

# WE ARE ALL BLACK BLOCK!

## The NOTAV protest movement and geographies of intervention

Cristina Bangau



(Source: *beppegrillo.it*)

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Supervisors: Professors Prem Kumar Rajaram and Andreas Däfinger

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## ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I explore the conflictual political nature of spatial rescaling through the NOTAV movement protest that originated in the Susa Valley, in the early 1990s. This started as an opposition to the proposal for a Turin-Lyon high-speed railway, included in one of the priority infrastructure projects of the trans-European network policy. I argue that the protest can be read through the framework of a disagreement on what (the spatiality of) the valley should be and on its integration into a specific European nodality, or multi-scalar spaces, played on the arena of national territorial organization, vision that hints to a project of European Union place-making. The overlapping of the two types of spatial imagination, embedded into practice, led to violent confrontations between the protesters and the authorities. On this basis, the project was declared of strategic national interest by the Italian government, which allowed for the militarization of the valley, initiative highly criticized by the protesters.

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## An outsider's intermezzo on the signs of resistance in the Susa Valley: Storytelling as introduction

It is the summer of 2008 and I am travelling from Turin to Meana di Susa, using the regional train. I have never been there before so I am fascinated by the scenery. After the train passes through a long tunnel and leaves behind the industrialized suburbs, I notice in front of me a valley surrounded by mountains. People in the compartment are busy reading or just resting after a long day of work, so my enthusiasm seems a bit out of place. I try to be as subtle as possible, but it is obvious I am a tourist, judging by the luggage I carry with me. Everyone else travels with a light bag, only rarely does a backpack suggest that someone is going to explore the alpine geography as a visitor. No wonder this is the context; from what I understood, the line which connects Turin to Bardonecchia, the last stop before the border with France, is used mainly as a transit route for the inhabitants of the valley who work in the city.

I look around, when my gaze rests on a mountain on my right side. Written in big white letters are the words: TAV = MAFIA (see Figure 1). I had heard stories about the corruption in Italy, and the dissatisfaction of the population with the politicians and the current state of affairs, but I had never before seen such a blunt expression of it. I write down a note in my diary, curious now about the codified language and the meaning behind it.

After another long tunnel, an eternity which blocked my gazing, a voice announces the next stop. I take my luggage and get off the train. A small, solitary station, just one other person waiting on the other platform. I have to climb up the hilly street with no sidewalks in order to reach the place where I will be staying. Cars pass me by, and I again feel out of place. For now, I can see houses in the distance, but around me there are only trees and the sound of water flowing. On the left side of the road, there is a wall covered in graffiti. This time it says NOTAV. I still cannot

grasp the meaning of it, but I am surprised that in such a small village I can find these types of message. Then I notice a flag hanging from a window, white background with red font, saying NOTAV and under it a train. I have to pass through that narrow street so I have time to see more and more graffiti and flags.



**Figure 1: TAV=MAFIA (*Notav.info*)**

I finally reach my destination and, for that day, I stop wondering about how to interpret what I encountered in my short one hour trip. Until some days later, when my host unusually comes home from work hours late. Like many of the people in the area, she works in another part of the valley, so she has to use the car or the train daily. I wait for her to have our afternoon espresso, and, outraged, she starts telling me that some lunatics were blocking the streets and the railways on the way back, somewhere near Susa, the neighboring town. I can understand little from her

story; apparently there are these anarchists, really violent, who could not care less about working people, fighting with *carabinieri* (the national military police). She does not know much about their reasons, only that they are the NOTAV protesters who from time to time disturb the peaceful life of the valley.

I ask her what NOTAV stands for, recalling my trip from Turin to Meana. From the terrace I can see another flag hanging in the courtyard of one of the neighbors, and my first reaction was to ask her whether those people are part of the rioters, as well. She explains, slowly, as if she is mainly trying to make sense of the story first for herself. It is an abbreviation from *no treno ad alta velocità* (no high-speed train). She mentions a generic ‘they’ who want to construct a high-speed railway from Lyon to Turin. From her perspective, it is a positive occurrence in a valley where not much is going on and there are no work places. It will bring tourists, create new jobs and who knows, maybe even her son, unemployed for some years now, will find one.

Not from the valley herself, she blames their reactions on their upbringing: people who grew up in the mountains, still using their dialect, with a strong sense of belonging. She admits, there were rumors that the mountains contain uranium, so the excavation for the tunnels could be harmful. Still, she hopes the construction work will soon start so her family may have the chance to benefit economically from this. In a lower voice she jokes that the only reason why she would sympathize with the protests is because she finds the mayor of the municipality, who is supporting the project, completely incompetent.

I try to get more information from her, but she moves on, sharing stories about her work experiences in the trattoria, a typical Italian eatery, in a small village somewhere far away, in the mountains. Every afternoon, the elders gather there, enjoying some wine produced by the owner

of the place, who is himself a proud *piemontese*<sup>1</sup>, and discuss local affairs in their own dialect. Some of them, apparently, never learned Italian, still go hunting and gather mushrooms in the woods, and never went out of the valley. Her description is surprising for me; the quality of the infrastructure and of all the other facilities makes those small villages seem like a dreamland. .

Later on, during my walks there, I see countless posters announcing evening gatherings where more information will be revealed about the injustice of the TAV project and its supporters. When I ask my host to accompany me to one, she rejects the idea immediately, saying that those people are too unpredictable and she does not want to get in the middle of their violent actions. We stop talking about this and only from time to time, when she is in a hurry for work, the family members exchange jokes about how there will be no train to catch because some ‘anarchists’ decided to block the railway again.

### **Case Study: Scaling the NOTAV direct actions**

My research is built as a case of protest as place-making, in the context of the TEN-T project, elaborated by the European Commission, with a focus on the 2011 revision of the Italian Objective Law that led to an intensified militarization of the Susa Valley. Trying to capture the movement instantiated in the process of assembling, I take the NOTAV protest as a source of understanding how the actors define and order their realities and how they resist the idea of jumping scales in such way that a small valley catapults to European significance. The protest itself can be considered a mediator, in the sense that it translates, transforms, distorts and modifies the meaning or the elements that it was supposed to carry. Therefore, in the following pages, I

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<sup>1</sup> Italian word for designating people from the Piedmont region.

insist on how the NOTAV initiative achieved success as a social movement by using the exact same strategy of jumping scales, with the help of autonomous social centers becoming a national and transnational movement of resistance.

With this in mind, I structured the research around the direct actions undertaken by the activists in spring 2013, in the Susa Valley, and the negotiation practices that emerge between the diverse actors involved. By conducting interviews with the participants to the protest, I explored their discourses on the spatiality of the valley in relation to the high-speed railway and the construction site in Chiomonte, one of the localities involved in this grassroots movement, which had been declared zone of strategic interest for the national security and economic development. More precisely, the research had been organized as a three months ethnography of the different groups involved in the protest – the local committees, popular assemblies, and the self-managed urban social centers. In the Susa Valley I paid special attention to the narratives of belonging and the spatial imaginations of the valley in connection to the construction site and the proposed high-speed railway. Another important aspect, as it is reflected in the following sections, had been the exploration of the Askatasuna self-managed social center as the locus of competing subjectivities that come out of the intersection of the project of creating a specific European spatiality and the counter-geographical imagination deployed by the protesters.

### **The NOTAV protest movement: The European Commission's infrastructure policy encounters the Valley**

In the early 1990s, the European Commission elaborated a White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment, a document that talks about the necessity of exploiting technical progress, and enhancing competitiveness, for the sake of improved living conditions and



employment, as main coordinates of economic development. It is the moment which marks the proposal for a trans-European network (TEN), based on a North-South and West-East urban axis. The aim was to achieve a common space, by increasing the physical links, making traffic safer, faster, and environmentally compatible. One of the main challenge, as it is stipulated in the report<sup>2</sup>, was to identify the priority projects while providing an administrative, regulatory and legal framework, and financing mechanisms.

The keywords of this proposal, which reflect the vision of a common European market, are large-scale, transnational, networks, cross-border cooperation, put in the general context of transport policy. Number six on the list of priority projects which begun or will begin in two years from the moment of the publication of the report, is the Turin-Lyon high-speed railway. Its desired outcomes are not only a positive economic impact, but an environmental one, as well, the creation of an increased number of job places, and the prosperity of the regions involved.

