

‘Stay home you murderer!’: populist policing of COVID-19 in Italy

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Abstract

Italy was the first European country to experience the impact of COVID-19. In order to deal with the health emergency, in early March 2020, the Italian government enforced strict lockdown measures. The different Italian police forces, the Polizia di Stato, Carabinieri and city police forces (Polizia Municipale), patrolled the streets, ensuring that people stayed at home and non-essential shops remained closed. These police forces received unprecedented support from the public in enforcing lockdown. People were active in their neighbourhoods, taking pictures of alleged violators and reporting them to the police, as well as posting pictures of those violating the rules on social networks. Local administrators encouraged citizens to report lockdown violations and in the case of Rome, introduced an online reporting system. This article focuses on the policing of lockdown in Italy. The article develops the argument that public attitudes, defined as policing from below, combined with policing from above by local administrators, produced a populist policing of the lockdown. Qualitative methodology is used to discuss interviews with police officers and analyse newspaper articles. Populist political forces are hegemonising in Italy, relying on the feelings of insecurity that the virus has embittered. Populist hegemony strongly influenced the policing of problems related to COVID. The lack of community policing or plural policing models within the organisation of Italian police forces, which remain a combination of continental and colonial models, has been decisive in the development of populist policing. The consequence of this is a type of ‘policing on demand’, with the public providing the police with intelligence and demanding enforcement.

Keywords

Policing, coronavirus, Italy, reports, populism, organisation

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Introduction: policing and populism

Italy was the first European country to be seriously impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. From 7 February 2020, when the first cases were identified in Codogno, near Milan, the pandemic escalated to the point at which, throughout March 2020, Italy ranked second after China in terms of contagion and death toll. Such dramatic and abrupt spread of the disease caused the Italian government to hastily approve a decree limiting the movement of citizens (Istituto Cattaneo, 2020).

This article discusses policing of the COVID-19 lockdown from 8 March to 4 May 2020. First, the public helped the police forces. Reports of lockdown violations were conveyed in a plurality of ways. Alerts sent to the police by phone were combined with mobile phone pictures or by the

creation of social network pages showing lockdown violators. Here, we saw direct, mass public participation in policing activities, based on models combining different approaches such as policing on demand (Conover and Liederbach, 2015) and community-oriented policing (Makin and Marenin, 2017). Mobilisation of the public spurred on by the moral panic caused by the coronavirus pandemic helped the process of enforcement by Italian police forces. Thanks to community intelligence provided

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by the public via a wide range of tools (Bullock, 2010; Innes and Roberts, 2008; Sheptycki, 2003), it was possible for police forces to monitor accurately the public and firmly enforce lockdown measures. The legitimacy of policing (Tankebe, 2009) depended more on adherence to social mores by police forces (Clark, 2008), in this case moral panic about coronavirus, than on procedural fairness (Gilmour, 2008). The Italian coronavirus pandemic policing model is hereby defined as populist policing. This is because it draws on the current populist context dominated by the Five Star Movement (Laclau, 2005; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017) founded by the comic actor Beppe Grillo in 2007. Its standpoints consist of a law-and-order approach, conveyed through widespread use of the media (Stockman and Scalia, 2020).

Some authors (Mény and Surel, 2001) have outlined a taxonomy of populism, defined as three main political attitudes: (a) opposition to ruling elites; (b) the people as a nation with a homogeneous identity; and (c) the people as sovereign taking a stance against the corrupt elite. Since the early 1990s, when the 'Tangentopoli' corruption scandal brought about the collapse of the post-war political parties, populism has been on the rise in Italy (Ginsborg, 1992; McDonnell, 2006). First, the Lega Nord and eventually the Five Star Movement became governmental partners in 2018. Their anti-corruption stance is based on a law-and-order approach that consists of strengthening police powers and the enforcement of more punishment-oriented laws.

Populist policing comprises two parts. The first is policing from below, that is, those practises enacted by the public as a reaction to lockdown violations. Reporting police intervention coincided with the stigmatisation of violators by the media and with direct action by citizens, such as verbal and physical abuse. The second, populist policing from above, refers to practises enacted by local administrators such as mayors and regional presidents to encourage the public to invigilate lockdown enforcement. The mayor of Rome, for example, promoted an online reporting system. Others, like the mayor of Messina, used drones to insult alleged violators. This is discussed in depth below. Some authors (Loader, 2000) have proposed a descriptive taxonomy of the policing field, defining as 'policing below government' a model based on vigilantism, neighbourhood watch and citizen patrols. Populist policing differs from Loader's taxonomy insofar as it does not involve a neighbourhood watch and the role of public police forces remains central.

