

CHAPTER 4

‘AN UNJUSTIFIED REVOLT’

Italian Political Discourse and Chinese Migrant Resistance to Inspection Culture

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INTRODUCTION

Since all men are ‘political beings’, all are also ‘legislators’.

—Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*

In what ways does contemporary political discourse limit or expand rights? In this chapter, I draw on ethnographic research to parse the ways in which official political discourse appeals to common sense to rationalize an inspection regime and demonize migrant resistance. I take as the object of analysis political discourse connected with a series of events culminating in a protest that turned violent in the heart of metropolitan Tuscany after Chinese migrants clashed with Italian health inspectors and riot police. What is it to negate or justify political protest? This case study has implications for the knowledge production of contemporary anthropology and for understanding the epistemologies of quotidian life. It extends the anthropological study of Italy to a transnational scale.

Two noteworthy events – a fire and a protest – frame this chapter. These events are remarkable not only for their tragedy and violence but also for the political discourse and reactions they generated. This chapter begins with the fire, situates the event in anthropological methods, moves to the protest and then analyses the inspection regime that developed in between. The narrative arc connects the two events as new political discourses emerged.

This chapter resonates with a number of others in this book as they contribute collectively to an intimate understanding of the migrant experience in Italy. Migrant experiences are often assumed to be similarly ‘othered’; instead, we learn that their experiences are deeply varied, whether in terms of the ways in which migrant youth express their feelings (Tuckett), refugees encounter state-sanctioned incompetence that leaves them undocumented and vulnerable to European racial hierarchies (Mahmud), or migrant survivors become enlivened through regenerative discourses that foster an ecology of life on Italy’s deadly southern border (Grotti and Brightman). Provocative are the contrasts in bureaucratic practice, as well as in different forms of resistance, perspectives and meaning-making. Migrant alterity becomes less a monolithic mass and more a floating fragment (see Jhally et al. 1997).

THE POLITICS OF FIRE

On 1 December 2013, around 7 o’clock in the morning, flames swept through Teresa Moda, a small fast-fashion factory in the heart of greater metropolitan Tuscany. The fire killed seven Chinese migrants, who worked and lived in the space. Initially, I followed the happenings from afar. An investigation revealed that the facility had barred windows and lacked emergency exits. The small firm, located in the Prato industrial district known as Macrolotto 1, included sewing machines and clothing pieces as well as a mezzanine where workers used dormitory-style rooms separated by plasterboard to sleep or take breaks (Revelli 2016). Somewhat ironically, the factory was located in Via Toscana – indexing the association between Tuscany, the Renaissance, the Made in Italy brand and all things beautiful. Reports described smoke quickly filling every corner of the workshop, thus rendering in vain any attempt by the workers to find their way out. The seven victims died through asphyxiation. Responses to this deadly fire repositioned institutions, stimulated new political alliances and accelerated workplace safety and surveillance practices (Krause and Bressan 2014; Bracci 2016: 310).

The fire had a strong impact on international public opinion (Krause and Bressan 2014), occurring as it did the same year as the collapse in Dhaka, Bangladesh of ‘Rana Plaza’, an eight-storey building that housed garment subcontractors and took the lives of over a 1,100 victims. Although far smaller in scale, Teresa Moda upended the notion that ‘Made in Italy’ meant dignified working conditions. International coverage intensified concerns. Textile and fashion industry representatives expressed worries about the Made in Italy brand’s international reputation, which has generally proven resilient even in a globalized fashion market.



Figure 4.1. A fast-fashion warehouse in Prato. © Agnese Morganti.

For example, a cartoon circulated on the internet that depicted singed shirts and dresses hanging on a clothesline with a Made in Italy tag. The image played on the common English idiom of hanging dirty laundry out to dry as it referenced damage to the label's reputation, suggesting that the cartoon was directed at an international anglophone audience. Meanwhile, television, print media, film, and garment activists reported on the complex layers of subcontracting and hidden immigrant labour behind even luxury name brands (Clean Clothes Campaign 2014).

