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The intersection of power: law enforcement, political authorities and protest policing in Italy

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# Justice, Power and Resistance

## The Intersection of Power: Law Enforcement, Political Authorities and Protest Policing in Italy --Manuscript Draft--

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## Cover Page

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The intersection of power: law enforcement, political authorities and protest policing in Italy

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# **The intersection of power: law enforcement, political authorities and protest policing in Italy**

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**Keywords** police • political power • protest policing • government authorities • public order

## **Introduction**

Many police officers in Italy and beyond strongly argue that policing and politics<sup>1</sup> should not be mixed (Geary 1985). However, the idea of neutrality or political independence of police in Western democracies is often based on a narrow view of politicization, which is typically limited to partisan conflict. As Reiner pointed out many years ago (1992), police are intrinsically and inevitably political.

This article explores the close relationship between the police and governmental authorities in Italy, focusing on crowd management. This perspective allows for a fresh examination of the operational decisions made by the police, shaped by their perceptions and experiences. It also reflects on the role of public law enforcement within the democratic context, balancing people's right to protest with their duty to maintain public order<sup>2</sup>.

The first part reviews the literature on the unique relationship between political and police institutions. The second part explains the qualitative methodological approach used to develop the theory proposed in this study and highlights the intricacies of researching law enforcement in Italy, particularly on a sensitive subject, using collected materials and data. Finally, the influence of the political sphere on police operations is examined, exploring the connection between the police and governmental authorities within the Italian context. This section introduces a more organized and in-depth examination of the ‘debt’ that Italian law enforcement agencies owe the relevant political system.

## **The relationship between political power and policing**

No society – even the most egalitarian – is exempt from the dynamics of power, which always involves elements of coercion or persuasion. In sociology and critical criminology, power is defined as the asymmetry in social relationships within a group, resulting in inequality in the strategic options available to individuals (Fabini, Gargiulo & Tuzza, 2023). This social control is both dynamic and contextual, evolving as societies change. The emergence of the police, therefore, occurs within specific contexts where political and socioeconomic conditions make its establishment necessary.

The term ‘police,’ even in the Middle Ages, was used to refer to ‘politics’ (Napoli, 2003). Brodeur (1984) introduced the concept of ‘high policing’ to explain the role of the police in relation to politics. The author (2010) traces the birth of this expression to the Napoleonic era, where law enforcement agencies were considered ‘the armed arm of the King’, being the most prestigious police force due to its exclusive relationship with centers of power.

As previously mentioned, the police apparatus is not eternal, just like all the methods of social regulation that exist today. And the birth of the police was inseparable from the process of nation-state formation in present configurations. For instance, Bayley (1975) links the birth of the police to the transformation in the organization of political power, including popular resistance to the State and the creation of new public order tasks. It is argued that the evolution of police organization stems from new challenges to the existing distribution of power in society. *Political power* has delegated part of the administration and social control of subordinate classes to this ‘armed arm of the King’. In this regard, these functions predate the formal establishment of police institutions. According to Rawlings (2012: 47) ‘by policing is meant the maintenance of order, the control of disorder, the prevention of crime and the detection of offenders, and by the police is meant those officials concerned with policing matters.’ This means that such an organization is not the custodian of these actions, as Rawlings further emphasizes: ‘The history of the police is not the history of policing, and the history of policing is not the history of the police’ (Rawlings, 2012: 67).

Reactions of law enforcement that are directly linked to political issues are often seen as deviations (Manning, 2012), leading the public to question the independence of the police from political power. This raises concerns about whether political authorities ultimately control police operations. In Italy, for instance, the political police force (DIGOS *Divisione Investigazioni Generali e Operazioni Speciali* – General Investigations and Special Operations Division) acts as a state organ, continuously gathering information on politically oriented organizations deemed worthy of attention, even when no crime is apparent.

Despite this inherent connection to political power, the police maintain a degree of autonomy in performing their duties, primarily focusing on maintaining order. However, they also play a role in ‘pacifying’ and managing conflicts that can arise during the formation of nation-states. In this regard, some argue that the police would be the hypocritical mask and cover for state violence (Weber, 1997) under the guise of pacification (L’Heuillet, 2001).