The report also mentions the possibility of the owners of the land – that can be acquired through voluntary or compulsory means, with a fair compensation – to defend themselves if they consider to be affected by the project. This latter stipulation, which can only add-up to more costs and delays for implementation, gains great significance in the evolution of the TEN-T projects. In this context, the NOTAV (abbreviation for *no high-speed train*) protest movement originated in the Susa Valley, Italy, as the initiative of a small group of environmentally concerned inhabitants, over the effects of the construction of the high-speed railway. They were organized as a technical committee, Habitat, composed of around twenty people, as Mario reveals to me, mentioning with excitement the moment when they simulated the noise produced by the high-speed trains, during

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<sup>2</sup> [http://aei.pitt.edu/1144/1/trans-e\\_networks\\_christopherson\\_report.pdf](http://aei.pitt.edu/1144/1/trans-e_networks_christopherson_report.pdf)

their evening meetings. Over the years the group managed to gain the support of the local administrations, as the Comunita Montana della Bassa Val Susa and the mayors, incorporating more and more actors, not only locals but outsiders, as well. It created solidarity networks with different groups and developed its own strategies to cope with the increased presence of the police in the valley, and to promote their resistance.

The first proposal for a cohesive and integrated trans-European network had been revised countless times from the early 1990s. It introduced new actors, as the TEN-T agency, Corridor platforms - which brought together all the stakeholders involved in the project, presided by a European coordinator and technical observatories. For each part of the core network, divided in corridors, there has to be at least a cross-border section, considered of strategic interest for the Union. Their implementation requires bilateral agreements between the states involved. This further extended the oppositional discourse of the NOTAV movement to a political level, their critique being directed mainly to the state authorities, political parties and regional and local administrations.

The refusal of the project is shaped around the development discourse proposed by the Commission. The NOTAV protesters claim that the valley is already saturated, large-scale infrastructure projects being implemented here over the recent years. Also, the priority status of the project is seen as inconsistent, basing this statement on the fact that there is already a historic railway which facilitates the connection between Italy and France, built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which satisfies the transport demands. Moreover, in the late 1980s, a new highway was constructed for the same purpose, another initiative which met the opposition of the inhabitants, unsuccessfully this time.

They fear that the valley will be transformed into a transit area, aspect which will reduce the quality of life. The recent evolution of the economic situation in Italy functioned as the launching platform for a fierce resistance against useless investments, the high costs of the line being unjustified in the context of increased cuts in the financial resources allocated to various public sectors. For example, in 2012 the Piedmont region eliminated the financed university places, aspect which was repeatedly mentioned during the ‘Val Susa, l'Università delle lotte!’ four days event, as part of the NOTAV camp, organized as an alternative forum, by the members of the autonomous students’ collective from Turin.

For the protesters, the decision to construct the railway is perceived as serving political interests, disregarding the opinion of the actual inhabitants of the valley, and as being a symptom of the violent corruption phenomenon in Italy. On this basis, they claim the right to defend their own territory and have a saying on its development. Since the introduction of the checkpoints, around the construction sites, the population complains about the militarization of the area, increased police control and abuses. An interesting turning point had been the appropriation of the protest by the self-managed social centers from Turin, especially of the Askatasuna activists. They brought a certain type of knowledge connected to their affinity for autonomous politics. The confrontational tactics of the movement expanded, with a focus on direct actions. Therefore, the story of the valley, as narrated by the NOTAV people, during the last years, became a story of struggle, of resistance against the illegitimate actions of the official authorities, especially in the light of the numerous confrontations.

### **Unfolding the Susa Valley: short reflection on the ‘whys’**

The three parts were put together in the introductory section for several reasons. Through my intermezzo I explored my own spatial imaginary, articulated by the train trip on the so called

historic line, the Turin–Bardonecchia railway. I specifically tried to stress the encounter with the expressions of the disagreement (Rancière 1999), the uttering of what the valley is and what it should be. The signs I noticed though, were not one-sided, but indicated a contested spatial order, a field of sensible evidences that may be puzzling at a first glance.

By overlapping the TEN-T project, which evolved from an imaginary of a specific European spatiality, with the Italian national and regional strategies of translating it into practice and further, with the protest movement, I situate the Susa Valley in a broader geography of accumulation. This is a territory dependent on and produced by some fixed and immobile spatial organizations that are further contested and re-scaled. As it follows, the thesis is structured based on the concept of politics of scale (Brenner 1999), which hints at the political conflictual nature of the global spatial restructuring process. From this perspective, governance can be read as an expression of the friction between urban and national territorial restructuring.

The reterritorialization process is premised upon spaces that are simultaneously an outcome of, while being incorporated in, multiple, intermingling geographical scales. As Brenner suggests, the cities and the new state spaces remain the “geographical frameworks within, upon and through which capitalist development unfolds” (433), development shaped through large-scale infrastructure projects. Therefore, urban politics are to be understood as the outcome between the restructuring of major cities and state’s territory, and of the “re-scaling of politics and political contestation within the territorial state” (444) in the context of multi-scalar reconfigurations - in this particular case, the urban-regional, national and European.

Moreover, the TENs projects mark the emergence of a specific geography of spatial policy. This is why, by taking the specific case of the Turin-Lyon high-speed railway and looking at the different actors who come together in the Susa Valley, as it follows in the next sections of the

thesis, I tried to find an answer to my main research question: how is policy translated into practice and what is the spatial order it creates? I analyzed the valley through a process of place-making, defined in this context as the “intersection and interactions of concrete social relations and social processes in a situation of co-presence” (Massey 1994: 138). Therefore, Susa Valley is not only what the stories of the protesters or of the inhabitants reveal. As I further elaborate on, it is a moment articulated in networks of social relations and understandings, as a process that is constructed out of a particular unfolding of movements and events.

This articulation process, especially when looked at as the coming together in the struggle of actors who would have otherwise never interacted, is best exemplified by what an activist from a self-managed social center from Bologna told me during the interview. The setting is Budapest, 2012, in a room painted in a violent purple. It is the end of an informative gathering on the recent developments of the NOTAV struggle. I do not find it surprising that the news about the movement spread so far; one of the main practices of autonomous politics is the interconnectedness of different radical and alternative spaces and the sharing of information. Plus, I recall seeing NOTAV graffiti on the university walls during my trip to Bologna.

We are at KLIT, a Radical Queer Affinity Collective, and around 10 people came that evening. I become curious about the driving force behind the intensity with which the presentor talks about territory and belonging, and the need to defend the Susa Valley, something I heard so often from the supporters of the movement. She starts smiling, puzzled by my question. “Have you ever been there?” her immediate reply is. “If you had, then you know the answer. Have you seen how beautiful it is? Do you want to leave it to be destroyed by mafia and corrupt politicians?” She gives more details about the moment when she participated in the annual NOTAV camp, next to the construction site, on a land the protesters bought collectively. She enjoyed it and supported the

movement, strongly condemning the violent actions of the police. Before her departure, she greets the “comrades” and one of them, from a self-managed social center in Turin, mentions that next time, when he will be in Bologna, he will visit her squat. At the moment when she is telling this to me, she stops, opens her eyes widely, as trying to suggest this was one of the most absurd things she had ever heard. Gesticulating chaotically, she looks at me and says: “Come on! I can fight for the valley, it is alright to talk to you here. But in no way you can come to our squat! No way!”

## The political nature of spatial restructuring: conceptual transition from Brenner to Rancière

Stevens (2004), in his analysis of European infrastructure policy, shows that one of the main strategies of fulfilling a successful European integration has been considered the elaboration of a major transport network, alongside with monetary and economic union – features of a common market. Therefore, I used the concept of politics of scale in order to be able to identify the geographical frameworks under which the territorial restructuring – in this case, connecting the main European urban nodes - is articulated and the frictions that come out of the moments of encounter.

While Brenner's perspective is crucial for understanding conflict in a multi-layered manner, I later on introduce Rancière (1999) as a more elaborate take on conflict and the political, from my perspective. This is also justified by the fact that my attempt is not only to point out the phenomenon of rescaling, through the Turin-Lyon high-speed railway, situated in the national, regional and local context. I take the NOTAV protest as the expression of the clash between different discourses on development and spatiality, more specific, a dissensus on the way Susa Valley is integrated in the European geography by the TEN-T project. By bringing these two conceptual models together I strive to unravel the struggle over space, over its control – in the multiple possible ways that I call spatial imaginations – that is not only located in a concrete territory, but is articulated upon diverse scales.