In the weeks that followed the Teresa Moda fire, alliances swiftly forged across the political spectrum in the name of security. Anti-immigrant xenophobes suddenly joined forces with pro-immigrant politicians. At a discursive level, both sides positioned themselves as humanitarian supporters, accusing Chinese migrants of exploitative working conditions that mirrored slavery. On the policy front, the event mobilized Tuscany's Regional Council to promote greater levels of safety in the workplace and greater protection of the dignity and health of workers (Decision No. 5 of 16 December 2013; Bressan and Krause 2017; Krause and Bressan 2014). The fire accelerated workplace safety policies and charted new ground as it extended to a wider political territory than was customary (Bracci 2016).

More than six months after the fire – to be exact, some 203 days – I attended the heart-rending public funeral of the victims, in a parking lot



Figure 4.2. The funeral of the Teresa Moda fire victims (21 June 2014).
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across from the hospital where I had conducted fieldwork with migrant parents and their infants.

The funeral was the saddest day of my fieldwork. Local dignitaries joined about three hundred mostly Chinese migrants. Attendees sat in folding chairs facing six coffins, overflowing with flowers and identified with names and photos of the deceased. The memorial service combined Christian, Buddhist and secular elements: military wreaths of state; official flags; Buddhist bells; evangelical hymns. Young women handed out long-stemmed gerbera daisies to greet attendees. A charismatic evangelical preacher offered condolences. The mayor and other dignitaries called for increased workplace safety measures. A choir led the singing of ‘Amazing Grace’, familiar to Chinese evangelicals and to me, a lapsed Lutheran, but not to my Catholic-raised Italian sweater-maker friend. The most moving part of the ceremony occurred when everyone was asked to bring their white daisies to the front to place them on a coffin. This was followed by the survivors going to the front to mourn their loved ones. Women wailed and wailed; men mourned quietly. One woman was so overcome with grief that she had to be treated by paramedics.

The near six-month delay offered a symbolic contrast between the time it took for one of the most fundamental of human rites and the breakneck pace at which these migrant worker-victims toiled. The temporality suggests that something was terribly wrong – that the value of their lives was almost as inconsequential as the clothes they made. The message from a memorable

handwritten sign, ‘Sorrow Has No Colour’, appearing in the *New York Times* (Povoledo 2013) rushed through my mind. The event revealed that there *was* a colour to sorrow: its hues were saturated by a global economic system that demands cheap and super-flexible labour to make possible trendy clothes at bargain prices. The message conveys that all humans regardless of their colour or creed experience sorrow. The sign asserts humanity in the context of a brutal system of racial capitalism.

This chapter takes seriously the insight that ‘hurricanes and earthquakes do not make history; people’s conceptions of such phenomena, and responses to them, do’ (Farnetti and Stewart 2012: 432). The fire stimulated a formidable inspection regime with profound changes in the political discourses and policies concerning migrant workers in a city known for its thriving post-war economy and population boom, as well as its contemporary concentration of transnational labour and births to ‘foreign’ women (Bressan and Tosi Cambini 2011; Baldassar et al. 2015; Krause 2018). As an inspection regime gained momentum, Chinese migrants responded with political organizing and bold resistance.

In many ways, the multitude of responses was unexpected and thus invites reflection. This chapter focuses on the politics surrounding ‘crisis’. It departs from the fire, takes stock of the surveillance regime and analyses the political discourse surrounding a protest that turned violent as Chinese migrants clashed with Italian health inspectors and riot police. In particular, the chapter takes as its object of analysis the contrasting evaluations of the protest: Italian political discourse described it as an ‘unjustified revolt’ whereas Chinese observers stood firm in the view that the protestors’ actions were fully justified.

ANTHROPOLOGY AS A BASTARD DISCIPLINE: UNDERSTANDING AND CRITIQUING WORLDS

In centring political discourse related to two events, this chapter opens a window onto contemporary dynamics of Italian public life. A goal of the anthropological project has long been to illuminate and critically contemplate worlds as they are and as they might be (Crehan 2016; De Martino 1977; Hurston 2018; Tsing 2015; Willis and Trondman 2000). In a sense, anthropology has always been a bit of a bastard discipline. Its methods have been questioned as lacking in reproducibility. Its modes of knowledge production have been viewed as quirky and genre-bending. Geertz (1988) famously described it as mulelike: part lab report, part romance. Its positions have often been accused of being contrary and troublemaking. What constitutes legitimate political engagement? Who decides when politics

become stigmatized as illegitimate? How do borders and regimes that reproduce them shape these logics?