Two main theories describe the relationship between police and political power: the *insularity* thesis and the *instrumental* thesis, as defined by Brodeur (1984). The insularity thesis suggests that the police are an autonomous body that resists external constraints to pursue its own interests. This view serves as an ‘alibi’ for political power, justifying its inadequate control over the police, and is often embraced by police officers themselves (Melossi, 2002). As mentioned earlier, police officers are often captivated by this orthodox conception. On the other hand, the instrumental thesis, drawing on Weberian principles, sees the police as an inert organ, mechanically responding to the commands of the State, which serves the interests of the ruling class (Brodeur, 1984, p. 21). The allure of the instrumental role of police institutions in the face of political power and their ‘forceful’ determination to pursue and maintain the status quo still holds true today. The monopoly on the legitimate use of force is crucial to interpretations of police work (Bittner, 1970). All studies on the police have had to grapple with this concept, which is not without its challenges. The risk is that this legitimate monopoly may serve political power rather than operate independently. Neocleous (2000) argues that the *raison d’être* of the police is not the prevention of crime, but rather, from its origins, to be a form of governance. Foucault’s concept of ‘governmentality’ further explains this, describing it as the administrative apparatus, processes, mechanisms used by power to govern people, primarily (but not exclusively) through security systems: ‘I mean the set constituted by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow for the exercise of this particular, albeit complex form of power, which has as its primary target the population’ (Foucault, 1978: 27, author’s translation). In other words, this Foucauldian perspective suggests that police powers emerge when private governance expands into the public domain (Dubber, 2005).

From a critical criminological perspective, these interpretations fall short of fully capturing the inherent complexity of the relationship between police institutions and political power. Viewing the police as an isolated organization is a ‘mythical’ rather than factual conception. Similarly, the instrumental thesis also fails to fully capture the intricate interplay of roles and functions shared between police and political power. To move beyond these limited perspectives, it is necessary to recognize that the police apparatus is not merely an instrument of political power but a constitutive part of it: ‘the police is to the state as the blade is to the knife’ (Jacobs & O’Brien, 1998: 859). In other words, the police do not just wield power – they embody it, making the political dimension of policing explicit. Politics is a constitutive and substantial part of the police. This does not imply that police organizations are entirely subservient to the government; their capacity for *agency* is not called into question here. Rather, it suggests that the discretionary power inherent in these institutions can – *accordion-like* – expand and contract depending on the political context.

Another crucial aspect of the relationship between politics and law enforcement is identifying the political dimension of the police. Beare (2007) emphasizes the importance of recognizing the conditions that determine the effectiveness of control in police operations, particularly how this control becomes visible under specific circumstances. This requires analyzing the relationship between government demands and the management of public protests. Consequently, the lack of formal inquiries into law enforcement actions does not necessarily indicate an absence of political influence. Political influence or dictates can be the *norm* rather than the exception in certain cases (Beare 2007). In other words, a mutual and ambiguous dependence exists between the police and political power. In summary, controversial police actions should not be dismissed as the result of isolated individual behaviors or ‘bad apples.’ Instead, they must be understood as responses to political pressures that are deeply embedded in the *structure* of the police institution. Police officers are not merely street-level bureaucrats (Donahue, 2023; Lipsky, 1980); their actions are shaped by the broader political environment in which they operate.

The creation of modern police forces was accompanied by a grant of operational independence, allowing them a degree of autonomy. However, political power retains the ability to intervene and control police actions, particularly in politically sensitive situations. Over time, the boundaries between police and political power have blurred, with the two increasingly converging and intertwining.

## **Policing protest and political influence**

One of the areas where political influence on police operations is most apparent is in the maintenance of public order, particularly in the management of street protests (Tuzza, 2021; Della Porta & Reiter, 1998; Monjardet, 1996; Waddington, 1987). The degree of political control over police strategies can significantly shape how police intervene during demonstrations. This influence can manifest in various forms. For example, changes in crowd management techniques and policy shifts are often linked to changes in government leadership. According to Goldstein (1978), the political beliefs of a President can directly affect how protests are handled, leading to a more or less repressive response. Della Porta and Reiter (1998) further argue that political parties have historically polarized the issue of protest policing, creating a dual approach to crowd management that aligns with the ideology of the ruling government.

Various scholars have analyzed the style of police intervention during anti-globalization protests, such as the cases of the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa or the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in Vancouver in 1997. Most authors agree that these events often involved less conciliatory police tactics toward demonstrators (Martin, 2011; Gillham & Noakes, 2007; King, 2006; Sheptycki, 2006; McCarthy & McPhail, 2006; Vitale, 2005; Ericson & Doyle, 1999). While the specific nature of the protesters influences crowd management strategies at these international summits, the intervention style is also shaped by the expectations of foreign governments attending the conference. Specifically,

the presence of high-ranking authorities from other countries places additional pressure on top law enforcement officials, influencing how police actions are conducted. Consequently, sudden changes in the management of demonstrations often reflect the broader political context in which the protest occurs (Chan, 1997).