## **On Rancière and the political: the NOTAV movement in between politics and la police**

Politics, as envisioned by Rancière (1999), presuppose a break with the tangible spatial configurations (in this case, the TENS project) which, as he argues, makes visible the sheer contingency of the previous way of distributing bodies, ways of being and saying, and their appearance. Doing so, it rests on specific subjects or subjectivization mechanisms and, it finally leads to creating the conditions of possibility (the political) for the production of a new field of experiences (35). Therefore, I argue that the protest in the Susa Valley can be read through this framework, the disagreement on what (the spatiality of) the valley should be and its integration into a specific European nodality. These multi-scalar spaces are played out on the arena of national territorial organization, vision that hints to a project of European Union place-making.

Politics is an incongruence in the terms used to define the same subject, the coexistence of contrarities. This is why a democratic emancipation implies, from this perspective, a process of redistribution which modifies the field of possibilities, supplementing the subject with what was not included so far in the perceptual field. But what is this field more precisely? Rancière calls it *la police*, a distribution of the sensible, an organizational system that separates what is to be made visible from what is to be excluded, therefore an exclusionary practice. It is a symbolic manner of constituting the social, which has concrete consequences in the sense that it cuts through certain parts of the social and puts it into a certain order, separating what is visible from what is not, what is to be uttered from what is not. *La police* is not to be confused with the repressive forces, rather it is a partitioning of the sensible - an arrangement of bodies and their appearance - with a special emphasis on what is not included in the field of evidences.



The political, then, relies on the relational intervention of the politics on the police order, through modes of subjectivization. It is instantiated when politics (contrasting manners of uttering a concept) interrupts the distribution of the sensible evidences, the regime of articulation of what presents itself to shape experience and supplements it with those who were not previously included in the perceptual field. As it follows, the political is the disagreement between a regime of representations and exclusionary practices (la police) as an intervention on the visible and the sayable (politics). It rests on the intermittent acts of subjectivity that redraw the coordinates of the aesthetics (the sensible evidences). There remains an inherent conflict between la police and politics, theorized under the form of a *wrong*, a clash between the given distribution of the sensible evidences and what is left out of the perceptual field, through a normative inclusionary practice of mimesis.

This way of conceptualizing the political, as the disagreement between a regime of representation and exclusionary practices, if applied to the concrete case of the NOTAV movement, opens up the space for claim-making for the protesters to be included in the field of the sensible evidences (the TENs project in which the valley is marked as a space in between urban nodes). On the one side, the TEN-T is, then, an attempt to create a specific spatial order that has at its basis the geographical representation of a smooth European space, as it is described in the 2011 Commission's proposal for regulating the development guidelines of the infrastructure network. The protest movement, on the other hand is the action that tries to interrupt, to break the proposed order. By contesting it, through direct action, rejecting private property and the exchange value of space, new fields of possibilities are made visible. What seems as an overarching project of governmentality, reveals its cracks in which action is made possible.

The protest appears as the contestation of a spatial order, and what comes out of this disagreement could be compared to Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) exploration of the rhizome as multiplicities. These are never fully complete, since they can connect to a multitude of other machines, forming new assemblages. Each assemblage is considered to be an event, with specific aesthetics, spatiality and forms of subjectification, and therefore is presented as constant flows, with multiple entryways, a process of becoming that is generative of new ways of being in the middle, a stream with no end or beginning. The assemblage has the potential to transform the rhizome and its territories, through a process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. The rhizomatic perspective promotes a transitory segmentation-in-progress.

From my point of view, this can only benefit the understanding of politics, not as teleology, but as means, and of resistance as a matter of flows, in the specific context of the NOTAV protest as place-making. Therefore, the main research question gravitates around the spatial and the political forms that come out of this articulated moment, of the specific interaction between the way of partitioning the sensible that the European Commission promotes and the *wrong* brought into the field of evidences by the protesters. Even more specific, how is the Susa Valley imagined in this assemblage and how do the different parts see it integrated and unfolded in the multi-scalar processes of reterritorialization?

Questions on the power relations and the connection between local knowledge and the one produced by authorities are raised, furthermore relating them to the concept of collective action, how people create networks of resistance and how solidarity is built not only before, but while organizing protests. NOTAV is presented by its supporters as a counter-hegemonic movement,

based on *contropotere e conflitto, di organizzazione e controsapere*<sup>3</sup> (counter-power and conflict, of modes of organizing and counter-knowledge) as it is concluded in the detailed schedule of the ‘Val Susa, l'Università delle lotte!’ 2012, summer initiative. The protesters oppose, to the economic interests and the expert knowledge necessary for the elaboration of the TEN-T project - used as political means to sustain the construction of the railway - a strong environmental dimension, a dense network of solidarity and alternative knowledge. Before elaborating more on this, in the next pages I introduce the methodology section, after which I describe the way European spatiality is presented in the Commission’s documents, from a vision of space as fragmented to a networked one. Through this, I want to introduce the premise of infrastructure policy as the project of creating a spatial order that further connects to a geography of intervention.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.infoaut.org/index.php/blog/spazi-sociali/item/5369-programma-della-quattro-giorni-val-susa-luniversit%C3%83%C2%A0-delle-lotte>

## Methodology or how to make sense of the disagreement

### **The space of policy and practice**

As mentioned so far, my main argument has as a starting point considerations over the conflictual nature of spatial restructuring, following Brenner's insights on the politics of scale (1999) as struggle over space and its control. More specific, I take Susa Valley as dependent on and produced by some fixed and immobile spatial organizations that are further contested and re-scaled, in the continuous reshaping of the geographies of accumulation. The result is competing subjectivities that come out of the intersection of the project of creating a specific European spatiality and the counter-geographical imagination deployed by the protesters. Based on this analytical model, I chose to analyze the emergence of a specific geography of spatial policy, as envisioned by the trans-European transport network and its articulation through the Lyon-Turin corridor of high-speed railway. I took this as my case study not only because it is considered of strategic interest and, therefore, a priority, as an attempt to create a specific spatial order that has at its basis a certain geographical representation (detailed in the documents produced), but also because of the protests against its construction.

By pointing out the social in the making, the frictions are used as moments in which the static, linear concepts of state and space are redefined and put in a historically specific analysis, which reveals the dynamics of the politics. Conflictual, antagonistic perspectives are key elements of the restructuring of spatially embedded social relations, product of an uneven economic development of capital accumulation. This is highly important especially since states still play particular roles in formulating, implementing and coordinating the urban policies (the TEN-T

project is also designed to connect main European cities), used as mechanism for economic development. I believe the dynamics identified at each level of analysis reveal excellent insights on the translation of policy into practice, the latter one understood as the articulation of alternative practices and its imaginary. Complementing this with a view of place as process (Massey 1994), as the articulated moment that comes out of the interaction of different scales, I developed a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995), inspired by a rhizomatic perspective of reterritorialization (Deleuze & Guattari 1987).

### **Following the documents**

My attempt had been to propose a methodological approach which is able to capture the movement instantiated in the process of assembling, so what had to be studied was the dynamics of this assemblage, the trails of the associations (Latour 2005). The first step was the analysis of the documents produced by the European Commission regarding the trans-European transport network. I started my point of investigation from the 1993 Council's Decision<sup>4</sup>, which follows from the White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment, with a special focus on the Report on trans-European networks<sup>5</sup>. Then I looked at the strategy report for railway revitalization<sup>6</sup>, from 1996. Further, I took the report of 2001 on the transport policy for 2010, which mentions the urgency to decide, also the moment when the TEN-T agency was set up. The last part of this level of analysis consists of the European Parliament and Council's 2011 proposal for regulating the development guidelines for the network, in order to analyze the discourse of what

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<sup>4</sup> <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:1993:305:0011:0037:EN:PDF>

<sup>5</sup> <http://aei.pitt.edu/1144/>

<sup>6</sup> [http://europa.eu/documents/comm/white\\_papers/pdf/com96\\_421\\_en.pdf](http://europa.eu/documents/comm/white_papers/pdf/com96_421_en.pdf)

an integrated trans-European network implies, and position the specific Lyon-Turin project, included in the priority project number 6.

An intermediary link was the 2012 Progress Report on the implementation of the priority projects, which specifies the actors<sup>7</sup> who are in charge of planning, coordinating and supervising the Lyon-Turin Corridor. From this point, I had to move at the exploration of the 2012 bilateral agreement, signed in Rome, between France and Italy for the cross-border section of the project. After, my focus went to the main legislation elaborated by the Italian government, more specific to the Objective Law from 2001. I considered it to be of great relevance, as it shows up in the detailed analysis, because it sets the normative context of large-scale infrastructure projects. It offers insights on the priority projects considered of strategic interest for the national development and modernization process. For the specific time-frame of my research, I looked at the revised version of the 2012, in order to understand better the roles the Italian state and the Piedmont region play in monitoring and implementing the works.