The metaphor of bastardy, with its underlying tensions between legitimacy and illegitimacy, is productive to think with. In *Bastards of Utopia*, Maple Razsa's (2015) account of alter-globalization political actors makes use of the term 'bastards' to underscore how certain political subjects are produced as debased. These actors' politics and desires transcended state borders. Their modes of political engagement subverted what Razsa has described as a nationalist version of culture that tended toward being unified and bounded. They were bastards precisely because of the way in which they affirmed instead a sense of culture that was not exclusionary but rather steeped in do-it-yourself, or 'DIY', sensibilities and collectivities.

Razsa's project brings to mind Antonio Gramsci's ideas about political participation, especially the insight that everyone is a legislator: 'Every man, in as much as he is active, i.e. living, contributes to modifying the social environment in which he develops . . .; in other words he tends to establish "norms", rules of living and of behaviour' (Gramsci 1971: 265). The idea that every person is a legislator has always struck me as profound. Establishing norms does not happen exclusively in parliamentary and congressional procedures but also through quotidian practices. Gramsci suggests that not only lawmakers make laws, but that everyone does so. Core to our species being is to be political – to contribute to the social environment in which we exist. In contributing, we are constantly remaking that social environment.

Of course, the naked truth is that rights vary widely in a globalized world of nation states and borders due to a range of statuses, from those who are incarcerated or carry the burden of a felony conviction to those who are undocumented and thus have limits to their participation in key institutions, those who are residents but without full citizenship rights, and those who assume substantial care work due to choices or limitations (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Krause and Li 2020). Nevertheless, all humans are subject to the cultural revolutions of ongoing state formation as they follow laws or defy them. Corrigan and Sayer (1985) argue that capitalist development and state formation are deeply linked, and that together they create a moral ethos that shapes mindsets and leans towards validating the inequalities of bourgeois society. In this sense, quotidian acts are deeply political. These acts can also reveal core values and a given population's relationship to politics and civil society. Participating in a protest as an exercise of one's fundamental rights may be riskier for certain individuals than for others. Thus, at the end of the day, the stakes of negating or justifying a protest are high.

Of course, Gramsci knew in an embodied sort of way about political subversives. He was writing from a prison cell because he had criticized and threatened the Fascist regime, a fact that suggests beyond a doubt that he

was poignantly aware that all political engagement was not equally legitimate in the eyes of the state. All men – and all humans – have the potential to be political beings, but all humans are not in a similar position to realize that potential. Gramsci distinguished between different degrees of power, such as that held by ordinary people as opposed to by state actors. This latter group, elected or career, ‘have at their disposal the legal coercive powers of the State’ (Gramsci 1971: 266).

In sorting out the case of the protest and its evaluation in political discourse, it is important to frame all participants as political actors. That said, there are significant differences in their roles as ‘legislators’. The most significant difference is access to state coercive powers. In the case of the protest discussed below, Italian elected officials had coercive powers at their direct disposal whereas Chinese migrant protestors were directly subjected to those coercive powers, although they eventually reached out to the consulate for intervention.

ENCOUNTER ETHNOGRAPHY AS METHOD

My analysis draws on insights from various periods of ethnographic fieldwork extending back to the mid-1990s with in-person and virtual stints continuing into the present (see Krause and Bressan 2020). Beginning in 2012, I served as principal investigator for several years on the transnational collaborative project ‘Tight Knit’ focusing on Chinese migrants working in the fast-fashion industry in greater metropolitan Tuscany. I spent 220 days across seven trips between 2012 and 2015 as the project’s principal investigator conducting urban ethnographic research at various sites and events across the city, its industrial district and nearby *frazioni*, or villages. Ethnographic data derived largely from two different types: unstructured, in the form of participant observation and socially occurring discourse, especially in a hospital paediatric ward as well as at public events, and semi-structured, in the form of audio-recorded interviews with Chinese as well as Italian participants (N = 72). Conference participation and short-term field visits have continued into the present as much as possible. Prato and its sprawling province, which cuts across post-war industrial districts and picturesque hill towns, serve as a laboratory of globalization (Krause 2015; Krause and Bressan 2018).

