Italy: the 'Safe Cities' project

Rossella Selmini explains the political context in which crime prevention projects have emerged in Italy.

The roots of *'Città sicure'* (Safe Cities) is a project of social crime prevention created in 1994 by the regional government of Emilia-Romagna, an Italian region that has traditionally been known for its progressive political and social orientation. *Città sicure* is best characterised for being situated at the juncture of two social trends. On the one hand the project developed in response to the emergence of 'crime' in Italy as a major feature of public discourse. On the other, it unfolded during a major shift in the Italian political landscape marked by the request of local powers (especially regions and cities) to play a much more decisive role in relation to central government. The juncture of these two trends defined *Città sicure*, because the level at which the issue of crime emerged was the day-to-day level of local life, much better known and managed by local and regional government than by the central state.

Recently in Italy the emergence of 'crime' as a central question of public debate took place alongside a crucial transition from a society strongly divided along class and political lines to a society where the working class became incorporated inside the established system of governance. A number of social processes began to unfold in the 1970s. First, the role of the police started changing from being a public order force engaged in the repression of the Left and the working class to a force that is supposed to deal with 'ordinary' crime (Della Porta and Reiter 1996). Second, crime as represented in official statistics, and especially property crime, increased dramatically (Barbagli 1995). Third, socio-economic change empowered the organised working-class but at the same changes also brought its nemesis: the 'post-Fordism' of industrial decline, dilution of the work ethic, etc. Fourth, a general process of class fragmentation ensued, marking both a deep decline in the self-definition of large sectors of the population as 'working class', and increasing symptoms of social disorganisation especially among working class youth such as the emergence of a drug culture and drug market after the mid-1970s.

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The phenomena of fear and 'moral panic' have only recently become relevant in the public field and political agenda. In the second half of the 1970s and in the 1980s, institutions, public opinion and political parties directed their attention towards the Mafia and related forms of organised crime, and especially towards political terrorism. In both cases, Italy experienced the outbreak of a widespread moral panic and the emergence of a law-and-order campaign, accompanied by a strong law enforcement tendency in criminal policies. Even then, public opinion did not demand tougher punishment, the death penalty, and so on. The alarm surrounding Mafia activity and terrorism neither extended to other less serious forms of crime, nor gave rise to a widespread feeling of lack of safety, such as we are experiencing today.

According to Massimo Pavarini (1994), both concern about crime and demands for safety remained low because demands for political change and democratic participation channelled whatever feelings of fear and insecurity may have existed. Consistent with such views one should note that in Italy there have been two strong increases in the recorded crime rate, the first in the 1960s and the second in the 1990s (Barbagli 1995; Colombo 1998). A rise in fear of crime and social alarm developed only around the second of these in the 1990s, together with a decrease in political and social participation.

From a journal to a programme

How did the political and the institutional context react to rising crime rates and the developing fear of crime? For a long time, the safety issue did not enter political competition. The right-wing parties certainly included in their agenda concern for public order, but as a concept unable to embrace the new forms of urban insecurity. In Italy it was the Left that undertook discussion about concern for safety. This was strongly connected to the emerging role of local governments within a political and legal system traditionally based on national centralisation.

In 1992, the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS) in Bologna launched a magazine, promoted by researchers, academics, politicians and local administrators, called *Sicurezza e Territorio* (Safety and Territory). It was through the pages of this journal that the concepts of safety and of a 'new' crime prevention policy developed and spread, at least in northern Italy, but above all in the Regione Emilia-Romagna. The first issue of the magazine showed the influence of Jock Young and other British proponents of 'Left realism' in its introduction of strategies such as the importance of taking crime and fear seriously; attention to victims (a category which has traditionally been neglected in the Italian legal system); the search for communitarian mobilisation; the importance of the 'local' rather than the 'central'.

From its very beginnings, matters of safety were strictly related to the aim of extending principles of autonomy for regions and cities vis à vis the central state and they became part of a more general struggle for federalism. Central in the Italian case is that institutions that had never been involved in crime control strategy began to struggle for the recognition of new fields of intervention, and the central state initially opposed and resisted this tendency, so that safety issues became central not in the struggle between political parties, but between central and local government.

Sicurezza e Territorio ceased publication in 1994: times were ripe for the move from promoting strategy to local implementation. In that same year the regional government of Emilia-Romagna started the programme called *Città sicure* which represented the first Italian attempt to develop a general programme about urban safety and crime prevention through research, promotional activities, and co-ordination of new strategies. In its guidelines (*Comitato scientifico di Città sicure* 1995), safety is considered one of the most important tasks of local governments, despite the fact that these institutions have no criminal policy jurisdiction whatsoever.

