

Ventimiglia between official reception and informal ways

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The stakes in the dialectic between surveillance and resistance

Ventimiglia is a piece of land with the sea in front of it and the mountain behind it. A few kilometers to the west, the soil, by virtue of the human invention of borders and nation-states, becomes French.

In Ventimiglia, however, they still speak Italian, with a mixed accent somewhere inbetween Ligurian and Calabrian, thanks to the massive settlements from the South to the end of the last millennium. Just under 25 thousand inhabitants that in summer welcome tens of thousands of national and international tourists, attracted by the beaches and the climate of the province of Imperia.

It is perhaps tourists who reflect even more the contradictions of this area. On July 26, as I had just arrived in Ventimiglia with the STAMP project, I was struck by a group of tourists waiting for the gates of the grade crossing of the railway tracks that intersect Via della Tenda to be raised. The road runs parallel to the semi-drained gorge of the Roia river, partly covered by the elevated highway. From Via della Tenda, a waist-high wall separates the carriageway from the river. The wait at the grade crossing was getting longer, but the tourists with their inflatable mats, bathing suits and diving masks, waited quietly: some admired the low buildings, typical of the sixties, others the pebbles on the pavement, some checked their smartphones, but no one looked over the wall, where, ten feet below, on an opened up cardboard box, three black kids were taking a meal. This image could appear as one of the best candidates to reflect the brutality of the symbolic border in Ventimiglia as elsewhere: the same border that separates an unwanted humanity to be rendered invisible and criminalized where it expresses the desire to cross the borders from a humanity to which the “right to leisure”, to consumption and above all to movement are guaranteed. Never as in that scene the Bauman metaphor of “tourists and vagabonds of globalization” takes shape so explicitly.

The institutional intervention at Ventimiglia seems to be aimed at establishing, on a larger scale, that evasion of glance put in place by the group of tourists: **governing the masses of “unwanted” so that they are made invisible to the eyes of the population.** However, this political design clashes with the constant resistance of the migrants trying to come up with their own self-determination ways. The tension between resistance and repression is felt where the attention is focused on the institutional attempts to concentrate the “transiting” migrants in the Ventimiglia area inside the “Roia park” run by the Red Cross: in fact, out of the about 700 migrants who stay in this area in an attempt to cross the border, more than 500 are hosted within the Red

Cross camp, opened on July 16, 2016. Another 200 migrants settle instead in “informal” camps on the river’s edge, between the piers of the elevated highway, in tents or in the open. Between the two dwelling solutions there is not only a difference in “comfort” level, as we would be led to believe at a first glance; the Red Cross camp is an example of the ambiguous intertwining between care and control of the existing humanitarian approach. The camp is in fact strongly avoided by migrants as it totally coincides with the **“camp model”: it is far from the center of Ventimiglia, invisible to the eyes of the population and tourists; it is under constant control of the military and various law enforcement agencies; access to outsiders is not allowed**; finally, and this is an element feared by transiting migrants, for some months now **access to the center is subject to identification through picture and fingerprinting**. These elements lead us to shift attention from the problems of camp management, such as promiscuity between men, women and children, hygiene conditions and respect for privacy, towards a closer examination of the concept of “camp” as an apparatus of power. This is the reason why the institutional **pressure for people to move to the Red Cross camp corresponds to an ideology that makes propriety and public order a mode of government of the people**. The actions of the young mayor from the PD party, Enrico Ioculano, who is having a hard time managing a phenomenon of this magnitude, stem from: he uses every type of instrument in order to discourage the pervasive presence of migrants on the Roia river, pushing them to accept the surveillance of the Red Cross camp. In addition to clearing out the informal camps, last summer drinking fountains on the banks of the river were closed and the installation of chemical baths was denied, thus putting at risk the survival of the people settled along the river and, more in general, public hygiene.