The external political context not only influences event management, but, as Jefferson and Grimshaw (1984) observed, senior police officials analyze the political scenario when making decisions on practices and policies to adopt. According to the authors, police officers in liberal democracies are particularly concerned with how professionals – such as police, courts, and government authorities – interpret and judge the policies that structure ‘on-the-ground’ police practices. Indeed, several scholars consider the political context to be a fundamental variable in understanding variations in public order management (Waddington, 1989; Della Porta, 1996; Mansley, 2014).

Jefferson (1990) examines both the worldview of the police and the structural conditions of capitalism, although his focus tends to be on the latter. He argues, based on his research, that paramilitary policing not only amplifies disorder but also undermines key characteristics of the police, such as discretion and flexibility in dealing with civilian populations. David Waddington et al. (1989) developed a model integrating six levels of analysis – structural, political/ideological, cultural, contextual, situational, and interactive – to predict how and when protests might escalate into riots. Della Porta (1996) identifies policing style as the most direct variable influencing protest behavior, noting that it is heavily dependent on the government and political context.

As emphasized by David Mansley: ‘The style of policing should be read as a statement on the state’s political priorities. Neoliberalism is related to “harder” protest policing, just as it is related to the punitive turn in criminal justice’. (Mansley, 2014, p. 60).

Schwartz, Da Costa, Soares (2014) highlight how authorities – both government and police – claim to wage a ‘crusade’ (Becker, 1966) against protesters, portraying them as deviant individuals rather than simple demonstrators. Similarly, Welch (2004) notes that during periods of intense mobilization against government authorities, the symbiotic relationship between rule creators and enforcers becomes crucial for maintaining social control and generating moral panic against those who challenge the status quo. This function of ‘rules creation’ is closely linked to political and police authorities, particularly in shaping the public image of protesters.

Authorities, both police and government, significantly influence the stereotypes and prejudices that police officers hold during crowd management. These biases are shaped by the concept of moral entrepreneurship and are integrated into what Della Porta & Reiter (1998) describe as ‘police knowledge’. This is the *filter* through which officers interpret their roles in relation to the external reality.

It has been observed that the political context plays a crucial role in shaping how protests are managed, particularly in the case of international and transnational movements, but not exclusively. This influence is equally evident in national movements, such as the Gilets Jaunes<sup>3</sup> in France and the Italian No TAV movement (which serves as the case study of this research and will be presented in the methodology section).

Although police officers interpret reality through the lens of ‘police knowledge’ and sometimes have the discretion power to determine their responses, this is not always the case, especially in crowd management situations. Several authors argue that discretionary power within the police hierarchy is often limited or non-existent during protests. In such scenarios, police officers are typically required to follow orders strictly, with little room for individual judgment. P.A.J. Waddington, in his work on the militarization of crowd management, states that: ‘in contrast to normal policing, the containment of violent crowds involves officers acting as anonymous members of a group in obedience to higher authority in a well-defined conflict, all of which is conducive to aggression’ (Waddington, 1987: 40). Monjardet (1996) supports this view, noting that maintain order is driven by political reasoning and is executed through commands that translate into imperative maneuvers, which officers are expected to carry out without question, regardless of their personal views (Monjardet, 1996: 213).

Decisions made from above are part of a shared understanding of police work, shaping the tasks that officers are expected to carry out. Police officers internalize the fundamental principles established by the authorities and integrate them into their actions without hesitation, as they are trained to share and uphold the same vision.

This theoretical perspective emphasizes the need to (re)focus on police officers, particularly on how they learn and perform their duties in different cultural contexts, and how police culture aligns with the broader ‘configuration of power’ (Kriesi, 1989). Della Porta and Reiter observe that: ‘the government defines some general lines on how protest should be handled’ (Della Porta & Reiter, 1998: 9). This orientation offers valuable insights into understanding how police officers approach protest management and the factors that influence their choice of tactics.

## **Method and material**

To empirical support the theoretical approach discussed, this paper draws on a specific case study. By combining sociological and criminological concepts and employing a qualitative approach, this study seeks to understand how political influences shape the operational choices of the police in managing protests. The assumption is that external pressures – both direct and indirect – affect police knowledge (Della Porta, 1998), and the police respond to this political power in their crowd management strategies (Della Porta & Zamponi, 2013; Rafail, 2010; McCarthy, Martin & McPhail, 2007).

