

Story of an ordinary silence

This is the story of a highly-debated site located on the road to Palazzo San Gervasio (PZ) Italy, the story of a system where the words “human rights” seem to have no meaning, the story of invisible and segregated migrants who were looking for a “better life” in Europe.

This story began in February 2011 when a welcome center built on a site that was confiscated from the Mafia and destined to house seasonal workers during the tomato harvest was rebuilt and re-employed as a first aid welcome center for migrants (CARA) in order to face the emergency of the thousand people fleeing from the Arab Spring in search of protection in the “Fortress Europe”. On April 21st of the same year, in accordance with a decree emitted by Mario Monti’s government, in a matter of fifteen days the same center was rebuilt and converted into an Identification and Expulsion Center (CIE) for migrants. Three-meter high concrete walls, crowned with a two-meter high wire fence, were erected all around the facilities and consequently the possibility for migrants to communicate with the outside world became completely inexistent from that moment on. The center became to be known as “the little Italian Guantanamo” since access to lawyers, psychologists, doctors, politicians, journalists and other specialists was been denied during the entire period of detention of Tunisian migrants. Thanks to several controls that took place outside of the facilities, we know that the conditions inside the center were really dramatic: 500 persons inside a structure which could host a maximum of 200, only 7 toilets and showers for all the “guests”, accommodation inside tents under the sun of a very hot Italian summer, no telephones, no medical aids. Videos taken with hidden cameras by the prisoners inside and by the activists outside reported mass deportations taking place during the night and many other atrocities. But crimes seemed to be never-ending. The administration of this center had been committed, without any kind of arbitration, to the Sicilian private managing company called “Connecting People”. Later this company was investigated by police for fraud against the State, as well as for criminal conspiracy. The economic benefits deriving from the Identification and Detention of each of the detainees as well as the large scale business seemed to be quite profitable: 1) 30 - 60 € per each day/migrant for a maximum time of detention of 18 months; 2) employment of policeman coming from the surrounding area and from other Italian regions simply for surveillance purposes; 3) payment for hotels for policeman accommodation purposes; 4) payment for food for migrants and policeman.

Meanwhile tensions within the center, between the detainees and the operators, grew constantly until the situation was on the verge of exploding.

In June 2011, thanks to local and national activists, mass media and the extraordinary inspection of three politicians who reported intolerable conditions for detainees, the center was closed. We all considered it a victory on our part, but it was just an illusion....

Meanwhile, as usual, things were proceeding in silence, in the underground of a silent land.

On 4 April 2013 the project for renovation of the Identification and Detention Center (CIE), located

on the road to Palazzo San Gervasio (PZ) was approved by the Ministry of Infrastructure of Puglia-Basilicata, the Home Office and the Prefecture of Potenza (Basilicata). Almost €3-million have been spent for renovation works, without any clear specification about the final destination of that structure. I realized that the nightmare was going on without any kind of information about what was happening. The past calls and sentences coming from Italy and other parts of Europe on the necessity to stop reclusion of human beings and to stop this illegal form of protective custody have been completely ignored. Administrations and governments have turned a deaf ear to the protests denouncing the inhumane conditions in which detainees (who committed no crime other than not being in possession of valid documents) have to live in Identification and Deportation Centers (CIE). I thought that the government would appeal to a good sense of responsibility and respect for human lives and this crazy project of renovating the "little Italian Guantanamo" would never start all over again. But as soon as I opened my eyes I realized that it was just a dream and that the Italian Government, the Home Office, the Prefecture do not have any feelings and respect for people who risked their lives in search of better life conditions. I realized that the government was interested exclusively in pursuing politics of terror, segregation, reclusion, psychological demolition and ousting of the "strangers".

But why have I come to this conclusion? Recently, on 17 August 2014, I drove up to the Identification and Detention Center (CIE) located on the road to Palazzo San Gervasio (PZ) and realized that renovation works were starting again. By that time only two buildings had been erected. Initially I believed this process and activity would have stopped as soon as possible. On 21 September 2014, once again I drove up to the same Identification and Deportation Center (CIE) and realized that the nightmare had continued and several buildings had been built over the entire area. I couldn't understand the reason why nobody sees, nobody hears and nobody speaks.....

Then while passing in front of the site I noticed that something was not as it has to be: the construction sign which, according to the law, must be visible to the public (art. 27, comma 4, of PDR 380/1, Act of Construction) is actually situated inside the structure, surrounded by a fortress wall and therefore invisible from outside. After some research I learned that basic information on the construction sign has to be accessible to everybody. For instance, the date of beginning and end of the renovation works, information about the construction company, the property, the architect and the director of works in charge as well as installer company have to be made visible on the billboard. But nobody can see, nobody can hear and therefore nobody can speak.....

I went further with my research and I found out that detainees in CIEs (Identification and Expulsion Center) and CARAs (Welcome Center for Asylum Seekers) are often thrown out of the centers after their procedures of Asylum are completed and in most cases this is done without getting regular documents from Italian authorities. In doing so they are often simply thrown out of the facilities and become victims of the Mafia system which exploits the precarious conditions of these "illegal" people - offering them jobs in illicit businesses and without employment contracts. Work in the tomato harvest is the most frequent example.

I pursued my research and realized that, as I heard from some people, a new CIE and a new CARA will be opened in Basilicata; therefore the highest concentration of CIEs and CARAs on the Italian territory can be found (absurdly) in Apulia and Basilicata - the two Italian regions with the highest concentration of migrant workers, working illegally for the Mafia in the tomato harvest. But nobody sees, nobody hears and nobody speaks.....

I was shocked and began to wonder how nobody can see, nobody can hear and nobody can speak.....and..... where are all the institutions, politicians, associations, trade unions of the Basilicata Region? So I decided to ask some questions to the Communal Mayor of Palazzo San Gervasio, to the government, to the Prefecture of Potenza and to the Home Office.

I request an urgent reply to the following points:

1. clear and public intentions for the exact final destination and scope of the facilities in question;
2. to allow the access to the documents concerning the project of the center, deposited in the the municipality of Palazzo San Gervasio;
3. enforce ongoing regulations by posting the construction sign in clear public sight, in order to get basic information according to the law;
4. move on with the new political tendency of removing Identification and Deportation Centers from our territory and destine these structures for purposes different from preventive detention ones. One purpose I suggest could be the use as center for cultural activities which lacks in the area in question.

Thank you.

Elettra Griesi.