

SYMPOSIUM ON THE STRUGGLE AGAINST HIGH-SPEED TRAINS IN VAL DI SUSA, NW ITALY

Introduction to the Symposium: Hints of Post-capitalist Prefiguration in Val di Susa (NW Italy)

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No TAV stands for *No al Treno ad Alta Velocità* (No to the High-Speed Train). It is a movement that emerged from what started as a group in a small town in Val di Susa (Susa Valley) that formed in 1991. The group began questioning the introduction of an international high-speed railway line between Turin and Lyon, a project that arose from discussions among French and Italian officials at the European Union (E.U.) 1990 Nice Summit. The movement that has since formed and spread has organized protests, established permanent self-defense garrisons, and has even succeeded in halting construction at several sites. The national state has responded with violent repression, using the penal code introduced during the Fascist regime (and still largely unchanged) to imprison activists without any sentencing or to charge them with absurdities like “devastation and pillage” of property. This repressive apparatus has not only resulted in gratuitous beatings, invasive surveillance, and local impositions of martial law, but also of activists’ deaths in prison (Imperato 2007). The recent Monti regime, which ruled until the February 2013 elections, even managed to make crossing any areas of the high-speed railway project into the crime of trespassing a zone of national strategic interest, punishable by Article 682 of the penal code (this is Article 19 of Bill 183, which was passed in 2011 with center-left support). This “crime” results in a 100 to 600 euro fine or a three- to 12-month prison sentence. In some ways, this is beyond standard fare for those familiar with such bourgeois democratic forms of despotism (see, e.g., Boykoff 2007).

Protesting a high-speed railway link might seem odd to most environmentalists, who are often compelled to rely on motorized vehicles for nearly everything. But the justification for this infrastructural project has rested on outlandish, conjectured, and contradictory projections on trade volume and transportation, all disproven by empirical evidence and critical analysis of assumptions in mathematical models. For the sake of what amounts to a 39-minute reduction in travel time largely for those coming from Turin and other large cities and those who can afford a high ticket price, there would be, to cite a few large-scale and long-lasting problems, environmental damage (e.g., deforestation, farmland destruction), substantial health hazards (e.g., release of radioactive substances and asbestos from local rock formations), and the permanent displacement hundreds of people (Giunti, Mercalli, Poggio et al. 2012). The project would also make no dent in reversing the damage meted out by government disinvestment and partial privatization of existing railways since the 1970s, which have resulted in the rapid expansion of petrol-using vehicles; higher frequencies of large, deadly railway accidents; and poorer service and cramped conditions for most train passengers (Leone 2002). It is then in self-defense and with much sensitivity to the environment as a commons that the No TAV movement has come into being (Della Porta and Piazza 2008).

There is a gendered aspect to the No TAV movement that tends to be overlooked. Its formation, politics, and organizational effectiveness are related to the involvement of many women,

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who often take on key leadership roles. As many scholars have already shown in many parts of the world (Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen 1999; Salleh 2009; Turner and Brownhill 2004), women have been at the forefront of environmental struggles because they “have depended more than men on access to communal resources, and have been most committed to their defense” (Federici 2012, 142). It is, in some respects, an ecofeminist movement, even if connections between environmental degradation and patriarchy are only recently being discussed explicitly (DonneInMovimento 2012). The No TAV movement therefore poses a direct threat to capitalist institutions, even at international levels (e.g., E.U. commercial interests), since these institutions subsist parasitically on socially reproductive work and non-capitalist uses of resources. In this sense, it is a manifestation of the local in the global (Engel-Di Mauro 2009) that should spark the interest of all those that see local action as crucial to establishing a postcapitalist egalitarian order worldwide. This is why so much attention is being given here to a protracted seemingly local protest in northwest Italy.

The three works presented in this symposium describe and reflect on the ongoing mobilization and movement formation involved in the preservation of Val di Susa environments and communities. Armano, Pittavino, and Sciortino give an overview of how the struggle began and unfolded. It resulted, in spite of repressive state action, not only in the (until now) successful grassroots resistance against the imposition of an eco-socially destructive infrastructural project, but also in the creation of inclusive communalistic identities and political objectives. Self-defense has been refashioned into a series of demands for direct democracy, territorial integrity, and an end to subordinating people to profitability. Crucially, these demands rest on recovering the socially reproductive practices associated with an intrinsically anti-capitalist defense of the commons (Federici 2012, 138-142; Ricoveri 2010), widened beyond environmental resources to include such aspects as people’s health and the production and diffusion of knowledge.

Emanuele Leonardi develops the argument further by showing how this ostensibly environmental struggle turned into both the development of collectivist self-government, the extension of struggles to issues well beyond high-speed railways, and the forging of explicitly anti-capitalist communal practices. Part of these practices is in scientific knowledge production. I find it especially of interest that the process has been communal in orientation and has involved natural scientists in constructive ways. It provides an instructive example of the ecosocialism-informed natural science that could be developed to counter scientific work subordinated to capitalist ends (Saed 2011).