Therefore, contextualisation of Italian policing within politics is necessary, in addition to an illustration of the anti-COVID-19 measures issued by the Italian government. A description of the public health model adopted by the Italian government is related to the epidemic psychology

model (Strong, 1990) to explain how the pandemic triggered the rise of moral panic and boosted populist policing.

The analytical path used winds through a qualitative approach. In-depth interviews with lawyers and police officers across Italy are integrated with newspaper articles to provide a plurality of sources, enabling the development of a wide-ranging perspectives.

Anti-COVID policing measures in Italy: populism and epidemic psychology

In his model of epidemic psychology, Strong (1990) argues that when medical emergencies occur, emotions play a crucial role in shaping the strategies a society uses to deal with them. This was the case in Italy. The government chose to enact an immediate lockdown because of the abrupt escalation of the pandemic. Although dictated by the emergency, this choice neglected to develop and promote a public health model in which local communities could be involved in better management of the pandemic (Torri and Sbrogiò, 2020). Local governments were given powers to cope with the emergency, while police forces and the army were in charge of ensuring lockdown measures were enforced.

Decree No. 11/2020¹, issued on 8 March 2020, limited the movement of Italians. It was only possible to travel within one's city of residence, making necessary the possession of a self-written certificate (autocertificazione) stating the reason for being outside the home. Movement was possible only for work, health and family reasons, as well as for shopping. Exercise was allowed only within the immediate area around the home. Journeys within Italy were restricted and were limited to either workers moving across the country or those who had serious family-related issues. Only food, medicine, newspaper and tobacco shops were allowed to remain open, as were the offices of professionals such as solicitors, engineers, architects, dentists and doctors. *Io resto a casa* ('I am staying home') was the slogan the government chose to make sure the public reacted positively to the biggest restriction of civil liberties Italy has faced since the collapse of the Fascist regime.

Police forces patrolled the country to ensure enforcement of the decree. Police patrols consisted of three different types of activities. First, stop and search of people moving around, to make sure that they both had the necessary certificate and that their reason for being outside was compliant with the decree. Second, territorial control by the mobile division of the *Polizia di Stato* (*volanti*) who made sure that no-one congregated in public areas such as parks, which had been closed to the public, and checked that people who were gathering were doing so for justifiable reasons, such as queueing outside supermarkets or health-care providers. Third, police forces ensured that all non-

essential shops were closed. Violation of the decree was sanctioned by fines of 400 to 4,000 euros², with imprisonment for violators who had COVID-19. Patrols were concerned with compliance by those shopkeepers who remained open despite the prohibitions issued by the decree, which allowed only supermarkets, pharmacies and newsagents to remain open. Italian citizens returning from abroad had to undergo a two-week period of quarantine.

Decree No.11/2000 did not just entail a strict limitation of personal liberties; its constitutional legitimacy was questioned because it limited the liberty of movement granted by Article 16 of the Italian Charter. In fact, the COVID-19 emergency was dealt with through the use of government decrees, use of which should be limited, and without wide-ranging discussion in the Italian Parliament. Nonetheless, Italian citizens gave these limitations their widespread consent, actively cooperating with police forces to ensure that the lockdown measures were enforced. The enforcers, that is the Italian police forces, did not try to develop collaboration with the public. The Italian government did not implement any public health model by which collaboration between the police and the public could have developed (Murphy et al., 2008), following the same pattern as its predecessors. As a consequence of this, the continental approach of the Italian police forces continued, paving the way for populist policing.

From continental to populist policing: the unimplemented community policing/plural policing model

The Italian police consists of a plurality of forces: the Polizia di Stato, who patrol big cities; the Carabinieri, a military force who patrol the whole country; and the Polizia Municipale (city police), who work on local duties such as evictions, traffic, parking and shop licences. Police forces are centralised, following the continental model (Mawby, 1999), with strict government control coupled with an element of militarisation, like the French Gendarmerie.

Moreover, Italy's relatively recent independence (1860) resulted in a colonial policing model (Brogden, 1987). Northern Italian police officers dealt with the demands of southern populations through the use of special laws, such as the Pica Act against Brigands (1863). Frequent mass brutality, abuse and prejudice (Benigno, 2015; Mack Smith, 2000; Teti, 2000) soon alienated the southerners from police forces.