Conducting empirical research on the police in Italy is challenging. Sociological, political, and criminological research have often encountered limitations when trying to explore the phenomenon of ‘police’ from various angles, with field research being almost entirely avoided (Gargiulo, 2015; Palidda, 2010). The initial objective of this study was to focus on in-depth interviews. Efforts were made to find participants from the ranks of the police forces who had been involved in maintaining public order during the operations related to the No TAV movement between 2005 and 2012. The No TAV movement is an Italian social and environmental movement that opposes the construction of high-speed railway line between Turin and Lyon. The acronym TAV stands for “*Treno Alta Velocità*”, which translates to High-Speed Train. The No T movement emerged in the 1990s. Since then, it has mobilized activists, local communities, and environmentalists who argue against the project on various grounds, including its potential negative impact on the environment, health, and local economies. The analysis for this research project was based on 12 semi-structured interviews: ten with law enforcement officers (including eight field officers from the *Polizia di Stato* and the *Carabinieri*, one member of the DIGOS, and one *Questore*<sup>4</sup>, the territorial chief of the Italian *Polizia di Stato*) and two with politicians – an Italian Senator and a former Mayor and Regional Councilor, both connected to the TAV events.

To ensure a coherent analysis of the police officers involved in the No TAV demonstrations, all testimonies given by police officers during the trial against the No TAV protesters in Turin were included. All hearings from 08 March 2013 to 23 September 2014 were examined, a total of 39 hearings. The analysis focused solely on the testimonies of police officers and certain politicians, some of which lasted over 5 hours<sup>5</sup>. The final number of pages analyzed was thus reduced to 475 from the original 600+ pages. The trials against the No TAV movement in Italy have involved various members and supporters accused of different violations during protests against the construction of the high-speed railway line. Some of these trials have led to convictions while others have sparked controversies and debates regarding the legitimacy of the charges and the right to peaceful protest. They primarily took place between 2011 and 2021. The study focuses on testimonies from the trial concerning the clashes between police and protesters in Chiomonte in 2011. However, there have been subsequent trials involving activists opposing the construction of the TAV line. While this study examines some of the most well-known cases, it is important to note that there have been numerous legal proceedings related to the No TAV movement over the years.

## Law enforcement as a tool: “the police is like wood”

‘Then I always say the police is like wood, I always say it, wood can be used to crack someone's head or to warm your house, it's the way you use it that matters. You can use it to make a fishing rod, furniture, a chair. Or to club people, it's all about how the tool is used’<sup>6</sup> (Interview No. 10, field agent).

This excerpt encapsulates a broad range of interpretations regarding the nature of the police and how it is ‘used’ by those in power. The agent refers to the police as a *tool*, but in whose hands? A tool is something inanimate, devoid of its own will, and functional only for a specific purpose. According to this logic, police knowledge (Della Porta & Reiter, 1998) can be seen as a collection of skills and abilities controlled by a select few – police leaders and politicians – who wield this tool either to suppress through violence or to construct with deliberation, but always with a clear objective in mind.

Moral entrepreneurs, rule creators, and their enforcers (Becker, 1966) embody a will that surpasses the ordinary police officer’s influence, yet to which officers dedicate themselves fully: ‘The enforcer, then may not be interested in the content of the rule as such, but only in the fact that the existence of the rule provides him with a job, a profession, and a *raison d'être*’ (Becker, 1966: 156). Thus, the police officer become a *tool* serving a specific purpose.

If the police are indeed like wood, their impact depends entirely on how they are used and for what intent. What stands out in this initial analysis of the relationship between politics and the police is the strong alignment of the police's auxiliary role in relation to politics. Becker’s (1966) concept of the rule enforcer perfectly captures the individual who does not question whether the authorities’ decisions are right or wrong. Instead, they assimilate and enforce these decisions within the bounds of their professional duties – a stance reflected by most interviewees.

Welch (2004) further highlights, during significant mobilizations against authorities, the alliance between rule-makers and enforcers is crucial for maintaining social control and generating moral panic against protestors. This interpretation is both consistent and fitting in the context of the case study discussed here.

## The finger and the moon: police discretion or submission to political directives?

There are two key bodies responsible for decisions regarding the management of public order: the Provincial Committee for Public Order and Security (CPOSP) and, at the national level, the National Committee for Public Order and Security (CNOSP). These two committees, established under the Police Reform Act No. 121/81, have distinct configurations and roles. The first committee includes the *Questore*, the mayor of the city in question, the president of the province, along with representatives of law enforcement agencies, and potentially other relevant mayors. It is presided over by the *Prefetto*<sup>7</sup>. The second committee, at the national level, is chaired by the Minister of the Interior and includes the presence of an undersecretary, the Chief of the State Police, various directors from other law enforcement agencies, and, at the Minister’s discretion, other executives and state administration representatives. It is clear that political power significantly influences the operational choices of the police in these meetings. As noted in the analysis of the chain of command, the *Questore* does not report directly to the Minister of the Interior but to the Chief of the Police, a point confirmed by interviews with police officers. Additionally, the *Questore* and the Minister never appear simultaneously in the same Committee<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, there is no formal record of direct communication of operational orders between the *Questore* and the Minister. However, the power of political authorities to intervene in police tactics directly and operationally is more pervasive than initially suggested by the analysis and testimony. To reinforce this assertion, the *Prefetto* recalls that after each demonstration, it is customary to the *Questore* to send a note to the Minister:

‘Q: You said earlier that a report was made on what happened on the 27th, is that correct?