The idea to examine inspections articulates well with the innovation of *encounter ethnography* as a method. I conceptualized encounter ethnography as a methodological strategy to guide a team-based transnational collaboration. Encounter ethnography offers an approach to conducting research as well as a tactic for enriching analysis. In the legacy of ethnographic research,

many anthropologists have described encounters to emphasize experiences or processes that are at odds with one another, as in the phrases ‘colonial encounter’ (Asad 1973), ‘development encounter’ (Escobar 1991), ‘inter-cultural encounter’ (Sahlins 2000), ‘clinical encounter’ (Ferzacca 2000), ‘fieldwork encounters’ (Borneman and Hammoudi 2009) and ‘activist encounters’ (Razsa 2015).

Rather than leave encounters to the realm of common sense, our team nurtured encounter ethnography as a theoretically informed framework. Considering encounters as points of interpenetration and mediation enriches interpretations grounded in local contexts yet with global dimensions. The approach takes inspiration from Eric Wolf’s (1982) billiard ball critique of the culture concept, Anna Tsing’s (2015) call for the arts of noticing and Ernesto De Martino’s (1977) sensibilities related to analytic categories and observational paradoxes. The approach offers value for understanding relationships between immigrants, majority populations and global systems. How do the ways in which people are entangled in global supply chains bind people together or tear them apart? How do security or health systems underwrite or undermine belonging? Multiple senses of belonging may be rendered invisible through urban segregation patterns, heightened security and criminalizing discourses. In this sense, I see encounter ethnography as a methodological positioning that works against the sorts of divisions coursing through many societies the world over.

THE OSMANNORO PROTEST: JUSTIFIED OR UNJUSTIFIED?

Three years after the fire, its after-effects on the relationship between migrant workers and local authorities were still being felt. A hostile inspection is what supposedly triggered protests near Prato. On 29 June 2016, Italian public health (ASL) inspectors entered a large workshop in Osmannoro, a commercial area in the Commune of Sesto Fiorentino on the outskirts of Florence. They were accompanied by law enforcement. Public versions varied from social media to news accounts. *La Repubblica* emphasized a scene involving shouts, shoves and clashes; the arrival of inspectors, then riot police, ignited a fuse that set off tensions and erupted in protestors throwing stones, bottles and cans. Sirens blared. Seven were reportedly injured. Protesters raised the Chinese flag in a show of solidarity (Serranò et al. 2016). Even the mainstream press acknowledged contrasting accounts of what initiated the protest. All versions agree that there was a baby in the fray. An Italian account suggested that the Chinese factory owner pushed the inspectors and police, using a baby as a shield; the Chinese community offered another version of the story.

The Chinese blog 华人街, or *huárén jiē* (referring to Chinatowns scattered around the world), circulated a version of events based on eyewitness accounts as well as numerous photographs. When inspectors arrived, in addition to encountering workers, they also met a visitor: a man of about 50 years holding his ten-month-old grandson. This grandfather figure had stopped by to visit a relative. When the man noticed the inspectors, he tried to leave, but the officials ordered him to stay inside. The man protested, a scuffle ensued and the baby fell to the ground. The grandfather, shaken and angry, reportedly bit the hand of the police officer who was blocking him, at which point other agents intervened, pushed him to the ground and wounded him on the head. In less than an hour, hundreds of Chinese citizens arrived at an open lot, just walking distance from the large Ikea store in Florence. Protests continued late into the night and violent clashes took place with law enforcement and riot police.

Versions of the underlying cause of the protest vary wildly depending on the observers' point of view – from that of the firm owner (who was later arrested) to those of the Chinese protesters and those of Italian officials.

The blog *huárén jiē* circulated images of injured protestors. In one, a Chinese man is pictured in the foreground, sprawled on the pavement, extending his arms above him, holding his left wrist with his right hand; a Carabinieri (military police) van looms behind him flanked by an imposing row of riot police with helmets and shields.

The image conveys a sense of vulnerability. In another, a Chinese man lies on a stretcher in front of an ambulance surrounded by Italian emergency responders as a crowd of Chinese bystanders watch.

The Chinese blog Mobile Phone Abroad Forum (手机留园), popular among overseas Chinese, reported the results of a poll about the Osmannoro clashes. In just a few hours, more than three thousand readers participated, mostly Chinese migrants living in Italy, but also those based in Zhejiang with family in Tuscany, as well as former migrants themselves. The survey asked, 'Considering the tension between Italian Police and Chinese people, what do you think?' Although the survey was hardly scientific, it arguably represents a quotidian form of political participation. The results suggested that a large majority viewed the protest as justified whereas a minority of respondents supported a calmer approach:

- 26 per cent (797 respondents) believed that the 'Chinese people were not very calm. They should rationally request for protection of their rights and respect the local laws.'
- 74 per cent (2,253 respondents) expressed the view that 'Italian police were too cruel. Chinese people should be united and fight back.'