Centralisation and militarisation were emphasised by the Fascist regime (Canosa, 1976), as public order increasingly overlapped with political subversion. The post-War democratic state retained middle and high-ranking officers appointed by the previous regime and the authoritarian

laws that had been passed. The international political context of the Cold War and a culture of isolation within the Italian police (Della Porta and Reiter, 2003; Palidda, 2000; Reiner, 1997) increased the gulf between the public and police forces until late 1981. Under mass demands for wide-ranging political and social reforms (Ginsborg, 1992), demilitarisation of the Polizia di Stato was enforced. Police trade unions were legalised and their members advocated for dialogue with communities, although a 'critical threshold' (Della Porta and Reiter, 2003) continued to mar relations between police forces and some specific groups, such as militants on the political extreme-left and football supporters. Social, local and political differences, combined with a centralised organisation working within an authoritarian framework and through a staff appointed under an authoritarian regime, historically gave low levels of legitimacy to the Italian police forces until the 1990s.

The end of the 20th century marked a watershed in this respect. The end of the Cold War brought about the collapse of the Italian political system together with a serious economic crisis. A demand for security spread in metropolitan areas of the former 'industrial triangle', namely Milan, Turin and Genoa. Residents of working class districts formed spontaneous civic committees (Dal Lago, 1998; Nelken, 2001; Selmini, 1999). Protests against the presence of the homeless, Roma, illegal migrants and drug dealers in their areas soon evolved into the creation of spontaneous protection squads using violence against these new and supposedly dangerous classes (Bauman, 1999; Chevallier, 1977). Reports to the police soared dramatically as the press fuelled moral panic among the public (Cohen, 1971; Maneri, 2001); new political right-wing forces, such as the Northern League, the ex-neofascists of Alleanza Nazionale (AN) and Berlusconi's Forza Italia enhanced their status through a campaign of law and order. The right-wing coalition gained legitimacy across the north. The Ministry of the Interior, which controls police forces, was assigned to either AN or Northern League party members by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who ruled Italy from 1996 to 2001 and again from 2008 to 2011. Police raids against drug dealers, the homeless and illegal migrants spread across the country (Barbagli, 2001) as the Northern League founded its own *ronde padane* (Padan, i.e. Northern Italian protection squads) to force Roma out of the camps and chase prostitutes from the streets. Right-wing mayors took advantage of new electoral reforms that allowed people to elect them to order City Police forces to evict illegal residents and fine abusive market vendors, who were mostly migrants (Pavarini, 2005; Vianello, 2007).

However, the populist policing model of the right wing was counterbalanced by an attempt by some left-wing administered regions to introduce community policing (Skogan, 1989, 2004). Under the supervision of such

outstanding criminologists as Dario Melossi and Massimo Pavarini, the local government of Emilia-Romagna promoted the idea of *Città Sicure* (Secure Cities) that aimed for democratic management of policing and security. Joint committees, including police forces, academics and local administrators were set up. Facilitators were sent around the region to create local security committees and promote citizen participation in the management of public order (Selmini, 1999). Public meetings between residents, local administrators and police forces were organised to meet growing demands for a model that was more compliant with democratic laws (Shilston, 2015) and more respectful of minorities and marginal groups (Skogan, 2004).

This attempt to introduce changes in Italian policing was short-lived because it never gained the support of the national government. There were internal divisions over police reforms in both the centre-right and centre-left coalitions who ruled the country, and the growing securitarian attitude of Italian public opinion (Barbagli, 1999) discouraged governments from undertaking any changes in the structure of policing. Even the constitutional reform of 2001, giving regions increased powers, left both the organisation and the tasks of the different police forces unchanged. The recession of 2008 provoked a new crisis of legitimacy in the Italian political system, bringing about the rise of the populist Five Star Movement and growth of the Northern League, which has given up its own secessionist ideals (Baldini and Cento Bull, 2009). Both parties, drawing on public resentment of politicians, were satisfied with the continental/colonial police model that prevailed in Italy, rejecting any proposals for reform. The idea of police forces as organisations vested with special powers to clamp down on designated outsiders (Becker, 1963), that is, refugees, migrants, political activists, etc., on behalf of the people, became increasingly popular in Italy. The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated how the Italian public has been urging (Conover and Liederbach, 2015) police forces to comply with the demand for security.