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In relation to social policies, by contrast, local governments cover a large field of intervention, together with socio-health institutions – the ASL, *Aziende sanitarie locali*. ASL are the main local structures of the Italian national health system. They are managed by regions and have many competencies related to 'safety' policies, for example in the treatment of drug addicts and of young people considered 'at risk'. According to the principles of *Città sicure*, the place for safety policies is to be found partly in an already existing framework of competencies (which we could term social prevention) and partly in a new area of intervention for local authorities, in which the right to live safely is considered a public good akin to other citizens' rights, the responsibility for which rests with local government. According to *Città sicure*, the main actor in safety policies should be the mayor, who, following the electoral reform of 1991, is now elected directly by the voters.

Other guidelines elaborated by the scientific committee of *Città sicure* recall directly some of the basic principles of 'Left Realism': the need to take crime and feelings of lack of safety seriously; the importance of giving power and visibility to victims; the importance of research in a mixture of quantitative and qualitative investigations; the attention to the differences between the needs and resources of women, men, immigrants, children, adults, etc.; and finally, the need for 'partnerships'

among the various levels of government. During the following years, the programme has developed: a great deal of research about crime and related social phenomena; a strong impulse towards projects managed directly by cities; a central role in stimulating the national public bodies (police, ministers, prefects) toward introducing the new vocabulary of safety and the new strategies of crime prevention in their everyday work; the training of new safety professionals (co-ordinators, mediators, etc), of local and national police, and of social workers; and the mobilisation of community participation.

Public policies: from research to development

At the end of the 1990s, Italy witnessed the beginning of a new phase of public safety problems and policies. Safety issues became the object of political competition in public discourse. All recent electoral campaigns (both at the local and at the national level) have focused on fear of crime and in most cases the parties of the Right have been successful in including safety issues in their manifestos — paradoxically, in a country in which safety policies originated in Left local administrations. Public discourse and the media are now dominated by debates on citizens' fear of crime and violence: a concern (very often related to the presence of undocumented immigrants) which is dramatically increasing in Italy, despite the fact that in the last two years crime rates are falling for the first time since the end of the 1970s. Finally, safety policies are now also part of local public policies: almost half of the 103 largest Italian cities now have a 'safety programme', usually based on a mixture of social and situational measures (Martin, Selmini, 2000). Meanwhile the debates about the legitimacy of municipalities in dealing with law and order issues appear to wane.

In the last two years, something has also begun to change in the *Città sicure* activities. The current focus is now more on the construction of an administrative and legislative apparatus for the management of safety policies than on research and promotion. This new trend is consistent with the renewed interest of politicians and local administrators in citizens' concerns for crime. For instance, in April 1999, the Regione Emilia-Romagna passed a law on '*Politiche regionali di sicurezza*', in which the whole system of political action about safety was outlined, starting from the basic principles described above. The main purposes of the law are to promote "pacific co-existence and safety in local communities", to support local governments and voluntary entities (associations, citizens' committees) that act locally on problems related to crime prevention, inclusion of marginal groups and immigrants, urban conflicts, assistance to victims and development of (local) police services. According to the general principle of the project, activities for crime prevention are supported only in the case that intervention on the effects of crime is strictly related

to intervention on causes of crime. Since 1999, 43 local projects managed by the municipalities or provinces have received regional support for safety action: 13 of them are represented by large and complex programmes, and they can be defined as 'experimental projects' . Also 22 associations of volunteers received financial support for specific safety actions. The sum awarded to safety projects in two years has been the equivalent of £15 billion. This is a peculiarity of the Italian initiatives for safety: a region is acting as if it was central government.

The Città sicure project, therefore, is now faced with a different political climate, in which a strong concern for crime is combined with the increasing tendency to rely upon short-term situational and technological preventive measures.

A second important development is an official agreement – signed in May – between the regional and the national government about safety. The two institutions have agreed on the joint management of some activities: the institution of a regional centre for the study of crime rates and of a regional office coordinating public calls for intervention (with consequent coordination of the activities of the local, central police and the carabinieri), and the establishment of joint professional training. The *Città sicure* project, therefore, is now faced with a different political climate, in which a strong concern for crime is combined with the increasing tendency to rely upon short-term situational and technological preventive measures. The new challenge for *Città sicure* is to resist political pressures for fast solutions and to maintain its primary principles: to protect both public 'safety' and public 'freedom'.

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Information on Safe Cities has already been published in D. Melossi and Rossella Selmini, (2000) 'Social conflicts and the microphysics of crime: the experience of the Emilia-Romagna *Città sicure* project', in T. Hope and R. Sparks (eds), *Crime, Risk and Insecurity. Law and order in everyday life and political discourse*, London: Routledge.

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