## **Moving through the Susa Valley**

When dealing with the events in the Susa Valley, mainly with the NOTAV protest movement, I took into consideration the following aspects: what are the reference points in the history of the movement as narrated by the inhabitants, how it is organized, and the different actors involved. Of crucial importance had been the websites<sup>8</sup> maintained by the supporters of the NOTAV movement and *assemblea permanente* (permanent assembly), their mailing list. Not only did I extract from them my information about the next meetings and strategies of resistance, but I

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<sup>7</sup> European Coordinator, the European Commission, the national, regional and local authorities of the two Member States concerned, France and Italy, the railway managers and operators, the current promoter LTF, the Observatory, and the organization's representing the interests of industry and of the future users, such as Transalpine and Transpadana, 69.

<sup>8</sup> Notav.info, infoaut.org,

had the opportunity to consult the documents they produced over the years, from technical reports on the feasibility of the project, to financial ones, manifestos and press releases.

Then, I devised an ethnographic project, in order to grasp the embeddedness of the struggle: from the end of January until the beginning of May I participated to assemblies, demonstrations, informative gatherings for the public, promenades around the construction site, and dinners or local wine tasting events. I also conducted interviews, trying to cover a wider range of actors, from the members of the Komitato Giovani No Tav, a youth initiative, to activists coming from Askatasuna self-managed social center, members of the local NOTAV committee and non-affiliated individuals whom I met at the different gatherings.

Even if I had time constraints and sometimes it had been difficult to contact specific people I wanted to talk to, the movement enjoys a large support and organizes meetings almost every week, which offered me the chance to engage in various discussions. This is why the interviews followed some guiding lines, necessary later for coding, but usually took the form of an extensive conversation on their position in the movement, what are the reasons of supporting it, their NOTAV history, the issue of violence and the reaction of the police forces and authorities, their spatial imagination of the valley. I adopted this strategy to ensure I did not interrupt the flow of their thoughts and because I considered it of extreme significance to follow their personal emphasis.

I opted for situating myself firmly in the field as a student/researcher. One of the consequences this option implied was that I had to refrain from participating to their surprise night attacks over the working sites. These require a thorough knowledge of the geography of the valley, of each small path in the forests – alternative routes to the checkpoints established by the military police, around the location in which the drills are to be done. I did not want to compromise their

missions or put them in any type of difficult situation, and I explicitly wanted to maintain a degree of objectivity towards the protest. Plus, it involves high risks: from being banned to enter the region, fined or arrested, to being exposed to physical hazards. I am not suggesting in any way that the NOTAV protesters have a propensity for violence or dangerous situations. I was never in a context when I was faced to any similar type of behavior. But as I will be describing in my ethnography, the outcomes of the interactions between authorities and protesters are unpredictable and I had to make sure I do not have any influence on this confrontation.

An important mention has to be made at this point. I considered the accusations of violence, from both sides, to be one of the most relevant aspect of the materialization of the disagreement over what the valley is, what it should be, and models of development. This is why, while researching the protest, a special focus was the Askatasuna self-managed social center, from Turin, formulated during my endeavor as a subsequent research question. I wanted to understand the relation between the increased policing of the protest and the arrests that took place after some demonstrations and the self-identification of those activists with autonomous politics. To be able to grasp this, I analyzed press materials and videos in which officials express their position on what is happening in Susa Valley.



## The Trans-European transport Network: policy as spatial order

The 2012 *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council. On Union guidelines for the development of the trans-European transport network* states clearly its background and objectives. It starts by referring to the urgency for a “smooth functioning” of the infrastructure, in the context of an internal market which features cohesion at economic, territorial and social levels. This claim is made based on the 1996 reports on the increased traffic flows, moment that also marks the extension of the list of the priority projects to be executed. The demand for efficient infrastructure could not be satisfied under the current geographical fragmentation due to the missing links in between transport modes.

Therefore, the aim is to “establish a complete and integrated trans-European transport network, covering all Member States and regions and providing the basis for the balanced development of all transport modes” (2). The main issue stressed is the removal of major barriers, by identifying and addressing missing links, cross-border sections, bottle necks and the lack of multi-modal capacity, with special consideration of the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. This should lead to a smart, sustainable and inclusive European growth.

What has been described so far is put, in the document, under the label of shift in transport patterns at the European level, and can be achieved through a dual layer approach to conceptual planning, which makes the distinction between a comprehensive network, consisting of all the existing and planned infrastructure, and a core one. The latter includes the TEN-T priority projects with the highest European added value (the bottlenecks, cross-border sections, missing links), strategic for ensuring a multi-modal mobility network and a proper geographical coverage. The success of the policy depends highly on a reinforced coordination, both at a planning and an implementation level, for a “sound governance structure” (6).

In order to support the traffic flows required by a cohesive economic, social and territorial European single market, the TEN-T is based on a coordinated approach, especially in the cross-border sections, where there are two Member States involved. For that matter, one of the suggestions is to simplify the existing rules for planning and implementation. The states are not the only actors anymore involved in the development and management of the transport policy. The proposal is to integrate regional and local authorities and other public and private entities, from infrastructure managers to transport operators. Furthermore, it is implemented a new methodological approach to planning, the core network corridor, that should cross through at least three Member States and include at least three transport modes, with each Member State participating in at least one corridor. The Commission, after consulting the states concerned, has to designate a European Coordinator for Corridor Platforms. These platforms are structured as governance entities, with a legal status.

The analysis of the documents elaborated by the European Commission was necessary in order to set the grounds for an overview of the spatial markers that the infrastructure policy designates. As it can be extracted from the description I provided, the proposal for infrastructure development is based on a vision of space as fluid, cohesive, smooth, integrated, flowing, connected, networked, coordinated. This is opposed to a fragmented one, one which lacks “multi-modal capacity” (3) and is characterized by missing links, barriers, bottlenecks and quality disparities, an issue perceived as a problem that has to be tackled at the European level. The Member States have to report constantly the progress towards the desired spatial order, by using TENtec, the interactive geographical and technical information system (46). This further leads to a continuous adjustment of the statistics published by Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union, and of the maps of the networks.



**Figure 2: Priority Axis 6** ([tentea.ec.europa.eu](http://tentea.ec.europa.eu))

Since the NOTAV movement developed in opposition to the implementation of the Turin-Lyon high-speed railway, part of the European infrastructure policy, I find the insights Dikeç (2007) offers on policy as place-making, as a site of constant negotiation and creation of subjectivities, extremely valuable. This is because by following his exploration of the processual nature of space, Dikeç takes a similar approach on space as not given, but produced through different strategies, in his attempt to integrate Rancière's concept of la police. He emphasizes that ways of imagining space have political implications, and play a central role in producing and reproducing domination and repression.

Therefore, policies as an articulation of spatial imaginations, lead to the creation of spatial orders, which further translate into a specific police order. More specifically, Dikeç's argument

rests on the idea that the state is articulated into a police order, which delineates the contours of a geography of intervention, through the implementation, evolution and the consolidation of policies. This allowed me to investigate the competing subjectivities that come out of the intersection of the project of creating a specific European spatiality and the counter-geographical imaginations, deployed by the protesters. My contribution rests in taking his argument further in the following sections and insisting on the disruption of the police order, on the practice of resistance as embedded into the everyday life, and the position of the valley in the geography of intervention

### [We are all Black Block! Détournement of an institutional profiling of the NOTAV violence](#)

The actors involved in the NOTAV opposition movement are varied and not limited to the Turinese activists of Askatasuna - self-defined as an antagonist network, but for the second part of the analysis my focus rests on them. One of the reasons behind this choice follows from the point where the interviews led me. While discussing how the movement originated, the main references were made to the partisan resistance against fascism, during the Second World War, another opposition to the construction in the valley of a highway during the '80s and the struggles of the '70s, mainly the workers and students' protests. This last mention is actually the starting point of the practice of squatting as a subversive strategy and of the emergence of self-managed social centers.

As I argue along the paper, the success of the protest was the ability to jump scales, becoming in this way visible at a national and international level. Partly, from my perspective, this was possible because of the type of knowledge the autonomous activists brought through their affiliation to the cause. As I noticed during my time spent in Italy, their specific modes of organization, self-production and self-management are based on participatory modes of action –

envisioning change through deliberate conflict - and experimental models of cooperation. For example, they set up a Palestra Popolare Autogestita Antifa Boxe (Self-managed People's Gym Antifa Boxing) in which capoeira and boxing are practiced, and organize an annual national pugilistic competition with other self-managed gyms. In the Vanchiglia neighborhood they launched the initiative for a popular assembly to discuss any aspect that has an impact on the evolution of the area. Also, there are screenings, concerts, and dinners prepared by the activists, open to everyone, organized as a financing method for the different needs of the squat. They are integrated in an extended network of grassroots movements, having a great capacity to mobilize people and disseminate information in order to create immediate solidarity networks with other autonomous groups.