A: On June 27th, the Prefect sends a note, as is customary the day after all public order demonstrations, to the Ministry of the Interior, describing what happened’. (Excerpt from the trial hearing, April 8, 2014, *Prefetto*).

Therefore, the *Questore* and the Minister not only maintain direct contact, regardless of their presence at various provincial and national meetings, but it also appears to be standard practice – specifically in this context – for the *Questore* to consistently and continuously transmit reports on demonstrations to both the *Prefetto* and the Minister of the Interior<sup>9</sup>. If the direct relationship between police institutions and political authorities during protest management is not sufficiently clear, this excerpt provides confirmation: a high-ranking political official indicate that informal and direct interventions between the Minister and the *Questore* are, in fact, common practice:

‘D: In your opinion, did the heads of law enforcement agree with this *modus operandi*?

R: The law enforcement agencies had received an order. If the *Questore* receives a call from the Minister telling him, «Tomorrow morning or tonight, I'll make 3000 men available to you, and you sweep everyone away», he can't do anything. He's a military officer<sup>10</sup>. He can resign and go cultivate the fields...’ (Interview n°1, politician).

It is possible to begin by defining that there is a significant political intervention in police actions, accompanied by a certain amount of moral suasion exerted at various level and with differing degrees of legitimacy. This intervention occurs both through direct involvement in specific meetings and through deeply entrenched informal practices, as described above. The aim of this analysis is not to demonstrate illegitimate interference in police practices, but rather to highlight the pervasive nature of political directives intended to influence police operational decisions. Although scientific studies on political interference in police operations are limited, existing research indicates that this phenomenon is increasingly common in Western democracies, as in Spain (Fernández de Mosteyrín & Limón López, 2018). This tendency of political authorities to interfere seems evident even in contexts that do not originate from a continental and centralized policing model, such as Spain or Italy. A study on student protests in Québec in 2015 suggests that the provincial government subtly pressured universities to suppress student protests through their private security forces to avoid being held responsible for the repression. Luc Chicoine (2018) defines this influence as ‘proxy repression’, a state strategy that encourages a group or organization to apply repressive measures against protesters. In England, the years of austerity have witnessed a series of statements and exchanges between political and police authorities regarding the police's operational decisions in handling dissent. For instance, in 2014, the Mayor of London advocated for the Metropolitan Police to equip themselves with water cannons, stating the need: ‘to ‘get medieval’ in certain public disorder situations,’ with the agreement of the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and the approval of the Association of Chief Police Officers in England (Pickard, 2018: 85).

In Italy, Gargiulo (2015) notes that the conduct of police services under political influence often involves discretionary actions that are not strictly *contra-legem* (since precise rules may not exist to be explicitly violated), but more common *intra-legem* (where rules exist but are highly generic and ambiguous). In many cases, these actions are *extra-legem* (where rules are entirely absent). Brodeur (1984) had already described the political mandate of the police, illustrating how the tacit approval from the government is reflected in police actions as a ‘gray check’. This ‘check’ is ‘written in general terms and cashed in specific transactions’ (Brodeur, 1984: 34), suggesting that this asymmetry shields both the issuer (the government) and the recipient (the police). Thus, there is no direct evidence implicating the government in actions it does not fully oversee, while the police can assert that they have a broad mandate to carry out specific practices. In the context of this analysis, some behaviors can be categorized as either ‘black checks’ or ‘blank checks’, depending on the circumstances. There is often an explicit intention by governmental authorities to impose specific behaviors and operational

actions on the police (black check). Simultaneously, there are elements within the police –who, while adhering to political directives – retain a degree of decisional autonomy (blank check). This tension between the police’s discretion as street-level bureaucrats and the directives of governmental authorities diminishes as one moves up the chain of command in public order, remaining residual in some more autonomous and specialized sectors. In other words, the imprint of governmental authorities on police operational decisions is evident in certain instances. Concurrently, there is flexibility within specific police sectors and in the strategies employed to align with government needs.

Della Porta & Reiter observe that: ‘governments increasingly tend to leave the technical side of policing to the police’ (Della Porta & Reiter, 1998: 17). However, in this context, the authors’ assumption appears to only partially consistent with the case study. This is because the technical-operational decisions for managing protests are not solely delegated to the police but are – at least in some cases – directly made by political authorities, leaving law enforcement agencies with significantly reduced decision-making autonomy. To reinforce this concept, a police officer noted: *“The police are a consequence of the executive, they focus on the finger but do not see the moon. In Italy, that’s the problem, the problem is not the police but the governments”* (Interview no. 10, field officer). From this analysis, it can be argued that the role of the political authorities in managing street demonstrations involves exercising a certain degree of directive power over police decisions.