Methodology

This article is the first stage of a wide-ranging research project on COVID-19 policing in Italy. A qualitative methodology was used (Altheide and Schneider, 2013; Schwartz and Jakobs, 1988), which from the outset was deemed the best way to develop the subject of this work.

In-depth interviews with lawyers and police officers across Italy form the primary data used in this study. The advantages of this method are manifold (Marvasti, 2004). First, interviews allowed the researcher to understand respondents' points of view, and how they make sense of the world. It thus became possible to delve into the routine practices and values of the participant. Second, because

there were no fixed questions to answer, respondents felt free to develop their views and provide the researcher with their feelings about the interview topic. Third, in-depth interviews disclosed the complexity of reality because participants reflected at length and expressed themselves freely, bringing to the fore the contradictory aspects within a specific issue. The choice of in-depth interviews for this work is related to the purpose of shedding light on the perceptions, feelings and opinions of the privileged witnesses.

Newspaper articles compliment the interview findings and provide the reader with a background to the context under discussion (Marvasti, 2004). The interviews were with nine police officers from Northern, Central and Southern Italy. All had long-term police experience and occupied middle ranks within the police hierarchy. The same criteria of geography and number were applied to lawyers. All the privileged witnesses were granted anonymity, following the informed consent model: participants were given a written form specifying that they had the right to choose whether or not to participate, that they were entitled to withdraw anytime and that their privacy would be protected. Moreover, lawyers were guaranteed that cases concerning their clients would be anonymised. Because of the pandemic, it was necessary to conduct the interviews online and so the locations of the cases discussed are not specified. The interviewed police officers are designated as follows: P1–P3 refer to Northern Italy, P4–P6 to Central Italy and P7–P9 to Southern Italy. The same designations are used for the lawyers: L1–L3 refer to Northern Italy, L4–L6 to Central Italy and L7–L9 to Southern Italy. Because the first six interviews were collected during lockdown, they were conducted using an electronic platform. After lockdown was released on 4 June 2020 it was possible to move across Italy to carry out interviews in person. Following requests from participants, particularly police officers, interviews were not recorded. This made it possible to avoid any issue of ethics.

Populist policing from below: reports to police

Although some authors, such as Giorgio Agamben (2020), challenged the Italian public to adopt a critical attitude towards the risks of a state of exception (Agamben, 1995), the majority of Italian public opinion sided with the government. A poll by the Demos Institute from June 2020 shows that 56% of Italians agreed with a limitation of liberties under exceptional circumstances. In another poll, commissioned by the Catholic trade union CISL a few months earlier and prior to the peak of the pandemic, the figure was 72%. This outcome contrasts with the view of the Italian Catholic Church which constantly expressed,

through its newspaper *Avvenire*³, its objections to the governmental limitations. Public approval for the anti-COVID limitations also resulted in widespread support for police action.

Because the media supported the government decree, police forces were deployed on patrols to ensure effective enforcement. Both the *Polizia di Stato* and *Carabinieri* made more than nine million stops between 8 March and 4 May, when the so-called Fase 2 (Stage 2) marked the gradual easing of lockdown. City Police forces (*Polizia Municipale*) were also active in patrolling the country, ensuring enforcement of mayors' ordinances (ordinances), which matched the restrictions ordered by the government. A total of 449,628 fines were issued for violation of the lockdown⁴.

In addition to patrols, intense reporting by the public took place across Italy. As two northern Italian police officers reported:

People have always been reporting here. We used to receive reports about attempted burglaries by Roma, migrants selling drugs . . . these weeks we have been coping with reports about the violation of lockdown. [P1]

It was not a novelty for us. This time, though, we had been dealing with a much greater flurry of reports than in the past, and this made us feel stressed, also because it added to our fear of being infected ourselves. [P3]

A similar attitude, although different from the usual trend, seemed to characterise the Southern Italian public according to officers in that region:

We were used to old widowers reporting about overnight parties (Italian law states that parties in private houses cannot last after midnight); these days have been a mess. Looks like everybody is eager to report about who was doing what. Maybe it is because of fear, but it is something unprecedented and unexpected. People used to mind their [own] business here. [P7]

Women had always been insulting us. They knew us for arresting their children or searching their flats. Now you see a group of them coming to the office and screaming. 'Hey', I said, 'it is not time to protest, there's something else going on . . .'. 'No, no' they replied, 'no protest. We just want you to help us. Someone regularly has barbecues in the building opposite ours . . . Please, do something! Do you want us to die?' [P9]

Officers in Central Italy also refer to the unusual number of phone calls and reports:

During the first days of the lockdown, we received something like 2,000 reports per day. It was too much to cope with. Our superior had to do an appeal on local media about reducing the

number of calls because we were unable to deal with all of them. After that, the number of calls slowly decreased to 300 in the last week of the lockdown. [P4]

You know, we have what we call our 'usual guests': old women complaining about their neighbours playing the music too loud. Residents reporting screaming from the door opposite theirs, hoping we will discover some violent crime thanks to their report. They are our regular guests. This time we had more 'guests' than ever, and, in a way, you feel responsible, because you could see people were just scared and worried. [P5]

We couldn't believe . . . there were people bringing pictures, videos, eager to show the evidence they had collected. A neighbour jogging. Someone ringing the bell late at night. Someone else going out. Very accurate investigations (laughs . . .). [P6]

All nine police officers shared the view of a widespread, unusual demand for policing during lockdown. In the case of Southern Italy, police officers faced an apparent, abrupt growth in their legitimacy among the local population. Local differences were overcome by a fear of the spread of coronavirus, triggering increasing demands for policing (Conover and Liederbach, 2015) that police forces were unprepared for, in relation to both their usual workload and their routine occupations.

Traditional policing matters – such as thefts, burglaries and robberies – were overshadowed by the demand to enforce lockdown. Not only did police forces face unprecedented demands, but they were also forced to change the focus of their ordinary practises, adapting their work to the rapid change in social mores (Clark, 2008). This is an important aspect of the demand for policing during lockdown as it appears that fear brought about a radical change of perception in the Italian population vis-à-vis the police:

Let me quote you some excerpt[s] from a report. There is a left-wing activist I have known for ages, as I met him when patrolling political demonstrations. The same person reported his neighbours partying during the lockdown, and this is what is stated in the report: 'you've got to help us. We are facing a human inhumanity (sic!), that does not care about sacrifices and renunciations, who does not care about the need of sacrifice to pursue a superior need . . . we must be on the same side against them.' I could hardly believe it was the same person who used to call me 'murderer' when he came across me after the violence occurring in Genoa in 2001. [P1]

Yes, one might not believe it. To meet political activists, who have a negative bias against you, here in the police office. And them telling you: 'this time we are on the same side. We must cooperate'. What?! I am curious to see how these people behave after all this is over. [P3]

Fear of coronavirus overcame the ideological divide across Italy as some left-wing militants regarded enforcement of the lockdown as a battle to defend public health:

A trade union member, reporting youths hanging out in the park outside his building, stated: ‘this is the new frontier of militant anti-fascism. Citizens and police must work together in the defence of public health’. [P4]

The justification that the current majority government has a centre-left component in the Democratic Party and the Free and Equals party (LEU) can only partly explain such a remarkable shift in public mood and perception. These reports show how police forces were being vindicated even by traditionally hostile sectors of Italian society. Demands to enforce the emergency measures ordered by the government became a priority, also reducing reports of other crimes:

The figures for reports about property crime and personal offences have never been so low for ages . . . who knows what is going to happen when all this is over. [P4].

We don’t know what’s going on here in the south. They say the mafia controlled lootings and property crimes. There were even less property crime reports than ever, anyway. But there also were unusual crowds of people ready to report alleged violators. From different social backgrounds. [P9]

Despite the abrupt rise in the numbers of reports, police officers assessed citizen collaboration positively:

You know, we are supposed to patrol the territory, so we mainly focused our work on the section of the government decree regulating the limitation of movements. We did not have a good grasp of what was happening inside: parties, barbecues. So, the reports of people proved a great help to us. [P1]

We mainly made sure that people did not come to the city centre and that they had the self-certification form . . . Reports were essential for us to have a broad perspective on how the decree was enforced in neighbourhoods. [P7]

The positive public reception relates to the need to gather information as a complimentary activity to patrolling of the region by police forces, which in this case was even more necessary to ensure that people both stayed home and did not gather to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. There is something of a division of labour, with patrolling of public spaces carried out by the police and controlling private places and behaviours enforced by the public. We are looking at a multilevel manifestation of policing, with the co-production of police practises (Makin and Marennin, 2017) entailing constant, active collaboration with the public, which strongly legitimises police work and actively provides public assistance.