Another line of evidence that demonstrates how the Chinese migrant actions were seen as justified came in the form of two screenshots from WeChat, the most popular social media platform in China, which appeared on the Overseas Chinese Street Forum on 30 June 2016:

The battlefield is at the backdoor
 The police came to get fines
 No problem,
 but they found some problems to get fines on purpose
 The ambulance came
 The final witness came out
 The worker swore at the police, *cazzo*, no money
 The policeman handcuffed him, then he bit the police
 Later, four policemen came and violently beat him
 The witness said she was so scared,
 and apologized on her knees,
 then the police lightened up a little.
 Asked the police to leave first
 Somebody took photos, but got deleted by the police
 There were few people behind
 He was at the empty ground at the back door,
 some people were trapped in the factory,
 some left before.

(Translation by Ying Li)

The reference to a ‘battlefield’ indicates the fierceness of the conflict, the intensity of the stakes and the determination of migrants. In a sense, the idea that the ‘battlefield is at the backdoor’ itself suggests how the migrants were living this fight on a daily basis. Describing the conflict as a battlefield situates the Osmannoro protest not simply as a pursuit of benefits or rights, but as a claim of community protection given a collective sense of being unfairly targeted and violently treated. Just as Gramsci predicted, the workers’ protests were ‘legislating’ new norms as they pushed back against the practices of a racialized inspection regime.

By contrast, Italian officials questioned the legitimacy of the resistance and attributed the spontaneous mobilization to the Chinese mafia, thus reinforcing a stereotype of migrants as criminals who negate civic life and refuse to integrate (Lem 2010). The audacity of this attribution becomes clear as one recalls the history of the mafia, especially in southern Italy, but also the extensive anti-mafia movement throughout Italy in recent decades (Schneider and Schneider 2003). A detail that most struck political commentators and officials was the speed with which hundreds of Chinese individuals assembled in protest. It is to that temporal detail that I now turn.

Two days after the Osmannoro clashes, the President of the Region of Tuscany, Enrico Rossi, known for his role in promoting the quick

implementation of the Safe Work plan shortly after the Teresa Moda factory fire (discussed below), declared: 'If there are excesses in the controls, there is a right way to respond.' He described the protest as 'an unjustified revolt', and emphasized its 'dimensions', saying: 'it makes me suspect it was planned. . . . If I had to summon 30 people here in two hours, I could not succeed' (Il Tirreno 2016). Describing the protest as an 'unjustified' reaction dismisses not only its legitimacy but also the very rights of the participants as political subjects. A few days later, on 3 July, Prato's chief prosecutor took his turn to highlight the speed with which the protest went from just a few to hundreds of demonstrators, underscoring 'the fact that the Chinese community of Prato mobilized within a very short time and moved to Sesto' (Notizia di Prato 2016). For the investigation, he assigned an expert to analyse information on smartphones, tablets, computers and other devices seized during searches.

The hypocrisy of these statements and assumptions deserves to be highlighted: labour unions and political parties are often quick to mobilize. Had the workers in the factories been Italian, one can imagine that the Italian labour unions would have organized at least a local if not a national strike. Chinese workers have tended to avoid participating in the labour unions, however, and this refusal has created complex tensions between the unions and migrants.

Among Italian officials, awareness of the intensity and complexity with which migrants use the internet and smartphones was apparently low despite there being a range of studies, even promoted by the European Commission itself, to highlight the significance of mobile devices in integration processes related to social life and citizenship (see Codagnone and Kluzer 2011). Surprising consequences result from low awareness of social media. On the one hand, common sense leads to the belief that Chinese immigrants rely on an efficient network of relationships, or social capital, and hence express a fair degree of autonomy over public practices and policies. On the other hand, this belief promotes an attitude of exclusion: their ability to organize economic activities and social life is read as a denial or refusal of integration (Lem 2010).

The consequences of exclusion are significant. Ultimately, it is through such cultural logics that a large number of individuals and officials came to the conclusion that the spontaneous mobilization could be attributed to only one thing: the actions of the 'Chinese mafia'. Otherwise, observers reasoned, how on earth would it be possible to get so many people to show up so quickly?