### **Digos: An Ambiguous ‘Political’ Police**

Beyond the formal chain of command, other key actors within the police force play a role in the managing of protests. One such actor is the DIGOS, a specialized section of the Police, often seen as the ones holding the ‘white check’. DIGOS primarily focused on intelligence operations and information gathering, and its play a crucial role in maintaining public order. It directly intervenes in public order operations to gather information, primarily through undercover agents who have the authority to issue orders to regular officers and often act as mediators with protesters (despite the paradoxical nature of this role given their undercover status). The resulting perception of DIGOS’s role is ambiguous (Campesi, 2024) and, as we will see, not universally shared. It is important to note that while the chain of command is well-defined and complex, with key roles such as the field commander for public order, the position and level of decision-making autonomy of DIGOS members in public order matters are less clear-cut:

‘Q: Where do you position yourself in the chain of command?

A: I have the function of giving instructions... regarding the activities of DIGOS, an information function, as if I were an advisor to the official in charge of carrying out the actual work.

Q: So, we distinguish between the activities of public order and those of DIGOS, which provides support...

A: integrated into the activities of judicial police that fall under the responsibility of DIGOS and take place within the framework of public order’. (Extract from the hearing of July 15, 2013, DIGOS officer)

Determining the role of the DIGOS division within the chain of command for public order management is challenging; these ‘special’ police officers seem to possess greater decision-making autonomy within the specific hierarchy governing the management of demonstrations:

‘Q: But was it you who decided to go with 4 people near the woods, or did you receive the order?

A: No, I decided’. (Extract from the hearing of December 23, 2013, DIGOS officer)

This DIGOS officer explains that he and four other police officers separated from the rest of the unit to assess the situation, acting entirely on their own initiative, without receiving an order from the service director or seeking permission to distance themselves. In the following extract, the officer's position becomes even clearer. He describes, among other things, his authority as a DIGOS officer to request assistance of regular police officers during operations without needing approval from the public order commander at that time:

'Q: Do you communicate this initiative to anyone or not?

A: No, I don't communicate it to anyone. [...]

Q: So, did the head of DIGOS say that? In case of disturbances, try to stop someone?

A: No, it's the typical activity we do... if something happens, I intervene and stop that person.

Q: Were you given an order/directive not to approach the protesters?

A: In public order situations, it's important to understand that there isn't a specific directive. Decisions are determined by the evolution of the demonstration'<sup>11</sup>. (Extract from the December 23, 2013, hearing, DIGOS officer).

In these passages, based on the DIGOS agent's reasoning, at least three new aspects of their role are highlighted. 1) DIGOS agents do not engage in demonstrations solely to enforce public order; 2) they have the authority to separate from other officers and request other police officers to join them; 3) they are not bound by the directives of the designated police commander managing the situation and view their 'decisions' as responses to the immediate circumstances. This perspective contrasts with the majority of interviews and testimonies analyzed. While operators from other police forces often emphasize the disparity between predetermined decisions and the reality on the ground, few would go so far as to claim that "there are no directives in public order." The DIGOS division is the branch of the Police primarily responsible for gathering intelligence on activities related to political intentions. A such, DIGOS investigates any form of political participation that might pose a risk to the democratic functioning of the country. Thus, it functions as a true political police force (high police) focused on the defense of the State (Brodeur, 2008). However, rather than of focusing on external threats, DIGOS directs its attention to potential internal threats to the nation. This explain why DIGOS members are deeply involved in public order management, contributing their expertise and gathering additional information, both as undercover agents and through the use of audiovisual tools. Additionally, their role in managing protests includes acting as a real 'buffer' between the 'traditional' police and the protesters. Their primary objective is to engage in dialogue with the demonstrators: "*Q: Did you make any arrests? A: No, because my task was to establish a channel of dialogue; I then went to the square near the museum*" (Excerpt from the court hearing on April 15, 2013, DIGOS officer). "*Usually, DIGOS goes to the organizers and talks to them, saying no, listen, you cannot take that route, sometimes even for safety reasons, also because maybe there is a market, schools, and that road...*" (Interview No3, field officer). The roles of information gathering and the approach of DIGOS towards protesters are generally accepted when DIGOS members engage in negotiations with protesters representatives. However, opinions among other police officers (field agents) differ regarding this modus operandi: "*these are games played by DIGOS that we sector operators do not like at all; let's say that DIGOS members are not viewed favorably by us because they engage in agreements that undermine our duties and virtues*" (Interview No. 2, field agent).