I define this model as populist policing from below because it relies on a widespread demand for security by the public triggered by the COVID-19 emergency. The public is active in policing, such as spotting violations, trying to repress them and reporting to the police. This public cooperation is not the outcome of a planned and structured approach to policing involving citizens in the management of crime, as in the case of community policing. Individuals spontaneously reported to the police any alleged violations of lockdown, driven by fear of the virus spreading. As Tankebe (2009) points out, concern about the seriousness of a crime influences the public’s attitude more than their interest in the fairness of procedures. Insofar as the public demands enforcement by the police, demands for the outcome will be more important than the respect for procedures. Different authors (Bauman, 2006; Durkheim, 2000; Garland, 2003; Simon, 2007) note that demands for more social control and punishment are crucial resources regulating social relations during periods of deep crisis. The current demand for security has been fuelled by deep changes contemporary society over the past 30 years. Fragmentation, individualisation and more fragile social bonds have weakened public trust (Putnam, 2004), encouraging the emergence of a more punitive society. The coronavirus crisis, a health emergency risking the public’s survival, has led to an increase in demands for security. The Italian context is unique in this respect. First, throughout March 2020, Italy had the highest rate of COVID-19 cases in the world after China. In addition, policing in Italy has not developed community-based models, making direct, mass reporting the only way the public had to cooperate with police forces. Finally, the populist government and local administrations, as detailed below, encouraged the reporting activities of the public.

A combination of ‘ethical’ aspects, that is, respecting lockdown to prevent spread of the virus and the more functional demand to suppress violators, eliminated respect for procedures by the public, resulting in the public stigmatisation (Goffman, 1963; Foucault, 1976) of alleged violators without consideration for the presumption of innocence or respect for privacy. A lawyer in Northern Italy recounted his client’s experience in a middle-class district:

He is separated, but he has a son living in the other part of town. My client went there regularly to pick up his son from his ex-wife’s flat and spent a couple of hours with him. One day, he was surrounded by a crowd of people who obliged him to wait for the police. ‘Stay home, you murderer!’, they started shouting. Then, the police came over, and they were given pictures of him parking the car, ringing the buzzer. Pictures they had taken days before! They thought he had a mistress there. My client showed the police his self-certification form, but he did not have a pleasant

afternoon... Now we want money for defamation, aggression, and violation of privacy. [L1]

I think there is no sufficient knowledge of the laws. People are almost enthusiastic; they feel powerful with their electronic devices. Someone should explain them that such crimes as defamation and assault are prosecuted by the law. [L2]

Things were not very different at the opposite end of the country. Runners were targeted for violating lockdown because exercise was allowed only around one's own residential block. A young man spotted jogging on the beach of a Southern Italian city was forcefully stopped by a group of neighbours from the area who insulted him and forced him to wait for the Carabinieri, who were shown footage produced by the accusers:

He lived a couple of blocks away. I agree that he violated the lockdown as he was running half a kilometre longer than allowed, but this recalls lynching. Someone patrolling the street, others taking pictures, others blocking him, and then calling the police. Everything organized! Do they have a licence to do it? Ok, they do not have weapons; they called the police, but it is an outright aggression and violation of privacy! [L7]

Another case probably has more to do with voyeurism than with public safety:

My client works outside the city. His wife had moved to the new flat just before the lockdown. Neighbours did not know him. He came home when the lockdown was enforced. He found the entrance cordoned off, and an aggressive crowd ready to beat him: who are you? Why are you disturbing the lady here?... it's exaggerated, really. [L4]

All these cases make a crucial point, the reports were not accidental: pictures and videos of alleged violators were taken regularly, someone spotted 'violators' through a window, and others intervened to block the violator and call the police. None of the reporters belonged to either a political group or a protection squad. This was a spontaneous, self-organised practise. Moreover, in both cases, there was verbal aggression and physical restraint, but there was no violence towards violators. The public contacted the police, who were recognised as the legitimate authority to deal with the violation. This is similar to another case, in Central Italy, which is different from the other two:

My client accidentally found pictures of himself going to the supermarket and walking down the street. Locals had given him a nickname and slandered him because he went out every day for shopping. Other pictures, concerning other people, were on the same Facebook page. They [locals] had nothing [else] to do, so they had time to take pictures, but now we are promoting a collective judicial action. It is a crime, and you must face the consequences of it. [L4]

