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Genoa Social Forum 20 years on

Genoa didn't last for only 48 hours

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On the twentieth anniversary of the 2001 Genoa G8 summit, there are reconstructions of what happened going around that decontextualise the event, highlight the explosive events without explaining their roots, and erase the history of a movement that should instead be rediscovered. [1]

After twenty years, memory plays tricks on you. Perhaps this is why a singular interpretation is emerging - above all in a moderate key, but sometimes also in a radical version - of the events of the movement that invaded the streets of Genoa twenty years ago against the G8. There is the idea that it was a “speeded up 1968, lasting 48 hours”, a movement that died in the cradle under the blows of repression.

The thesis of the “68 of forty-eight hours” is that of the director of the *Espresso*, Marco Damilano. He expounded it in the [editorial](#) of the Sunday 3 July issue, dedicated to Genoa 2001 and enriched by the wonderful [cover](#) illustration of the cartoonist [Zerocalcare](#). *L'Espresso* has the merit - thanks to the effective and accurate reconstruction by [Simone Pieranni](#), which will continue in subsequent issues - of taking a clear position and without playing down the police violence in those days. Damilano himself defines the actions of the police as a “massacre” perpetrated by suspending the constitutional guarantees, and is not afraid to point the finger at “state lies which protected the top managers of the violent butchery, first and foremost, the Chief of Police of the time, Gianni De Gennaro”. A stance all the more important today when we have been forced to see images so similar to those of twenty years ago inside the prison of Santa Maria Capua Vetere, this time to the detriment of prisoners. Images that remind us how certain dynamics of law enforcement are systemic and repeat themselves in a similar way in different contexts and historical periods.

What leaves us puzzled, however, is the reading of the movement of twenty years ago. An analysis that ends up being useless for those who still believe another world is possible, and misleading for those who simply seek some historical tools to understand what has happened in the last twenty years.

Basically, according to the director of *L'Espresso*, the traumatic repression of those days caused:

the retreat of those who were then twenty or thirty years old and who no longer wanted anything to do with a collective project after encountering violent and lying politics and institutions. Genoa is also this: the lost opportunity, the end of commitment, the chasm. The black hole into which everything has fallen.

In short, the left in Italy ended at that moment, because of carabinieri Mario Placanica's gun which killed Carlo Giuliani, the raid on the Armando Diaz school (headquarters of the Genoa Social Forum) and the torture at the Bolzaneto barracks. [2]

The opposite of retreat

I am among those who in Genoa 2001 were in their early twenties, like most of the protesters who tried to march from Via Tolemaide towards Piazza Alimonda where, Carlo, who was 23 years old like us, lost his life. Yet after that July 2001, among those of my generation who were in those streets, and among those who were not there but who in the following weeks felt the need to participate, I saw the exact opposite of retreat. We came out of Genoa not as mere victims, but strong in the hope aroused by that movement and in the anger and indignation at that same repression.

Already on Saturday 21 July it brought unexpected numbers to the streets, despite the fear and death of the previous day. Hope and anger that convinced us another world was not only possible, but also necessary.

This is what dragged us into the two-year period 2001-2003: the dramatic days in Genoa were a formidable boost that multiplied participation and enthusiasm. Social Forums were born in every city, even in the smallest towns and neighbourhoods, a myriad of different paths and disputes were opened, moments of mass discussion with tens of thousands of people and, one after the other, continuous demonstrations that are still some of the biggest street events in the history of our country. The Social Forum in Florence in November 2002 had an incredible participation in the discussions in the Fortezza da Basso and then a final demonstration of 500,000 people, bigger than that of 21 July 2001 in Genoa;. On 15 February 2003 there was the biggest demonstration in the history of our country with three million people in the streets against the war, in a global day of action that led the *New York Times* to define that movement as “the second world superpower”. That same movement had a significant influence on the battle of Sergio Cofferati’s CGIL against the reform of Article 18 of the Workers’ Statute by the Berlusconi government. In March 2002 it filled the Circus Maximus with one of the largest trade union demonstrations ever. It blocked the reform, which was then approved in 2015 by the Renzi government with very little opposition from the confederal unions. In between, there were:

- the world social forums around the world
- great efforts to invent and renew anti-capitalist content
- the multiplication of student collectives in schools and universities
- new occupations of social centres
- the birth of magazines and publishing houses (our *Alegre* was born in 2003 with a name that is not exactly random)
- self-managed communication paths that revolutionized the web such as Indymedia, which after Genoa and until 2004 had its phase of greatest strength and visibility (and then closed not surprisingly in 2006)
- not to mention the many environmentalist, feminist and territorial struggles.

It was a real explosion of so-called “civil society” which Damilano evidently does not remember. Zerocalcare himself, as quoted in the editorial, curiously claims that “what disappeared after Genoa was civil society. When something happened [before] there were the Arci, the Catholics and the social centres, city assemblies”, then, after Genoa, there was apparently nothing. Yet it is very difficult to find a historical moment with a greater number of town assemblies on the most varied themes than between 2001 and 2004. Certainly without comparison to the two decades preceding Genoa and the two that followed.