This relative mistrust in the liaison role embodied by DIGOS members supports the hypothesis that other officers do not view this role as part of the traditional police mandate (Tuzza & Mulone, 2015). In Italy, this task is considered secondary and is managed by those already involved in investigating the protesters. This contrasts with other democratic countries, where dedicated liaison officers are specifically tasked with mediating with protesters (Stott, Scothern, Gorringer, 2013).

Therefore, the notion arises that this mode of operation by a segment of the police should not be viewed as deviant, but rather as part of a specific mandate. Manning explains: 'the idea that there are no police secrets is an illusion; observers know police are carrying out political policing routinely. From whom are they keeping secrets? When political policing emerges, it is seen as deviance rather

than an everyday core function' (Manning 2012, p. 3). For authorities, it is easier to recognize these practices only when they surface and label them as deviant, rather than acknowledging their permanent and routine existence in police conduct.

Moreover, both courtroom materials and interviews with police officers reveals the image of DIGOS like a distinct and separate police service: *true political police force* within the traditional police structure. A Janus-faced entity. This ambivalence and *ambiguity* are evident in all facets of this role, which may explain why non-DIGOS colleagues often feel both admiration and mistrust towards their work.

## **Discussion: An Italian Paradigm?**

The analysis of the data presented here, including interviews with police officers, politicians, and hundreds of police testimonies in the No TAV mega-trial, reveals a hierarchical, almost military-style approach to public order management. It also highlights a strict chain of command, with potential flexibility in specific cases (such as within the DIGOS division); characterized by top-down control and a lack of effective bottom-up communication (leaving field agents with minimal autonomy).

In recent years, there has indeed been a shift from consensual policing to the use of excessive force, which the literature describes as a strategy of *neutralization*<sup>12</sup> (Gillham, Edward & Noakes, 2013; Gillham, 2011; Baker, 2011; Fernandez, 2008). In other words, the intensified repression of protests, especially against anti-globalization groups perceived as threats to political elites and governments, has rekindled the confrontation between the police and protesters. Some disruptive demonstrations, deemed politically illegitimate, are suppressed by the police (Vitale, 2007).

The Italian case analyzed here has unique characteristics that reflect the specificity of this country. It seems that the key factor to consider is the decisive role of political intervention in the operational decisions of the police when managing these partly illegitimate demonstrations. Notably, some authors argue that the repression of dissent is linked (among other factors) to the level of democratization, and that political authorities' tolerance towards protests depends on a cost-benefit analysis in electoral terms (Davenport, 2007; Davenport & Appel, 2022). In this case study, the No TAV movement has never gained significant support from the political parties in the Italian parliament. Its political influence has been limited to the local level, with no significant impact on broader elective bodies. Moreover, while Italy is now a mature democracy, this is a relatively recent development. Since the fascist era, the police forces have undergone only minor reforms, which have failed to establish true independence of the State Police from political control (Fabini, Gargiulo & Tuzza, 2023). It is also important to emphasize that institutions in power have historically shown a tendency to protect the status quo against those who (appear to) challenge it. This stance towards protest is evident not only among government authorities but also within the media and police forces (Chan & Lee, 1984; McLeod & Hertog, 1999; Kilgo, 2021).

Consequently, the distinctive features of this Italian model can be summarized as follows: *a* paramilitary intervention tactics; *b* a significant presence of intelligence practices, including non-consensual active surveillance through audiovisual means, identification, tracking, and monitoring of protest groups (using undercover agents, plainclothes officers and agent provocateurs); *c* judicial police practices such as mass arrests and preventive measures; *d* a strong political component that intervenes, controls, receives reports, and issues orders throughout the police-politics chain of command.

The uniqueness of the Italian case suggests an intervention model with distinct characteristics, where the political component is not only directive but also integrated throughout the entire command chain (both external and internal) of the police managing street protests. This approach of maintaining public order could be described as a *model of neutralization through political criminalization*, or rather a *strategy of political incapacitation*. This *symbiotic* relationship between government

authorities and police forces in Italy is unique, largely due to the country's history, which has enabled the creation and preservation of police forces inherently connected to political power.

## **Conclusion: A Canary Dilemma**

This contribution has aimed to describe three key aspects of the relationship between the Italian police and political power in the context of managing street demonstrations. The discussion has emphasized how the chain of command is permeable to political demands, particularly on sensitive issues like protests in Italy; it has also examined the role of DIGOS, a specific division of the State Police, which plays an ambiguous role as a link between government authorities and field agents, bypassing the traditional hierarchy of the chain of command; finally, the unique characteristics of Italian protest policing have been outlined, defining it as a model where the political component is not only directive but also integrated throughout the command chain.