The second reason rests on the recent developments of the protest that have met increased militarization and police repression, based on a revised version of the 2001 Objective Law<sup>9</sup> that declares the construction site as being of strategic interest for national security and economic development. As it is showed along this chapter, there is a discourse of legitimizing repressive state interventions by drawing the distinction between “buoni e cattivi” (the good and the bad ones), usually the Askatasuna activists being put in the “cattivi” category, as I numerous times heard in my conversations with the protesters. They perceive this distinction as the authorities' strategy of weakening the movement. The sentence “We are all Black Block” belongs to Alberto Perino, one of the prominent figures of the movement, which stated this in a speech from July 2011, during a torchlight procession in Turin, organized in solidarity with the ones who were arrested after a NOTAV demo.

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.sicet.it/pages/urbanistica/leggi\\_urb/legge\\_443-01.htm](http://www.sicet.it/pages/urbanistica/leggi_urb/legge_443-01.htm)

In the following section I focus on the perception of the NOTAV violence in the Italian media and as expressed by institutional representatives. Each of the analyzed piece points out a certain profiling of the offenders: a particular category, an instrumentalizing faction that invites the violence, as the representatives of the historical core of resistance in Susa Valley: Alberto Perino and the activists affiliated with Askatasuna, anarcho-insurrectionists, former members of the Red Brigades. After this analysis of discourses, I move to the historical context in which self-managed social centers emerged, and I situate Askatasuna in the field of autonomous politics, in order to be able to supplement this with a reflection on anarchism and violence.

## 2.1 A particular category

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 2012, Mario Monti, the Prime Minister of the Republic at that time, expresses the position of the government on the Turin-Lyon project<sup>10</sup>. He states the full support for the urgent implementation of the works necessary, especially since it had been deliberated that they are economically justified and environmentally sustainable. Furthermore, “there will be no form of illegality allowed and any form of violence will be resisted” (“Non saranno però consentite forme di illegalità e sarà contrastata ogni forma di violenza“!). He mentions that during the years, the opinions of the inhabitants and of the local administrators of the Susa Valley have been taken into consideration, the Technical Observatory formed at Turin in 2006 organizing 182 meetings for this purpose. The recent studies, conducted after profound modifications had been brought to the initial proposal, show that the positive impacts of the high-speed railway surpass any negative consequences. For the sake of the common good and better prospects for the future, Monti declares,

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<sup>10</sup> Special Report on NO TAV: <http://video.repubblica.it/dossier/battaglia-no-tav/monti-la-tav-andra-avanti-violenza-non-sara-tollerata/89490/87883>

in the name of the government, that any form of resistance, which comes from “particular categories”, will be repressed.

## **2.2 Instrumentalized violence**

When asked about the dissensus over the NLTL (New Lyon-Turin Line), and if it is connected to the NOTAV movement, Mario Virano, the chairman of the Technical Observatory for the Turin-Lyon project, nodes puzzled. He repeatedly confirms, after which the description of the project follows. Out of 25 municipalities of the valley, 15 were against it at the moment of the transmission<sup>11</sup>, in March 2012. On the composition of the movement, Virano is asked, are they anarchists, black-blocks, who are they? He makes a clear distinction between the NOTAV movement before 2010, governed by the mayors of the valley, and the moment after 2010, positioning Perino as the main actor, as he puts it “detiene la golden share del movimento” (holds the golden share of the movement) and the Askatasuna activists. At the question, whether it is true or not that the violent faction is represented by outsiders who are instrumentalizing the consensus of the fundamentalists of the Susa Valley’s municipalities, he stresses that they are not infiltrating, but invited. In other words, the violence in the valley, from his perspective, works on a strategic basis, regulated by the NOTAV committees with a lucid assessment, using its institutional legitimacy.

## **2.3 This is Palestine!**

In May 2012, the NOTAV activists set a permanent presidium in Chiomonte, next to the archeological site, as an attempt to stop the drilling works for the base tunnel, until the 30<sup>th</sup> of June, the required deadline for obtaining European funding. On the 27<sup>th</sup> of June though, around 2000

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<sup>11</sup> Rai3 transmission: <http://youtu.be/f6ju7OoSyhg>

military forces take by assault the presidium, managing to take over the control of the site and push the people out of its parking lot, where the presidium was. After this, the place got the name of the *Free Republic of the Maddalena*, that event being considered a turning point in the history of the movement. On the Italy Calling blog (Italian Tales of Oppression & Resistance), updated any time an Italian resistance initiative is undertaken (most prominent tag being NO TAV, followed by movements and occupations), I read an article about the happening, called Civil War in Valsusa<sup>12</sup>. It mentions that some of the protesters compared the situation in the Susa Valley with the one in Palestine. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July, a national demo of support for the NOTAV people takes place. In the valley, the protesters try to take over Maddalena, the police fighting back with rubber bullets, tear gas, water jets. The conflict ends up with hundreds of people being hurt, on the both sides, and five people arrested.

## 2.4. Anarcho-insurrectionists and terrorists

In August, 300 activists blocked the high-speed train coming from Paris, in the section between Bussoleno and Avigliana, two of the localities in the valley. According to the La Repubblica<sup>13</sup> newspaper, 50 of the NOTAV protesters, of each around 17 anarcho-insurrectionists, have been identified by Digos (The General Investigations and Special Operations Division), an Italian law enforcement agency which deals with issues of public order, and prevention against terrorist attacks over the state.

In November, the Berlusconi government issued the decree for the development and internalization of enterprises<sup>14</sup> which explicitly states that the construction site for Turin-Lyon link

<sup>12</sup> <http://italycalling.wordpress.com/2011/07/03/civil-war-in-valsusa-repression-against-no-tav-movement/>

<sup>13</sup> [http://torino.repubblica.it/cronaca/2011/08/18/news/denunciati\\_50\\_no\\_tav\\_per\\_il\\_blocco\\_del\\_tgv-20593937/?ref=HREC2-2](http://torino.repubblica.it/cronaca/2011/08/18/news/denunciati_50_no_tav_per_il_blocco_del_tgv-20593937/?ref=HREC2-2)

<sup>14</sup> [http://leg16.senato.it/leg/16/BGT/Schede\\_v3/Ddliter/testi/32711\\_testi.htm](http://leg16.senato.it/leg/16/BGT/Schede_v3/Ddliter/testi/32711_testi.htm)



is of strategic interest. The tress-passers are to be subjected to the penalties that apply to any other area put under a military law: prison sentence from 3 months to a year, or a fine. Plus, it stipulates that it is illegal to take away any material from the construction site. In January, the following year, 26 more activists are arrested under the accusations of organized violence during the June events. One of them is “Paolo Maurizio Ferrari, ex terrorista italiano appartenuto alle Brigate rosse”<sup>15</sup> (former Italian terrorist member of the Red Brigades) and Giorgio Rosetto, called, in the same article, the historical leader of the Askatasuna self-managed social center.

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<sup>15</sup> [http://www.corriere.it/cronache/12\\_gennaio\\_26/arresti-valsusa\\_49d72a9a-47e5-11e1-9901-97592fb91505.shtml](http://www.corriere.it/cronache/12_gennaio_26/arresti-valsusa_49d72a9a-47e5-11e1-9901-97592fb91505.shtml)

## Make Rhizomes not Roots! Anarchist spatialities and autonomous practices

*“Piu di chi sono, preferisco di parlare di chi siamo...”* (Rossetto G.)<sup>16</sup>

As the prototypes of the locus of autonomous practices, the urban social centers become, in this perspective, the promoters of creative actions to subvert the existing modes of production and governmental structures. Directly linked to this type of politics is the concept of the decolonialization of everyday life, developed by Katsiaficas (2006) in his analysis of the European Autonomous Movement. The concept connects private concerns to broader societal aspects and offers analytical tools for extending the strategies deployed by these free spaces beyond the established microphysics of power. It indicates the rejection of the commodification of the everyday life and the uniform framework under which existence is being integrated in institutional practices. Furthermore, it refers to grassroots initiatives, detached from the established forms of politics, striving for direct democracy and control over spatial and temporal dimensions, away from the governmental structures. The importance of these practices is precisely the possibility of creating free spaces, where the decision-making process is autonomous, without being subjected to market profitability – a shift in resistance practices that takes the everyday life into the field of politics.