Migrants, large international organizations and institutions are not the only players in the complex local arena: various associations of citizens are pressing institutions and setting up solidarity networks with migrants. Also, a number of political parties (in recent months a Casapound group has appeared) support and feed a series of claims. Significant are the actions of the local Catholic church (the Church of the Gianchette), which offers hospitality to women and children under 14, of non-governmental organizations and social movements present in the area. The complex arena crossed by the tensions that we have described is enriched by the action of Weworld, Intersos and Doctors Without Borders, which offer medical and legal assistance to migrants in transit. Finally, an important role is played locally by social movements, whose impact is neglected or distorted by the reports of mainstream journalists and analysts, due to either bad faith or lack of knowledge. In June 2015 the No Border assembly of Ventimiglia was created to support a group of migrants who resisted an eviction. During its year and a half of activity, the permanent No Border Ventimiglia group has set up public assemblies with migrants and Italians and promoted events to raise awareness on institutional violence, on the effects of the militarization of the area, on the global causes of current migration. With the dissolution of the No Border assembly, the gap was filled by the “20k project”, made up of a network of activists, with a slightly different background compared to that of No Border, that is also involved in support for transitants, in information and monitoring of institutional practices.

Thus, the Ventimiglia arena is composed of these different forces, in tension between them, and is fragmented into dozens of different positions, opinions and initiatives. Also, the town strongly demonstrates the apparatus nature that the border assumes. The term “apparatus” here, in my opinion, must be applied in Foucault’s original meaning and in the subsequent interpretation of it by Gilles Deleuze. As is well known, Foucault defines the apparatus primarily as the network that is established between discourses, institutions, architectural structures, regulatory decisions, laws,

administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions that constitute formation, that in a given historical moment are created as a strategic response to a certain urgent issue. The aim of the French philosopher was to identify the nature of the bond that can be established between heterogeneous elements and the strategies of the relations of force that support certain knowledge domains and are supported by them. At the basis of the Foucaultian project, however, attention remains focused on the **processes of subjectivation**, defined as the way in which the Western man has come to define himself as a subject and according to what characteristics. In order to avoid any essentialist impetus, Foucault underlines the existence of different apparatuses, always crossed by tensions, although their main characteristic consists in a certain internal coherence. Thus, **what occurs in Ventimiglia can be seen in the light of a set of heterogeneous elements that run after each other and justify each other: the institutional action of pushing towards the Red Cross camp seems to respond directly to that evasion of the look at the grade crossing of Via della Tenda.** For both, migrants, but perhaps the poor in general, are annoying subjects to be hidden because they are symbolically foreign to a social purity delineated based on color and social class. At the same time, however, the humanitarian side of the West, with which the repressive side lives in a relationship of tension, imposes some form of reception. The latter, subsumed in the form of the camp, responds to a pattern of care and surveillance that feeds and justifies the same ideology for which **poverty is a problem to be solved by hiding and neutralizing its effects, rather than attacking its causes.** At a higher level, the surveillance mechanism allows to block people in transit, which responds to various needs, also in terms of labor needs, of other European States, finds its conditions of potentiality in the balance of power between countries and, finally, continues to justify itself through that symbolic division which sees in others a nuisance and a danger (the presumed and never proved infiltration of terrorists in the networks of migrants). This notion of danger, as opposed to the “purity” of propriety, makes it advisable to close the drinking water taps on the banks of the river or not to install chemical toilets as forms of disincentive to the informal settlements.

The analysis of the network that connects the different elements of a formation born to face an emergency – that is what Foucault defines as “apparatus” – needs an integration that overcome the dryness of a discourse that represents the Leviathan as an invincible being. At the end of the eighties, Gilles Deleuze proposed a re-interpretation of the Foucaultian apparatus highlighting the aspect concerning the dialectic between subjectivation, the power that acts on the living flesh, and the new, in an **infinite possible exercise of freedom. It stems from the dialectic between the incorporation of the “outside” (consisting of the interweaving of knowledge and power) and different forms of subjectivation that leave open possibilities for resistance.**

Ventimiglia also shows this: migrant subjects who support invisibility in order to cross borders or refuse reception/imprisonment and, ultimately, the status of victim assigned to them for the purposes of social control; migrants who come across activists, producing new political subjects, new forms of organization; migrants who move among tourists, breaking, more or less consciously, the invisibility wall built around them; citizens who break the orders that impose a ban

on distributing food to migrants; migrants who, at the border police station, refuse to show themselves as docile bodies and oppose, with an act of resistance, to their unmotivated transfer to the Taranto hotspot.

The “European Migration Government” COLUMN is curated by OSVALDO COSTANTINI, an associate researcher at the [Center for Religious Studies](#) of Fondazione Bruno Kessler, which is involved in the lifestyle and conflicts research lines. Within this interest moves between scientific publications and public press releases, especially in relation to those aspects of the #migration more closely related to the imaginations, the desires, and the related frustrations and disillusionments that move the actions of these new “damned of the earth”.

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