The point raised by the lawyer is relevant to our discussion: why did the public feel the duty to cooperate with the police? Banfield (1982) and Putnam (1985) exposed different degrees of civic duty in different Italian regions. In the age of lockdown, civic duty-related differences have apparently been overcome, and the public has even self-organised to cooperate with the police. It is unlikely that a sudden rise in civic duty could have occurred in such a short time, especially after the changes in Italian society discussed previously. One reason for populist policing might be lockdown itself. People observed and reported others to compensate for their own passive state. This leisure-oriented explanation is not sufficient, however, as it needs to be situated within the social and political context. Participation by the Italian public in the policing of coronavirus might appear to be an original form of policing on demand (Conover and Liederbach, 2015). It follows the pattern of evolving social mores (Makin and Marenin, 2017), because the dominant mood in March and April 2020 was one of fear. It does not follow, however, a structured pattern of a public, negotiated and agreed-upon policy. Fear was manipulated by political exponents, particularly at the local level, who played a central role in encouraging the public to report violators. In other words, this was not a negotiated participation, but rather a request for information that was answered positively by the citizens, who provided the information necessary for the police forces to suppress lockdown violations. Thus, Italian policing of the coronavirus pandemic might be defined as community intelligence (Bullock, 2010), encouraged from above. The cooperation of the public goes in the direction of providing police forces with information, and there is no quest for cooperation in the management of the emergency. Below, I describe and discuss this aspect in depth, focusing on its peculiarities.

Populist policing from above: political support

Since the late 1990s, claims about decentralisation have brought about meaningful political reforms. Act n.81 of 1993 introduced the direct election of mayors, while the 2001 constitutional reform increased the powers held by regions. City mayors and regional presidents became the focus of increased demand for security by citizens⁵. Despite this, police powers held by local authorities did not increase, as Act n.121 of 1981 introduced a Provincial Committee for Order and Public Security (CPOSP) whose head is the prefetto, that is, the officer the Ministry of Interior appoints in every province (an intermediate local authority between cities and regions) to coordinate police forces. The law states that this committee comprising mayors, police commanders and the questore (the chief

of State Police) has only a consulting role, with the prefetto making the final decisions.

This imbalance in accountability (local administrators are accountable to their voters and the prefetti are accountable to the government) has provoked conflict. For example, during the coronavirus pandemic, the president of Calabria decided to reopen bars and restaurants on 4 May 2020, thus violating the governmental decree. A similar situation arose with the president of Sardinia, who wanted to introduce a COVID-19 test for Lombardy residents landing on the island. Local administrators tried to be in tune with the public mood, that is, fear of the virus spreading during lockdown. Reports and denunciations were actively encouraged so that mayors and regional presidents could both make up for their lack of effective power and increase public consent.

A 'government of fear' (Simon, 2007) became the main pattern of authority during lockdown. Government decrees were enhanced by issuing rigid ordinances as well as by mobilising local police forces. Moral panic about coronavirus matched the populist turn in Italian politics in the previous five years. The most notable case concerns Rome, whose mayor, FSM populist Virginia Raggi, introduced an online reporting system, the so-called Sistema Unico di Segnalazione (Single Reporting System)⁶. Citizens were encouraged to fill out form and upload material, such as reports and pictures concerning any violations of lockdown, to the city police. Local officers then assessed the content of the reports and decided whether to fine the alleged violators or report them to the police. Raggi's initiative generated a bitter discussion about the 'mayor-sheriffs' but remained an isolated case. Other mayors followed different pathways to encourage reports of lockdown violations. The mayor of Palermo, Leoluca Orlando, encouraged the public to report violations, publicly praising some citizens who had reported a group of people organising a barbeque on the roof of a high-rise building, and calling the violators 'uncivilized criminals'⁷. The mayor of Messina, Cateno De Luca, chose a more dramatic method. He hired drones to fly over the city and spot violators. When alleged violators were spotted, the recorded voice of the mayor insulted them ('Where the f*** are you going...?')⁸. The drones took pictures that were eventually used to compile a report to the police.

These cases, despite being different, are all in the direction of populist policing from above (Laclau, 2005; Loader, 2000). This is because there is no structured, negotiated policing strategy that involves active public collaboration. Rather, there is an instrumental use of public fear to encourage reports and trigger intervention by police forces, and a consequent neglect of civil liberties as privacy and the presumption of innocence. The actions of mayors legitimised the public to undertake acts of mass denunciation,

which might not always be efficient as it does not distinguish between real and alleged violators. Coordinated action through a community-oriented policing scheme would have been more efficient and more respectful of individual liberties.