### **Subversive actions in Italy: occupying empty buildings as a performative claim**

In Italy, the self-managed urban social centers emerged as a strategy of resistance against neoliberalism, mainly after the 1970s waves of protest against the transition from Fordism to a

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<sup>16</sup> I would prefer to talk about who we are, rather than who I am.

flexible regime of capital accumulation (Mudu 2004), of the *Autonomia Operaia* movement. What started as a revolt of the workers, soon gathered a cluster of autonomous groups - from radical students to feminist initiatives - which coalesced against the economic restructuring and the established political parties, including the Communist one, accused of betraying the agenda of class struggle.

Because of guerilla organizations, such as the Red Brigades, which made use of violent means of contestation, the movement met massive government repression (Katsiaficas 2006). In this context and the incapacity of workers' unions and traditional left-wing parties to devise new spaces for political action, extreme left-wing groups set up the strategy of occupying public or private-owned empty buildings, especially in working-class neighborhoods. This brought into focus issues of use versus exchange value of land and the struggle to re-appropriate social time, grassroots groups readjusting their way of acting within cities, away from the institutionalized party system and conflict, to a microphysics of power (Mudu 2004), transforming squatting into a performative claim for the right to space (Mitchell 2003). Since 1985 onwards, a second generation of social centers has been set, Askatasuna included, building up a network of shared characteristics, as self-management and self-production, and political affinities on the left spectrum that mediates between place-specific struggles and the anti-neoliberal counter-globalization movement.

### **Ludoteca Popolare and the sounds of resistance**

I am in Turin, trying to find Askatasuna, in the Vanchiglia neighborhood. I found the address on their website, but I have not been there before, so I get lost on the small streets in between buildings. One of the pedestrian streets is covered with a green carpet and confetti. Curious, I walk along it to see where it leads, since I was already bored from searching the squat. It takes me to an intersection and I notice another trail of confetti, the carpet being replaced by cars

in this case. I continue to follow the colorful traces for several blocks, until I hear music and the noises of a crowd. I rush into that direction and an explosion of sounds and colors is revealed behind the buildings.

It is a carnival float from which clowns throw confetti in the air and wave. The music follows the procession, some upbeat children songs mixed with disco and pop music, that I think I recognize from my childhood memories. Some other face-painted people play with the children whom are accompanied by parents, handing balloons to them, and dancing. There is an older man, alone, carrying a small backpack, who follows the crowd from a margin. After some more rounds, I see that on the street sign is written Via Artisti and I remember that here I should find the Senza Paziienza Infoshop, Askatasuna's documentation center, as it is mentioned in the description on their Facebook profile. I stop there because I wanted to buy the book curated by the social center, recently published, on their take on the NOTAV militancy and consult the collection of books on counterculture and social struggles. The place is closed, so I wait some minutes, hoping it will soon open.

The older man whom I saw before in the 'carnival' approaches me and asks me why I am sad. I try to explain it is early March and it is still really cold outside and I am tired, having to wake up early in the morning in order to catch the train from Meana to Turin. As in almost all the other interactions I had during my research, I have to mention where I am from and what I am doing there. We realize that we both come from Romania, so we switch the language of conversation. I told him I am waiting for the infoshop to open and he moves his hand in a slow way, the Romanian body language for "you will have to wait long for that". He tells me his story, that he is a *barbone* (homeless), he came to Italy many years before, so he knows what is happening in that neighborhood. The people who work in that shop, they are the ones who organized the

parade. He points to the end of the street and mentions that they come from there, from that building covered in drawings. But I should better do something else, from his perspective, because on Saturdays the shop opens late in the afternoon.

Grateful, I go down the road, where I finally find Askatasuna. The gates are open, I can hear the music from the outside and I see a constant flow of people coming and leaving. I enter and I see all the windows and doors of the building wide open, NOTAV flags hanging and graffiti with subversive content all over the walls, in the same setting with more costumed characters, children, and tables covered in home-made snacks and drinks, with no specified price, but as it says on a small poster, donations are welcomed. I mingle, talk with some of the people with the painted face, about the occasion and I find out more about *Ludoteca Populare*, one of their initiative developed for the kids in the neighborhood as an alternative educational space. The atmosphere is playful; it is an atmosphere of joy, relaxation and celebration, rather than one proper for a discussion on the NOTAV. I will have the chance to do that during my time in the valley.

## **Reflections on anarchism and geographical imaginations**

I proceed, by using Springer's (2012) manifesto for anarchist geography, on a reflection on self-managed social centers' practices and how these play out around anarchism as strategy. This, even if it has been both keen of violent and non-violent actions, in the concrete case of the social centers, involved in the NOTAV movement, has been deployed mainly as an attempt to use direct actions as constitutive of new subjectivities. It opened up the space for rejecting hierarchies, while insisting on high degrees of solidarity and a radical perspective of politics. Plus, it created the conditions of possibility for rhizomatic assemblages and a regime of representations that strives to

include the ones made invisible or silent by the partitioning of the police order. As Springer states, anarchism offers alternative geographical imaginations

“understood as kaleidoscopic spatialities that allow for multiple, non-hierarchical, and protean connections between autonomous entities, wherein solidarities, bonds, and affinities are voluntarily assembled in opposition to and free from the presence of sovereign violence, predetermined norms, and assigned categories of belonging” (1607).

In this sense, it can be said that it is a manner of militating for a non-violent mode of action, since the main aim of the self-managed social centers is the rejection of exploitation, institutionalization and domination, inherent in the disciplinary logic of governmental structures. The solution portrayed by Springer is the adoption of a radicalized version of democracy (not a system of rule, but a mode of power) which conceives the political as permanent means without ends, in the form of an agonistic space (relational and processual). It suggests the shift from antagonism to agonism, from which violence, since it implies some form of domination which runs counter to the very nature of anarchy, is eliminated. This anarchist vision presents politics as the disruption of the governmental order, through dissensus. Its grounding in the space of appearance connects it to direct action, as anarchist praxis.

The case of the self-managed social centers is extremely intriguing, if situated in the context of the NOTAV movement, because of their translation of the personal into the political through their strategies of direct action, self-management and capacity to create extensive networks with the use of information technology. Relevant for this account is Harvey's (2001) debate over the notion of militant particularism, in his attempt to point out the dialectic relationship between universality and particularity. The latter concept, if translated into universal principles, can codify a common political agenda for different grassroots movements and connect them to a

broader terrain of struggle. The result is new tools to reimagine and reconstruct the social world, as the main aim is to change ourselves by changing the world.

He insists on the necessity of a long revolution, since the personal is political, which means that the field of the everyday life - as local solidarities and collectivities - has to be penetrated and brought into the public contestation of the existing order. This is possible when multiple militant particularisms intermingle into a coherent discourse, which can be embedded in wider politics. This particular grassroots movement therefore, can be said to function as a mediator, more precisely as layers of mediation, between different actors, the possible socio-spatial orders envisioned, and change, since the militant particularism is seen as a translation of the personal in the terrain of politics. Following from this, I argue that self-managed social centers function as unmediated spaces for contestation. The strategies used by these actors, organized as direct actions, point at spatially grounded contestation, extended in networks of resistance, and take on the performative dimension of emancipatory politics.

Performing a spatially grounded expression of social justice, resistance practices gain an element of subversion that integrates the creative acts of Askatasuna activists into a heterotopia which offers the possibility of becoming. Rossetto, one of the militants, as he prefers to call himself - rather than activist - because it implies sacrifice, commitment and organization, brings the idea of possibility into focus. He uses the example of the times when he saw written on the prison walls: “meglio un cattivo processo che un bel funerale” (better a vicious trial than a nice funeral) as being the best advice he could give to any revolutionary or autonomous militant. This is because the purpose of autonomous politics is to be inside the movements, be inside the conflicts in order to continuously build moments of institutional clashes that lead towards cracks in the capitalist power relations. The perspective of radical politics, as means and not ends, is based on praxis, on direct

actions that use the urban as counter-hegemonic mediation layers that allow for dissent and difference.

The attempt to the decolonization of the everyday life is not only about the personal; it tells a more complex story of a field of experiences connected to a network type geography of contestation, that rejects and tries to disrupt hierarchical visions of organization, domination, exploitation, institutionalization and violence. Therefore, in the conclusion of this analysis, I claim that through their forms and modes of being political used by the Askatasuna in the context of the NOTAV movement, the activists create new sites and scales of struggle and emerge not as beings already defined and distributed according to a certain regime of representations, but as beings in the making. They redefine multiple possible ways of positions that are assembled, generated, distributed and incorporated in a rhizomatic spatiality. As Rossetto puts it: “Who are we? We are a reality of autonomous militants, working, constructing and planning alternatives in a capitalist metropolis – our city of Turin”.