It should be noted that the findings presented here cannot necessarily be generalized, as they are based on a single case study. However, this study is relevant and highlights important aspects of the relationship between the police and political power in the management of street demonstrations. Some of these emerging elements may also be present in other comparable contexts within Southern European democracies similar to Italy. Therefore, it is necessary to continue conducting studies and comparisons with other 'non-traditional' or 'non-routine' protest movements (Noakes, Klocke & Gillham, 2006; Waddington, 1994; Fillieule & Jobard, 1998).

The analysis has revealed the symbiotic relationship between governmental authorities and the police in Italy, a dynamic primarily influenced by the country's historical context. This should be seen as a wake-up call for contemporary democracy. Just as the canary in the coal mine served as warning of danger, the management of public order can serve as an indicator of the health of our democracies. Addressing these issues will require reforming the Italian police forces. The goal should be to enhance their accountability and reduce their interdependence with political bodies concerning the mandate for public order management. Measures such as introducing identification badges on uniforms and establishing a clear division between a police force responsible for investigating political movements and one that mediate with protesters and law enforcement should be seriously considered.

The analysis also underscores the need for legislative reforms. Currently, the police mandate for public order management lacks specific regulations, leaving room for potential abuses of power. It is crucial to clearly define legitimate policing tasks within a democratic system guided by laws that uphold human rights and democratic principles.

In conclusion, this article sheds light on the critical issues surrounding politically oriented protest management and the deep-rooted intersection of power between police and political authorities in Italy. It is argued, therefore, that the police are neither instrumental to political power nor independent from it. The focus was on the substantial closeness between government and police authorities in decision-making. This paints a picture of the police being intertwined with politics, where orders are determined and executed at the highest levels of these institutions. By acknowledging and addressing the 'canary dilemma', we can strive toward a more accountable, transparent, and democratic approach to public order management.

## **Note**

<sup>1</sup> In this text the term 'politics' specifically refers to political power within the institutional framework. Therefore, when referring to 'political power,' the text pertains to the institutions or political authorities that govern.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'public order' in this text refers to the control and actions aimed at maintaining civil peace in democratic countries during protests. This interpretation is based on a European perspective (e.g., French and

Italian) of how state authorities manage collective actions in public spaces. Here, ‘public order’ is synonymous with crowd management during demonstrations.

<sup>3</sup> The Gilets Jaunes is a grassroots socio-political movement that emerged in France in late 2018. Initially, the movement protested fuel price hikes, but it evolved into a broader movement addressing socioeconomic inequalities and dissatisfaction with government policies. Participants are identified by the distinctive yellow vests worn during protests.

<sup>4</sup> The *Polizia di Stato* is the Italian civilian police force responsible for managing public order operations. The *Carabinieri* also collaborate in this mandate, but they are a military force. The *Questore* is a high-ranking official responsible for overseeing a specific administrative-territorial division. He has both technical-operational and organizational responsibility for managing police agents in that area.

<sup>5</sup> The need to use transcripts of witness testimonies from the No TAV trial arose to provide material that would strengthen the empirical basis of the study. Testimonies from law enforcement members are particularly valuable, especially in contexts where direct interviews with police officers are difficult to obtain.

<sup>6</sup> All excerpts and interviews have been translated from Italian by the author.

<sup>7</sup> The term *Prefetto* can be translated into English as ‘prefect.’ In certain contexts, it refers to a government official who holds administrative or supervisory authority over a specific region or department.

<sup>8</sup> For detailed information on the composition of the National Committee for Public Order and Safety, please refer to this link: <https://www.interno.gov.it/it/ministero/comitato-nazionale-dellordine-e-sicurezza-pubblica-cnosp>.

<sup>9</sup> In the same excerpt, it is confirmed that the *Questore* also maintains constant communication with the Minister: “Before organizing the operations, the *Questore* prepares an operational order, which is sent to all those who need to act, and for information, it is also sent to the Ministry of the Interior and the Prefect”.

<sup>10</sup> In this case, the interviewee made an error. The police forces in Italy are civilian (unlike the *Carabinieri*), but here it should be understood figuratively: the *Questore* must follow the orders of the government authorities.

<sup>11</sup> It is important to emphasize that all police officers, including those in DIGOS, have a legal obligation to intervene when they witness a criminal act. This obligation is codified in the Code of Criminal Procedure and does not require directives from superiors. However, in this specific context, we are discussing a ‘special mandate’ of the DIGOS division, which expresses the prerogative of this police unit.

<sup>12</sup> This model focuses on various police tactics aimed at neutralizing potentially disruptive actions by some protesters. It relies on surveillance and information sharing to assess and control risk, along with aggressive strategies and military practices.

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