'SAFE WORK' AND THE COMMON SENSE OF INSPECTIONS

Questioning the protest, in terms of how quickly so many people showed up, became possible in official political discourse as a new common sense. This common sense was in turn built on a new control apparatus. The apparatus took the form of a campaign dubbed 'Lavoro Sicuro', or Safe Work. In the most fundamental way, this campaign can be understood as a step-by-step construction of a security apparatus, involving protocols and inspections, that intensified after the Teresa Moda fire.

A bit of context is crucial. Inspections are not new. They are deeply entangled with modern nation states. Archival work related to demographic shifts led me to research the history of weavers and wet nurses in rural Tuscany (Krause 2009) and unveiled the report of a labour inspector who in 1893 lamented the gruelling work of *trecciaiole*, or straw weavers (Krause 2005: 36). Vanessa Maher's (1987) oral history of seamstresses in Turin noted the Italian Labour Inspectorate's inquiry in 1911 into the health of workers in dressmaking ateliers. Anthropologists among others have theorized inspections, most prominently related to border inspections of people and things (Briggs and Mantini-Briggs 2002; Carter 1994; Chavez 1998; Chu 2010; De León 2015; Kearney 1991; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013), but also in the context of value and quality control (Tsing 2015), workplace safety and chronic illness (Qureshi 2019), immigration and demographics (Hampshire 2005) and food and public space (Nowak 2012).

My encounters with inspections while conducting fieldwork come to mind. For a stint of about six months during my dissertation research in 1995–97 in the province of Prato, I worked in a family finishing workshop attaching buttons on sweaters. It was a world of subcontractors, of diffuse industry (Becattini 2001). I still recall Italians complaining about the *bolle di accompagnamento*, the invoices that had to accompany all orders or the firm could be fined for tax evasion. I recall people in my orbit being extremely stressed by these controls, which represented a crackdown on *lavoro nero*. This form of informal economy was widespread in those years.

Inspections morphed as Chinese migrants settled in Italy and not only operated various garment cut-and-sew machines but also assumed management and ownership of small sweater firms and, more importantly, fashion workshops, whether in the fast-fashion or luxury fashion supply chain. At the time of the fire, Chinese migrants reportedly owned nearly 45 per cent of Prato's manufacturing businesses. When considering all foreign-run enterprises, recent data suggests that Chinese citizens managed 6,202 out of 9,079 firms in the province of Prato (Camera di Commercio Prato 2019). As of 2023, *stranieri* (foreign residents) made up 24.8 per cent of Prato's population (46,154 of 194,848 residents), well beyond the national average of

8.5 per cent residents who are non-Italians. The vast majority of non-Italians in Prato hold Chinese passports (64%). At least 74 per cent of resident foreigners have origins in Asia (Comune di Prato 2023). When undocumented migrants are included, estimates rise substantially in terms of the number who live in the city and its surrounding municipalities. Chinese entrepreneurs and workers make substantial contributions to the Made in Italy sector, especially fashion but increasingly food. These contributions are also often contentious; labour leaders report trying in vain to convince workers to join unions and fight for better conditions.

The tone of surveillance became increasingly militant, with helicopter raids and armed forces, in the 2000s under the right-wing mayor Roberto Cenni and an anti-immigrant security minister who served a five-year term beginning in 2009. On the evening of 27 June 2014 – on the heels of Cenni’s defeat – I attended a dinner at a *circolo* in San Paolo, a working-class neighbourhood of Prato that since the 1960s had attracted migrants from southern Italy and since the 1990s from overseas. I befriended an Italian woman who worked as an inspector of quality control for a French company, and I recounted in a fieldnote her heartfelt description of seeing Chinese migrants and their families put out on the street with just their suitcases. The police raids and the round-ups mortified her. They brought to mind, she said, other bad times in Europe, such as when the Nazis were in power.

This affective disposition and accompanying visceral image enlivened my ethnographic sensibilities. I still remember the moment when I set eyes upon a large poster on the side of a bus stop announcing ‘Lavoro Sicuro’, a campaign for Safe Work.