## Passeggiatta in Clarea<sup>17</sup>: the locals take on (over?) the valley

I used this specific subtitle, because every time a group which is not from the valley visits the NOTAV committees, one of the main activities that are planned is the promenade in Clarea. I consider this to be an attempt from the militants to narrate their resistance through a spatial experience. My initiation on the territory of the struggles was set in that exact same space. Two years later after the events described in the intermezzo, I return to Meana. I can notice that the sign is still on the mountains and the number of flags increased significantly. On the walls of the town hall and in the parking lot I could see more NOTAV graffiti. I walk along the main street, *Colle delle Finestre*, which is part of the *Giro d'Italia* route, and I see the same protest signs displayed everywhere, even on the garbage bins.

My host, this time, has an entire collection of news articles about the issue and promises me she will introduce me to her respectable friend, a former school teacher, who is supportive of the cause. I read about a new demonstration so I decide to take the train to Chiomonte, the next stop of the railway from Turin to Bardonecchia, and participate to the protest. I arrive half an hour earlier and I explore the surroundings. Immediately next to the station there is a stand with clothing items, flags and accessories with the NOTAV inscription. In the other corner of the square, there are some leaflets, books and brochures. Anarchism, communism, revolution, struggle, freedom are some of the keywords. On the grass, people are painting their faces, preparing the flags, putting on t-shirts with the NOTAV symbol.

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<sup>17</sup> Promenade in Clarea

There are groups everywhere, nobody stands alone. I am amazed about the diversity of the people, from children to teenagers, adults, elders and an impressive number of dogs, with NOTAV scarves. It is Sunday and the atmosphere makes me think about a friendly gathering. More and more people arrive somewhere further from the train station, at the intersection of the national road and the entrance to the town center. There is a bar, as well, so everyone stops for a coffee, an ice cream or a sandwich. *I carabinieri* arrive in large numbers, and people start taking pictures of that contrasting image; the blue helmets next to the multitude of flags.

The crowd starts organizing and we descend to the narrow streets of Chiomonte. In front of the procession, there is a band singing partisan songs. Some of the locals greet the crowd, others just watch passively. When we are about to leave the town - the entire walk took less than twenty minutes - everyone starts singing *Bella Ciao*, an Italian partisan song from the Second World War. As I was to experience it later, this is a recurrent happening, since one of the main historical legacies of the valley is the resistance against the fascist regime, during that time. It is a story about freedom, about defending the territory and the mountains against the invaders, a comparison that will further appear during my fieldwork.

At the confines of the town, on the road sign that marks the exit from Chiomonte, it is written NOTAV. From this point on, more and more signs of the protest movement appear. We cross some fields, under the Turin-Bardonecchia highway built in the '80s, another artery which connects the valley to France. As I was told in my interviews, it is a strategic point for the NOTAV protesters. The core of the initial opposition, formed at the beginning of the '90s, coincided with the one which tried to stop that project. There are people camping, some more join us from the tents. The crowd is heading towards the construction site but soon we are stopped by the police forces. There is a checkpoint right next to the field which they bought collectively from the

Chiomonte municipality, where they set up a NOTAV presidium. Unfortunately, I had to run to the station, to catch the last train back to Meana, only to return there, once again, in August 2012, during the annual summer camp. Organized under the slogan *La valle che resista* (The valley that resists), one of the posters (see Figure 3) published on the notav.info website mentions that from June to September the valley is open for struggle. Besides the evening gatherings of the popular committees and the assemblies, there are various visitors who come to share their knowledge. There are other squatters, the actors from an occupied theater which had been closed down by the authorities, students.



Figure 3: NOTAV Camp Announcement (*notav.info*)

Everything that is needed is provided, improvised showers, electricity, there is even a bar that sells beer, wine, soda and a special fair trade Ubuntu cola, reference to the open source software. The ones who have cars always give a ride to those who came by train and have to reach the town. A small river passes by, at the end of the camp, and I usually sit there, after lunch, when nothing in particular happens. There are cooked meals every day, no money is required for food, but of course, donations are welcomed. After finishing, people still talk for hours to each other. When they decide it is the time to do something else, one by one, everyone goes to the two sinks that were provided, and washes their own dishes.

Usually, after a debate or a lecture on resistance of any type, subversive actions, and updates on the situation of the Turin-Lyon project, there is a concert or music is turned on and people start dancing. Almost as a ritual though, the nights end with a group of protesters going to confront the police forces who guard the working sites and attack the checkpoints with stones, or simply cut the fences. Then, most of them, familiar with the small paths of the mountains, disappear in the woods. It is easy to see what is happening from the camp, but I never got closer than what was a position comfortable enough, from which I can follow the interactions, without any risks.

### **Mirroring movements: policy, territory, resistance, in between the hammer and the sickle**

The Turin-Lyon high-speed railway is integrated in the TEN-T priority project number 6, the railway axis which starts from Lyon and has to reach the border with Ukraine, through Hungary, expression of the need for a policy of co-modality. The attempt to facilitate the procedures for the implementation of the trans-European transport networks was translated, at the European Commission's level, in a dual-layer approach to planning, consisting of a comprehensive

(all the existing and planned infrastructure) network and a core one. The latter, as the 2011 proposal mentions, overlays the comprehensive one and it includes the strategic projects for a multi-modal mobility network. Methodologically, it has been divided in core network corridors, each corridor having to meet the following requirements: it has to include at least three Member States and transport modes, and have at least a cross-border section. The corridors are considered to be priorities because they address the most important components of the TEN-T: bottlenecks, missing links, cross-border sections and multi-modal nodes. For each corridor a platform had been devised, a governance entity with a legal status, that brings together all the stakeholders involved in the project.

In this chapter, I focus explicitly on the Turin-Lyon high-speed railway, a cross border section (defined as having the highest European added value), which was devised with the purpose of connecting the two urban nodes. The railway includes a 57 km base tunnel from Saint Jean de Maurienne in France, to Susa, on the Italian side (where an international passenger station is to be built), and links with the historic lines that were upgraded recently. For its construction, Lyon Turin Feroviaire (LTF) was created in 2001 - as a joint venture of the both states' railway companies - that had to acquire the areas in which the construction sites are to be initiated, and offer the proper compensations. On the Italian side, the explorations for the tunnel are situated near Chiomonte, in the Maddalena municipality, the preliminary project being approved in 2011 by CIPE, the inter-ministerial committee for economic planning.

There is a constant movement of the most representative NOTAV initiatives, in the valley, as a spatially embedded mirroring movement of the located and relocated construction sites, and of each modification brought to the project. It is relevant for this to emphasize the fact that once the working site was established in Chiomonte, most of the major NOTAV demos and initiative

were directed to that particular part of the valley. This is the case with the annual summer camp that until 2011 took place in Venaus, the permanent NOTAV presidium and the violent confrontations between police and protesters after which the Free Republic of the Maddalena was proclaimed. A similar situation happened in 2005, after the surprise attack of the police of the Venaus permanent presidium, in order to prepare the territory for the preliminary explorations, which lead to the occupation of the terrain for the construction site. This encounter is celebrated in the history of the NOTAV movement as the Free Republic of Venaus. Some days after the police managed to push away the protesters, a demonstration is organized, from Susa to Venaus, at which an estimated number of 30.000 people participated. They occupied the land, pushing aside the fences protecting the site, and re-established the presidium.

The movement is not only locally based, directed by the popular committees, established in all the NOTAV municipalities, which can be described as organized, but weakly structured, groups that get together based on a territorial belonging, using protests as ways of opposing the exterior interventions to the quality of life. It also cooperates closely with environmental organizations, opening the path to proposals for a sustainable development and environmental justice, the movement starting as a technical assembly – Habitat. Squatted social centers and autonomous students' collectives are one of the newest groups integrated. The capacity for mobilization is linked to the augmentation of the discourse that NOTAV appropriates, making it easier to insert new claims that could represent a larger range of people – opposition to the far-right movement, defense of the environment and the demand for better workplaces, the struggle against privatization and the pursuit of social justice. As Perino beautifully puts it: “The NOTAV struggle it’s not just no tav: it became contagious because it represents a radical critique of the system”.