What produced the disillusionment

There is also a radical version of the interpretation of the days of Genoa as a “48-hour 1968”, that of those who had the feeling of having lived in those days an attempt at insurrection aborted because of the violent repression. They consider the enormous mobilizations of the following years politically tame because people were too little inclined to clashes in the streets. In the moderate version of *L'Espresso*, on the other hand, any responsibility of the left-wing parties for that movement is removed. Because of that repression, Damilano writes, “a generation was left without politics. And ended up in anti-politics.”

In fact, he immediately contradicts himself by quoting two 20-year-olds then on the streets of Genoa, Pablo Iglesias and Alexis Tsipras, who years later became vice-president of the Spanish government and Greek prime minister respectively. But his argument requires a direct link between the repression of the movement and the subsequent evolution of Italian politics: the nipping in the bud of a movement that imagined a different politics has supposedly produced a generational distrust such as to favour the birth of populism Grillo-style. [\[3\]](#)

The “[Vaffaday](#)” from which the [Five Star Movement](#) was born actually dates back to 2007, i.e. to the time when the effects of the second Prodi government were in full swing, which in 2006 had managed to beat [Silvio Berlusconi](#) by the skin of its teeth after five years of intense social movements against his government, but which in a few months had created disappointment and mistrust in the possibility of a real alternative.

Damilano glosses over the fact that the largest party of the left - the Democrats of the Left (DS - Democratici di Sinistra), who in 2001 were moving from the Communist Party of a decade earlier to the Democratic Party of a few years later - in that July not only was not in the streets with the movement but was on the side of the G8. Among the eight big names of the time were not only the hated George W. Bush and Silvio Berlusconi, but also the leader of the German Social Democrats, Gerard Schröder, and the leader of the British Labour Party Tony Blair, the theorist of the “third way” seen as a winning example by the main leaders of the DS: Massimo D’Alema, Walter Veltroni and Piero Fassino. They were fascinated by the “magnificent destinies and progressions” of liberalist globalization, by the beauty of labour flexibility against the prison of the fixed job, with a neophyte enthusiasm for the free market accompanied by the confused myth of meritocracy. And a few months later, following the attack on the Twin Towers on 11 September, they rushed, united and aligned, to support Bush in the war in Afghanistan.

In addition to the political responsibilities of the centre-left parties, Damilano also glosses over those of the radical left, which was an active part of that movement. The spokesman of the Genoa Social Forum, Vittorio Agnoletto, was elected to the European Parliament in 2004. In the same way as one of the most prominent media leaders of the March 2001 No Global Forum in Naples, Francesco Caruso, became a member of the Italian Parliament in 2006. Moreover, in the dynamics of growing social conflict in the years 2001-2003, the role of that party and of its leader Fausto Bertinotti was very important, until his stint in the Prodi government during which he became President of the Chamber of Deputies. In a short time, from being the political leader closest to the movements he became the one most hated by them.

It is too convenient to say that it was the police that caused the retreat. If ours has become “[a country without a left](#)” because of repression, we can do very little about it and certainly we cannot reproach ourselves for anything, neither those who were part of that movement nor those who were outside of it, like Damilano himself. If that movement was a 48-hour flashpoint, we cannot even learn anything from the valuable contents and practices expressed. In the best of cases these lessons were not grasped, in the worst of cases they were explicitly opposed by the political left. And which today it is evidently convenient to forget.

That movement got into difficulty in 2004, certainly because of its striking impotence in the face of the escalation of the war in Iraq despite the millions of people in the streets, because of the difficulty in obtaining concrete results (apart from the withdrawal of the reform of Article 18) and in taking root in the workplace. But without doubt the birth of the new centre-left, alongside the same Communist Refoundation that invested the consensus of those years of movement in a new governmental alliance with those who had opposed those same mobilizations, was decisive in creating the gradual retreat and disillusionment with active politics that we still suffer from today. An anti-system movement met on the one hand a moderate left that wanted to represent the system, and on the other a radical left that at a certain point was unable to propose anything other than the “lesser evil option”. This resulted in a formally left-wing government that continued to manage neo-liberalism at a time when, from 2007, that system was entering a deep economic crisis that increased inequalities and made an alternative even more urgent. It was this disappointment that made those who claimed to want to replace politicians with honest citizens appear more credible as an anti-system force, despite not proposing radically alternative policies,.

Today, when even the Grillo project appears to be in an endless crisis, showing the weakness of a diversionary discourse with respect to the contradictions of advanced capitalist societies, those years of mobilization should not be removed but rediscovered. We need to analyse the political potential, the errors and horrors committed at the time by a left that then rapidly self-destructed, the long range impact that its contents and practices had, which resisted the very crisis of the Social Forum, influencing first the birth of the student movement of the [2008 Onda Anomala](#)

(student movement) and then the 2011 [referendum victory for public water](#). But it also faced the limits of the roots and errors of perspective of that same movement.

Only a serious and sincere reflection on these events – that is not comfort-seeking, nor victimizing or aimed at obliterating – can make this twenty-year period a fruitful basis for rebuilding a politics on new foundations that can still aspire to another world.

*Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [Jacobin Italia](#).*

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[1] The 27th G8 summit was held in Genoa, Italy, on 20–22 July 2001. It is notorious for the police violence in which 23-year-old demonstrator Carlo Giuliani of Genoa, was shot dead. See Wikipedia [27th G8 summit](#).

[2] For these incidents of police violence see Wikipedia ["Raid on the Armando Diaz school"](#).

[3] Co-founder of the 5 Star movement, [Beppe Grillo](#).