Two young adults, one male and the other female, presumably Chinese migrants, had features that complemented the text, written over the human forms, in Chinese characters with Italian translation beneath:

LA SICUREZZA DI OGGI È IL BENESSERE DI DOMANI
(Today’s security is tomorrow’s well-being)

I remember photographing the image and sending it to my colleague Massimo Bressan. In light of our ongoing conversations about inspection culture, I was struck by the appearance of the campaign in public space and its positive framing in terms of public health and workplace safety. It occurred to me as an instance of political discourse disguised as a public health campaign. In essence, it was a classic instance of a war of position in the making. On the surface, the message seemed innocuous. The campaign played into common sense in terms of health and safety. There was nothing blatantly nefarious about this campaign. The workers were depicted as attractive, the setting was clean and modern. In small print appeared a rationale in both Chinese



Figure 4.3. The Safe Work Campaign, Region of Tuscany. © Elizabeth Krause.

and Italian with a justification and a warning: ‘Rispettare le regole e lavorare in sicurezza protegge i lavoratori dagli infortuni. I controlli per la salute e la sicurezza sul lavoro continuano.’¹ (To respect the rules and work in safety protects workers from injury. Inspections for workplace health and security continue.) Still, something about the messaging struck me as questionable.

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I had a flashback to my days working in the sweater-finishing firm and wondered at how strange it was that in a factory city where Italians still made things, a campaign primarily targeted immigrant labour. Workers, namely transnational ones, had become culprits. No longer were the Italians represented as the ones evading taxes. As one former Italian sweater-maker said, like the chorus of a song, *'siamo noi i cinesi – we are the Chinese'*. The metaphor reminded me that Italians and Chinese had occupied similar structural positions in a globalized fashion industry but at different moments in time.

How did a public campaign that seemed so well-intended on the surface lead to such heightened anger, protest and violence? Some dots need connecting. What the campaign does not convey is how inspection practices morphed into a veritable inspection culture, a surveillance apparatus that became mainstream and targeted a foreign population. It is as though the inspection regime served to uplift Italian society and distance its citizens from a history of performing work 'in nero' – sometimes associated with possessing semi-feudal social relations tainted by mafioso criminal activity (Schneider and Schneider 2003: 9).

My colleague Massimo Bressan, as lead author of our co-authored article 'La Cultura del Controllo' (Bressan and Krause 2017), deserves credit for sorting out the complex history of the security campaign. The apparatus built on the Patto per Prato Sicura, formalized in 2007, underscored 'economic crimes': Article 8 explicitly refers to behaviours that unlawfully hinder mechanisms of free competition, namely the counterfeiting of trademarks and patents, the irregular circulation of money and the exploitation of workers without a residence permit. Over the course of years, various agencies became involved. Indeed, a veritable consolidation of operations occurred. A provincial functionary came to coordinate the entities: local and state police, finance police, the territory's labour directorate, the public health agency, the revenue agency and local branches of other state entities. In 2009, an interforce entity was established to coordinate the inspection activities, which coincided with the election of Prato's first right-wing mayor since the fall of Fascism. The pact was due to be renewed in 2013, just two months before the Teresa Moda fire, with the goal of reasserting the objective of controlling 'fair competition' in the labour markets. The fire, however, fuelled a shift in the security regime.

The Lavoro Sicuro campaign of 2014 expanded to a wider political territory than was typical, extending its reach to the sprawling Florence-Empoli-Prato-Pistoia urban area. Indeed, the council approved the 'Extraordinary Three-Year Plan for Workplace Security Measures' (Appendix 1 to Delibera 56 of 28 January 2014). The plan sought to strengthen controls aimed at clandestine and informal economy labour and to reduce risky enterprises. The region approved an EUR 12 million package to substantially increase

inspection efforts and hire seventy-five new public health ‘prevention inspectors’. The goal was thus set to triple inspections (Bressan and Krause 2017).

It is important to underscore the fact that, in practice, the Region of Tuscany’s new security apparatus focused almost exclusively on Chinese-owned or managed firms, whether through inspections or campaigns. In the two-year period beginning September 2014 and ending May 2016, public health technicians completed 5,826 inspections. Sanctions resulted in substantial fines: from an annual average of less than EUR 1 million to EUR 2.6 million by May 2016. Inspections progressively extended their scale to the entire metropolitan area. As the Regional Plan enacted its shift in emphasis from economic crime and unfair competition to risk profiles for health and safety, its inspectors focused their gaze on the following: non-compliant dormitories, electrical systems and gas cylinders. Textile trash arose as a major concern. In a subsequent phase of the Safe Work campaign ending in 2018, 7,404 Chinese firms versus seven Italian firms were inspected (personal communication, Director, Disease Prevention, Central Tuscany Department of Health, 3 April 2018). The targeting of Chinese firms became a source of consternation among local Chinese residents. As a way to quell the rising tensions, the official Region of Tuscany website announced that the subsequent phase of the *Lavoro Sicuro* project included a ‘fruitful collaboration’ with the consulate of the People’s Republic of China in Florence and representatives of the Chinese community.

