of force' as employing a 'repressive, and "brutal" protest policing style'. As this definition shows, the notion of 'repression' is central in the understanding that political scientists have of violence during protests. As a result, violence is mainly seen as something that impedes or blocks the actions of an actor. Consequently, polititological studies of police violence during protests

protest policing, than the one shaped by the repressive conception of violence of the politological literature. Consequently, an anthropological study of police violence during protests should continue after the protests were crushed, focusing on the effects on the subjectivity of protesters.

The recent works of social psychologists Adriano Zamparini and Marialuisa Menegatto (2011, 2012) show the

> 'The psychopolitical trauma cracks tremendously the trust in the system, creating a long-lasting psychological rupture. Every kind of contact with people wearing a uniform creates fear and activates tactics of avoidance. "For years as soon as I saw a policeman I became anxious, the heart started pumping and the blood pressure raising, and I tried to avoid these encounters. And again: "For a long time when I saw the police I became afraid and I felt like in Bolzaneto. (…) Even who does not conduct police functions but exercises administrative control functions wearing an uniform can originates (apparently) irrational crises: I could not travel by train because I feared the uniform of the ticket inspector' (Zamperini et al 2011: 98, my translation)

The study provides many insights about the consequences

Summit emerged how the brutalities of the police had radicalised certain activists (Juris 2008a: 192). This evidence seems to confirm Foucault's thesis.

Conclusion

In this paper I critically analysed the recent return of violent protest policing in Europe, focusing on the Italian case. I started from a review of the politological literature on that issue, emphasising the limits of the politological conceptualisation of this phenomena. I than tried to identify the conceptual causes behind the limitative theorisation of political scientists. Hence, I suggested alternative concepts that might help anthropologists to overcome the reductionist narrative of political scientists. My main arguments are two.

On one hand, I argued that anthropologist should avoid to look at police violence from the notion of Western democracy as theorised in the politological literature. As shown in the first two sections, this notion entails the idea of democracies as a neutral political system that guarantees to every group the right to express dissent. Consequently, it tends to suggest a reading of police brutalities during protests as 'exceptions'. In addition, it obfuscates the fact that police brutalities in Italy made his comeback only in relation to those socially and politically marginalised groups marked as unruly.

Hence, I argued that the concept of neoliberal state, as theorised by Waquant, represent a better tool for understanding contemporary police brutalities. In Wacquant's theorisation, the neoliberal state is exactly characterised by being punitive and violent towards political and social marginal categories. In particular towards those seen as 'unruly'. The concept therefore stimulates a much more rich and complete view on police brutalities in countries undergoing neoliberal transformations than Western democracy.

On the other hand, I argued that anthropologists should avoid a conceptualisation of police brutalities during protests from the perspective of violence as a repressive force. Such conception – dominant within politological studies – conceives violence as limiting behaviour. Therefore political scientists, working from this perspective, stop the study of police brutalities once the violent intervention of the police crushes the protest.

2001 Genoa G8 Summit. An Intolerable Stain on Italy's Human Rights Record, Report EUR 30/013/2011 [Online]. Available at: www.amnesty.org

Amnesty International (2012a)

Wacquant, L.