Loris Caruso identifies novel, transitional cultural processes in the No TAV movement that are shared with other like movements in Italy and beyond. These characteristics diverge substantively from earlier protest movements (that is, in core industrialized countries). Participants identify as part of a whole while fighting for highly specific objectives that are crucially centered about the notion and protection of the commons. They fight with a sense of urgency, seeing the high-speed train as a vehicle of destruction of their ways of life. And they do so inclusively, focusing on concrete objectives that can unify people with, for example, differing political leanings or gendered experiences. This centripetal process is strengthened by explicit ties to anti-fascist guerilla resistance, with the mountains playing an important role in partisans’ survival (Armiero 2011, 58). The roots of the No TAV movement thereby resonate cross-generationally in Val di Susa.

Discovering the emergence of new identities through environmental conflicts parallels findings in other places by other researchers writing on this since at least the 1990s (e.g., Robbins 2012, 216-217). From an ecosocialist perspective, these cultural processes evolving in Val di Susa are

of great interest because they can facilitate the development of the collectivist identities necessary to overcome capitalism in areas under the most powerful regimes.

However, Caruso points out that the very characteristics of such movements prevent them from mobilizing beyond their locality, and this prevents them from countering national institutions effectively. Still, the No TAV movement was among those that set up and signed the 2006 National Pact for Solidarity and Mutual Aid, which has been a national coordination effort for communities in struggle against similar abuse¹. No TAV protests also typically involve activists from other movements from all over Italy, including those fighting against incinerators and rubbish dumping in Campania region (more on this movement in a forthcoming issue). The Val di Susa struggles are thereby tightly connected to many other ones throughout the peninsula (Della Porta and Piazza 2008). But there is also the transitional aspect to such movements, in Caruso's estimation. It is represented in some of the vagueness accompanying ideas like the commons and participatory democracy and related to efforts at distancing oneself both from predominant institutions as well as past leftist ways of conceptualizing problems and of organizing politically.

For Leonardi, echoing Armano et al.'s concerns, the main problems lay in movement closure (when objectives are reached) and institutional cooptation, problems that could be prevented by seeking and collaborating with other movements regionally and internationally, on the basis of protecting or furthering the commons. This outreach effort has been a mainstay of the No TAV movement almost from the beginning. Recently, on occasion of an intergovernmental summit on the high-speed railway financing and planning, delegations of protesters from France and Italy met in Lyon to mount a counter-summit. They were attacked violently and arrested by police (Dosio 2012). Still, the Movimento Cinque Stelle party² joining a forthcoming No TAV protest (in March 2013) poses a potential threat of right-wing institutional cooptation (Wu Ming 2013).

Nevertheless, there has been very little continuity or interlinkage with experiences in other struggles against high-speed rail in the past or present in other places, such as in Euskal Herria (Basque Country) or other parts under French and Spanish national states. It is also important to investigate why a similar struggle has not emerged in northern Toscana, for example, as a result of the devastating impact of the high-speed Bologna-Firenze line on the Mugello appenine area (Rumiz 2009). More importantly, from a more internationalist viewpoint, there must be ultimately a major effort to make the Val di Susa self-determination struggle relevant and useful to struggles in areas of the world, like in Cañaris, Peru (*Lucha Indígena* 2013a), where mass displacements and livelihood destruction through the expansion of large mines are in one way or another tied to the use of everyday items even in Val di Susa itself. This kind of understanding is not yet being made, but at least there is some mutual awareness building between the No TAV movement and Indigenous and campesino/a communities in Peru (*Lucha Indígena* 2013b). In these respects, in my view, the No TAV and other such movements reflect the specificity of their Italian contexts, as briefly described above. Still the more general processes involved in the making and development of the No TAV movement should be highly relevant to any anticapitalist environmental struggle.

Much more is therefore at stake than meets the eye in this high-speed railway struggle. No TAV is, in my reading, a variant of self-determination struggles against combined transnational and national capitalist forces, which in this case witnesses the convergence of interests of national and

¹ See <http://www.peacelink.it/ecologia/docs/1757.pdf>.

² This is a new political party that gained almost a quarter of votes in the February 2013 elections.

international corporations, a supra-statal organization (the European Union), the national state and sub-national government institutions, and parastatal organizations (often construed as “organized crime,” “mafias,” or other terms that derail attention away from their intrinsically capitalist character and their unofficial function as enforcers of capitalist institutions). The No TAV movement is most emphatically not a self-determination struggle based on national or even regional identity. This would be quickly contradicted by the historical influx of immigrants from abroad and from southern Italy, who form part of the valley’s communities. It is also not a struggle for sheer existence in the sense of what many Indigenous Peoples or Palestinians and Kurds, for example, are facing. It is, rather, a struggle to prevent further impositions of pauperization in a context of extreme economic power (Italy is a G8/NATO country, founding member of what is now the E.U.) to topple a neoliberal variant of a capitalist regime, and, what is much more promising, to replace that regime with an ecologically constructive non-capitalist communal way of life. The imperialistic objectives of the European Union (Böröcz 2009), manifested in this case through the quest to conquer space with speed (Harvey 1982), converge with a state-led robbery system that feeds national and regional oligarchies, whether formally legal, parastatal, or both (Arlacchi 2007; Dalla Chiesa 2012; Tilly 1985). By resisting these ostensibly overwhelming forces and by radically transforming themselves in the process, Val di Susa communities are helping set an example for overcoming capitalism by rejecting the dichotomizing of society and environment, institutional forms of political representation, and major foundational aspects of the capitalist mode of production (profitability, market values, private property, but especially the alienation of people from the land they inhabit). These should be sufficient reasons to pay attention to the No TAV movement and its fate.

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