The way that various institutions were drawn into the security project offers an excellent example of a modern form of power (Wolf 1999). Foucault (1978) refers to regulatory controls as a ‘bio-politics’ of the population that unfolded in an era of ‘bio-power’. This form of power operates through diverse mechanisms and dispersed networks – what in *Security, Territory, Population* Foucault names an apparatus, or *dispositif*. The apparatus has a disciplining and normalizing tendency that works on bodies and spaces, on life itself. ‘Discipline is essentially centripetal’, Foucault wrote in a Collège de France lecture in 1978 (Foucault 2010: 44). ‘Discipline concentrates, focuses, and encloses.’ It also produces new behaviours, new senses of self, new forms of resistance and new narratives. It powerfully shapes a new common sense. In the context of Prato, the common sense fuelled a heightened surveillance regime that targeted Chinese migrants.

REFLECTIONS: OTHER MEANINGS, OTHER BASTARDS

Once upon a time, a bastard referred to a child born out of wedlock. The term was convenient for condemning a form of unsanctioned intimacy. I picture the wheel at the Spedale degli Innocenti in Florence that once served

as a collection point for infants whose parents abandoned them (Kertzer 1994). Such children were considered illegitimate in terms of their claims to resources, such as inheritance. In a similar vein, the new actors of global supply chains have more often than not been rendered illegitimate subjects of the territories upon which their labour happens.

Thinking with bastards opens up connections to other ‘illegimates’. Such illegitimacies produce tensions. They also produce questions: Who is permitted political agency? Under what conditions? What are the limits of legitimacy? And when legitimacy hits a wall, what does its opposite, illegitimacy, expose?

As I have argued, the Teresa Moda fire prompted a reconfiguration of the security apparatus to emphasize health and safety. In *Gramsci's Common Sense*, Kate Crehan (2016) argues that all common sense is not good sense. Indeed, I want to suggest that the inspection regime itself became a sort of common sense in a war of position that sought to criminalize migrant labour. I use the term ‘inspection culture’ because it became taken for granted that conducting the inspections in the name of safety was good sense. In fact, the way in which it was operationalized suggests a racial apparatus that perpetuated the intensification of inspections.

The ethnographic encounters described here bring to light how Italian authorities attempted to displace onto Chinese foreign workers the negative stereotypes of Italian labour itself: illegal, under the table and run by the mafia. ‘The hypocrisy here is obvious, but the political strategy is remarkable’ (Lilith Mahmud, personal communication). What might it be to think about fire as an epistemological category? Fire is the ultimate force of destruction, yet from ashes spring new life. In this sense, the fire created the possibility of renewal for Italian politicians to remake Italy as ‘secure’. It is as though a security-fuelled Renaissance generated political discourse to cleanse and rebirth the Made in Italy brand.

Reading these events opens up space for understanding political alternatives. The protest itself serves as a reflection of emerging political identities – complex, ambiguous and fragile. Many Chinese residents in Tuscany’s metropolitan area live in a liminal space between legality and illegality. They have felt frustrated. Their resort to protest came from the margins of legality. And yet there existed legitimate reasons behind their protest: standing up against the intensification of the inspections and the brutal tactics of law enforcement. Concerns about the coherence, integrity and effectiveness of political discourse remain at the heart of Italian public life. Political discourse ultimately is a manifestation of everyday dynamics and power struggles. As Italy struggles with economic crisis, migration dynamics and an ageing population, understanding a single event in context shows how Gramsci’s reflections from a prison cell may continue to illuminate the ways

in which all people ultimately have the potential to legislate and shape their social worlds.

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NOTE

1. The website provided on the poster was originally regione.toscana.it/lavoraresicuri, but recent attempts to access it resulted in a 'not found' message. A current link from the Tuscany Region website still references the inspections but with different content. See 'Lavorare Sicuri' (n.d.).

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