By looking at the structure of the organization, it can be noticed that there is a certain coordination of the movement. First of all, the local administrations of the villages in the valley had to decide whether to support or not the project. The process through which this decision had been made consisted in establishing meetings of the mayors with the popular committees. This separates the different villages and towns in the Susa Valley in two categories: NO or SI (pro) TAV, with each of it having its own agenda and plan of action. The earlier described coordination becomes more evident when the protests against the project become protests against the state and its process of policy-making.

The contradictions that the struggle try to stress result from the recent cuts that the Italian government, faced with the European debt crisis, made to the public budget, while further sustaining the expenses for the Italian part of the high-speed railway that will not benefit the valley. One of the main fears is that the valley is becoming a transit zone, a services corridor, an extension of the metropolitan area. It also reveals that the protest becomes even more complex, from a territorial conflict, to an opposition against a multi-level governance that diminishes the legitimization of the decisions, because it sets an even greater distance between the institutional processes and the citizens, as it becomes obvious from the slogan “La valle e nostra” (The valley is ours).

In the same time, each violent confrontation meets a reaction from the authorities. After the Venaus incident, the 2003 preliminary project had been abandoned, and in 2006 a Technical Observatory was established, as a response to the opposition of the inhabitants of the valley<sup>18</sup> as it is revealed in the Progress Report (2012: 68) on the implementation of the TEN-T priority projects. The chairman’s role, Mario Virano, was to take into consideration all the concerns and opinions

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<sup>18</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/transport/themes/infrastructure/ten-t-implementation/priority-projects/doc/pp\\_report\\_low\\_final.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/transport/themes/infrastructure/ten-t-implementation/priority-projects/doc/pp_report_low_final.pdf)

uttered on the railway project, as the fundament for a new preliminary project that had to be presented to all the interested parties. The concept of phasing the works is introduced, therefore the works on the tunnel are postponed and the focus moves to connecting the historic railway at Susa. The exploration works for the tunnel are situated near Maddalena. After the 2011 (the already mentioned) opposition, the Berlusconi government issued the decree which reiterates the strategic interest the Turin-Lyon railway represents for the Italian economic development. In January, next year, France and Italy sign a new bilateral agreement, in Rome, and Monti announces the full support of the project from the government's side.

The police makes use of diverse strategies and violent methods to stop the demonstrations, which consist mainly of occupying highways, construction sites, railways, cutting off the fences that mark the places through which the future high-speed train will pass. Starting from the summer of 2011, the construction site had been put under a special law, making it in this way impossible for the protesters to continue with the tactics deployed until that moment. Blocking the highways and the railways, and occupying the construction sites have proved efficient for the NOTAV movement, but under the new law, the militarization of the area started (della Porta & Diani 2006), with more and more people being arrested or being banned from the region of Piedmont. The situation can be better understood by making reference to Agamben's (2005) concept of state of exception, "the opening of a space in which application and norm reveal their separation and a pure force of law, realizes a norm whose application has been suspended".

This means that in order to apply a norm it is ultimately necessary to suspend its application, to produce an exception. In every case, the state of exception "marks a threshold at which logic and praxis blur with each other and a pure violence without logos claims to realize an enunciation without any real reference" (40). By resorting to this, the provisional and exceptional



measure is transformed into a technique of governance. There is a biopolitical dimension of the state of exception that Agamben stresses, in the sense that the original structure in which law encompasses living beings offers the possibility of radically erasing any legal status of the individual, producing an unclassifiable being, through its own suspension and it defines the law's limit.

Around the same time, the Lyon-Turin Corridor Platform is established as an expression of the efforts to manage, in a more efficient manner, the corridor – the existing line, the new railway link and the road parts. The platform brings together the European Coordinator, Laurens Jan Brinkhorst, the Technical Observatory, the European Commission, national, regional and local authorities, LTF, Transalpine and Transpadana (these two being agencies which represent the interests of industry and future beneficiaries of the railway). These levels also represent, roughly, the main targets of the NOTAV institutional critique, as it is revealed in the section “Nel cantiere di Virano”<sup>19</sup> (on Virano’s construction site) of the NOTAV webpage, which contains all the articles and the documentation that function as evidence of the absurdity of the project (from the protesters’ perspective).

When Virano came to Susa, in February 2013, to present the final version of the project, a NOTAV demo was organized. The protesters were furious because the access to the press conference had been restricted, and they were unsatisfied with the fact that only those supporting the project were allowed to attend. The area around the castle where the event was held, was surrounded by police forces and fences. It was not allowed to cross beyond the limit imposed, unless one could prove is a resident. I cannot estimate how many people were there, but the small

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.notav.info/tag/nelcantieredivirano/>

square in front of the church and the school was full. As always, almost everyone present had a NOTAV flag or scarf. People got tired after hours of waiting, and outside it became colder and colder. At that point, people who were close to the fences, facing the police, started talking to them. Everywhere around me I hear different versions of the same question: how come they can defend the interest of the politicians, of the corrupt ones? They should join the people's side and fight for the future of the territory.

From time to time, the police forces are changed by the newly arrived. There is no reaction from the other side of the barricade. Someone starts playing the accordion, some folk songs, and a group initiates the dance. The others clap, following the rhythm of the music, smiling at the view. After this ends, and there are already fewer people, a woman makes jokes, speaking loudly in the *piemontese* dialect. I do not understand what she is saying, but I notice that everyone listens to her and laugh, from time to time, somebody replying shortly. Some people start screaming: "Giù le mani dalla Val Susa!" (Take your hands off the Susa Valley!). It goes on like this for some minutes. It gets darker and there are only around twenty people left. In a corner, the woman, now silent, is accompanied by a teenager who carries a red flag with the hammer and sickle. When I leave, I see on the other access route to the castle, some youngsters, displaying the NOTAV symbols, hiding behind some cars. As I read later, some of the car tires of the ones who attended the press conference had been cut during that Saturday.

## Concluding Reflections

At the end of my ethnographic journey I consider the statement “We are all Black Block”, coming from the one who is designated as the leader of the NOTAV movement protest, to be extremely relevant. When Perino made this statement in Turin, the crowd, which was almost entirely hidden under a multitude of white flags with the NOTAV red letters, started cheering and applauding with an extreme enthusiasm. What happened in that particular moment summed up all the information I gathered from the protesters’ side; it emphasized the collective indignation, the fierce opposition to a project that is perceived as a countless invasion of an outsider, as in the times of the partisan resistance against fascism. The barrier between what is legitimate and what is not, becomes blurred. It is highly dependent on the articulated practices instantiated in the moment of confrontation. Based on their claim to the right to defend their territory, the police forces and the authorities supportive of the high-speed railway project become illegitimate agents of domination and repression.

The European infrastructure policy is based on a spatial imagination which aims for interconnectedness, fluidity, smoothness. Because it is a cross-border section, considered as having high European added value, the Turin-Lyon high-speed railway, integrated in the priority project number six, becomes the expression of the transition from a fragmented space to a coherent distribution of elements. Since the Susa Valley is situated in between the two urban nodes, its inclusion in the policy hints to the valley as not integrated, as a spatial barrier to the European competitiveness based on social and economic development. This is exactly what the protesters reject, the vision of the valley as a corridor, a space in between which is just the extension of the metropolis.

The NOTAV supporters reject the geography of intervention drawn through maps and statistics. This is why, the promenades in the valley, through the forests and alternative roads, are used with subversive intentions. The official documents do not include those, it is a type of knowledge that comes out of a direct interaction with the mountains and the valley. The protesters transform that knowledge in tactics of resistance, space and a counter-geographical representation of it becoming their main ally in the opposition. The type of knowledge included in the countless reports on the negative effect of the drills on the water resources, on the alarming levels of uranium and asbestos of the mountains, or the statistics on the increased demand for efficient traffic networks can be reproduced by the authorities. What is specific only to the NOTAV people is the intimate relation they developed with the territory, the strong identification to its sinuous striations, which from the perspective of a single European market have to be smoothed out.

This is not all that can be said about the overlapping between the policy, territory and resistance. The protest and the first proposal of a European transport network go back for almost 20 years. The struggle went through fluctuating cycles of intensity, adapting its tactics based on the required context. This is why I talked in the last section about the mirroring type of movements, which refers to the NOTAV events not only as reflections, but also as dependent and produced by these type of police orders they reject. Since I clearly mention that place in this research is taken as a moment articulated in networks of social relations and understandings, I consider this paper as the translation of the specific assemblages I identified during my analysis. In the end, the attempt to grasp a particular unfolding of movements and events and put it into a partitioning of the sensible may seem painfully similar to a reversed *détournement*.

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