Italian mayors have limited policing power because the government and its appointed officers are vested with the main responsibilities of public order (Pavarini, 2007; Vianello, 2007). This lack of a plural, decentralised policing structure contrasts sharply with citizens' expectations of local administrations since the reforms of 1993. This contradiction is resolved by populism. There are no intermediate contexts, such as local committees, wherein local administrators can meet public demands for policing. Also, mayors have a limited range of power. Consequently, all they can do is encourage the public to report violations of the law, thus giving up the possibility of calibrating the response to a widespread concern such as the pandemic. The participation of citizens as well as mayors is secondary in this process. On the one hand, policing is carried out based on the social mores of the moment, that is the fear of contagion (Clark, 2008). On the other hand, populist policing does not consist of real participation in preventive and enforcement-oriented actions. Both the Rome and Sicily cases, which were the most publicised, show how populist policing consists mainly of wide-ranging community intelligence activities (Bullock, 2010) by which police forces are provided with information, but does not produce real public participation in policing. Moreover, mass stigmatisation and criminalisation can result in increasingly bitter relations within a community, as well as ultimately worsening the relationship between the police and the public.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to define as populist policing all those policing practices, in a broader sense, that were enacted in Italy from March to May 2020 to enforce lockdown. I consider it the first step in a more wide-ranging study as more in-depth interviews and more specific data are necessary. This initial stage of research enables us to define populist policing as a combination of three elements. The first concerns the centralised and colonial model of the Italian police. The second relates to public fear about the spread of COVID-19, which has catalysed securitarian attitudes in Italian society that have developed over the past 30 years. The third element of populist policing relates to the hegemony of populism within Italian politics.

The Italian police have never undergone a process of full demilitarisation and decentralisation. No structured project aimed at involving the public in policing activities has been carried out. Consequently, police forces have retained a

traditional attitude based on the suppression of crime and the mere obedience by the public. The anti-COVID-19 measures enforced by the government were within this structure. People were asked to stay at home, to self-certify their movements and to comply with the controls enacted by police forces patrolling their region. No discussions with local committees, such as district councils (even through the use of IT tools) took place, and no attempt was made to involve the local population as an auxiliary force. Although one can appreciate this was not customary government practices either, such an emergency could have paved the way for a reform of policing involving citizens in the management of public order.

The lack of a negotiated, participatory policing model, matched with the generalised fear provoked by COVID-19 and the securitarian mood of recent years, produced the spontaneous, disorderly activity of policing from below, that is, data-gathering and reporting on alleged violators. The public collaborated with police forces under the guise of fear, ignoring such things as the violation of privacy and the penal risks related to arbitrarily stopping a person without being vested with specific powers to do so. One possible consequence of this spontaneous policing might be conflict within Italian society between alleged violators and those who claim to comply with lockdown, and the consequent creation of a category of stigmatised individuals who may swell the ranks of scapegoats upon which contemporary society relies (Bauman, 1999).

Finally, policing from below goes hand-in-glove with policing from above, fuelling the populist attitudes of both individual politicians and political forces who build an agenda around punishment and social control. This is not useful for today's Italy. The country is trying to move on from the emergency and is facing an unprecedented economic crisis as GDP decreased by nearly 15% in the first quarter of 2020. A reform of policing, focused on decentralisation, demilitarisation and public participation could be one approach to reconstruction. Drones and online reporting systems will not help in this.

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Notes

1. <https://www.interno.gov.it/it/speciali/coronavirus>
2. <https://www.interno.gov.it/it/notizie/coronavirus-salgonon-665mila-persone-controllate-e-27mila-quelle-denunciate>
3. <https://www.avvenire.it/rubriche/pagine/la-delazione-un-vizior-isvegliato-dal-virus>; <https://www.globalist.it/news/2020/04/04/coronavirus-l-indagine-per-il-72-degli-italiani-e-giusto-spiare-o-denunciare-violazioni-dei-vicini-di-casa-2055574.html>
4. <https://www.interno.gov.it/it/speciali/coronavirus>
5. <https://www.governo.it>
6. <http://www.comune.roma.it/web/it/di-la-tua-segnala.page>
7. https://www.ilmessaggero.it/italia/coronavirus_palermo_griagliata_tetti_fuochi_d_artificio_elicottero_carabinieri_ultime_notizie_news-5168396.html
8. <https://messaging.gazzettadelsud.it/articoli/politica/2020/04/19/messina-scoppia-la-guerra-dei-droni-botta-e-risposta-consigliere-sindaco-sui-costi-8d331927-f861-465d-9dde-defca1cf8a97>

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