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'OPERAZIONE STRADE SICURE' AND THE MILITARISATION OF SPACE: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON POST-9/11 SECURITY IN ITALY

Premise. – The themes of militarism and militarisation have recently garnered growing interest across the social studies, after losing much of their appeal following the end of the Cold War. Feminist, geography, and sociology scholars (Bernazzoli, Flint, 2009; Enloe, 2000; Shaw in Stavrianakis and Selby, 2013; Woodward, 2004) have led the way in the resurgence in interest in these themes (Stavrianakis and Selby, 2013, p.4). This renewed interest has been accompanied by the development of novel concerns. One of these is the social impact that military presence and activities have on civil space, an issue much debated in literature (Bernazzoli and Flint, 2009; Enloe, 2000; Paragano, 2017; Rech e altri 2015; Woodward, 2004, 2019). Military presence and activities have been shown to lead to the militarisation of space, i.e. the spread of militarism at the societal level, where militarism is understood as an ideology in which violence is central to the development of social relations. The prioritisation of military solutions when tackling societal issues is a paradigmatic illustration of this approach (Rech e altri, 2015, p.48).

This article critically addresses the militarisation of space engendered in Italy in the context of post-9/11 security policy "Operazione Strade Sicure" (hereafter OSS), and its social implications. Drawing on security, feminist, and geography literatures, it investigates whether OSS has been a key driving force in the militarisation of Italian society by assessing the operation and its social repercussions, taking the impact of the military presence on the territory and the public's view on OSS, and drawing links between the two. In line with critical theory-inspired work that questions social reality with an emancipatory goal in mind (Cox, 1981) and critical geography literature on militarism and military activities (Paragano, 2017; Reche altri, 2015; Woodward, 2004), this work questions the very military presence and its impact on Italian civil space and society more broadly; it

is not limited to assessing OSS in functional terms (Paragano, 2017, p. 337), taking it for granted. It also reflects on the rationale underlying the militarisation process and lays the ground for a broader reflection on the role of armed forces, and on the perception of (in)security in contemporary Italy.

Although it was meant to be short-lived, OSS has remained in place since it was adopted in 2008. Not only has this brought unprecedented levels of military presence in Italian civil space, which has visibly impacted the landscape; it has also helped normalise such presence and thus contributed to the militarisation of society, a process jeopardising the workings of a democratic system. Recent research has revealed the Italian public's propensity for increasingly militarised approaches to security; a survey shows that after 10 years of OSS the vast majority of Italians think that the current military presence in urban areas labelled "at risk" should be either intensified or kept as it is (Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII [ACPG], 2018).

The militarisation of Italian society has received only limited scholarly attention. However, the numbers above suggest that it should be urgently addressed, for a militarised society is one where social issues are tackled using force, rather than looking for constructive alternatives, and where people's ability to think and freely participate in society is constrained, as militarism affects people's understanding of society (Enloe, 2007).

O*n Militarism and Space.* – In the last few decades, academic interest for militarism, both as a concept and object of enquiry, was marked by a majorshift, as critical scholars started pointing to the need to consider its social aspects (Shaw, 1991). Historically, militarism was understood as an ideology based on the glorification of war, military institutions, and martial values (Stavrianakis and Selby, 2013, p.12). In the 1990s, militarism came to be thought of as encroaching into society and people's everyday, leading scholars to move beyond narrow understandings of the notion common in the past (*ibidem*).

Feminist Cynthia Enloe (2000) compellingly argued in favour of a wider understanding of militarism that emphasises, beyond its ideological character, how deep it can reach into the societal fabric. People become militarised in how they think, how they live their everyday, how they understand society (*ibidem*, p.2). This implies a transformation, as militarised

values are progressively adopted, affecting social and individual choices. Becoming militarised is about «adopt[ing] militaristic values (e.g. a belief in hierarchy, obedience, and the use of force) and priorities as one's own, [seeing] military solutions as particularly effective, [seeing] the world as a dangerous place best approached with militaristic attitudes» (Enloe, 2007, p. 4). This stands in the way of a well-functioning democratic society, as compliance and resorting to violence are encouraged, rather than critical thinking and the peaceful resolution of conflict.

The means through which militarism spreads in society is militarisation, a «step-by-step process by which a person or a thing gradually comes to be controlled by the military *or* comes to depend for its well-being on militaristic ideas» (Enloe, 2000, p. 3). Enloe applies this notion to virtually anything, ranging from toys to local economies; in this paper it is used in its capacity to capture what happens to civil space subjected to military presence and to people when they become militarised. Hence, the militarisation of space occurring in the context of OSS is understood as the process entailing militaristic ideas spreading across and becoming entrenched in society, where they influence social choices and activities (Paragano, 2017, p. 339), as military presence becomes progressively established in civil space.

Militarisation can be subtle and come in many guises, not all of which explicitly linked to warfare or soldiers; this is what makes militarism so insidious and pervasive (Enloe 2000, p. 3). However, militarisation processes need not be subtle. Overt militarisation processes often also unfold without people taking much notice. The militarisation of space taking place through OSS and the related military presence and activities, is a clear example of how militarism can visibly find its way into society, and yet elicit little scrutiny and resistance.

Since OSS was adopted, there has been a significant physical impact on Italian public space. In line with the recent tendency to militarise urban life, which Graham refers to as 'new military urbanism' (2010), military forces have been deployed to select Italian cities. It is the military control of land (Woodward, 2004) that has led to significant changes to urban landscapes. This often has implied the mere 'military act of just being there' (*ibidem,* p. 10) as military units patrol Italy's main cities in camo uniforms, but also the stationing of military vehicles and setting up of army

gazebos in central town squares, all of which has contributed to establishing a deliberately eye-catching presence in the landscape and more pervasive forms of social control. Some OSS measures have been even more consequential in terms of the impact on space, as they created "borders" leading to the fragmentation of urban space and the exclusion of collective space from public fruition. For instance, access to the Duomo in Milan was restricted by a physical barrier manned by military personnel carrying out security checks. This leads to what Rossi and Vanolo call the annihilation of public space (2012), understood as the «reduction of public space in terms of physical size and opportunities for free access» (*ibidem,* p. 121).

Not all the territory has been affected by OSS in the same way due to the uneven distribution of military personnel and activities in civil space. This is true both within cities and nationally. Military forces have been deployed mainly in large Italian cities, leaving the rest of the national territory and the population unaffected by the impact this has had. Within those cities they are concentrated in central areas. This distribution covers many sites typically thought of as potential terrorist targets, e.g. stations and main squares. However, it leaves out the peripheral areas - where common crime is most frequent and hence security is most lacking - despite OSS having a stated anti-crime function (Esercito Italiano [EI], 2022a).

Militarism and Militarisation in Italy. – The militarisation of space has received little attention in Italy. The same is true for the themes of military presence and activities in civil space, at least from a critical perspective, or, even more broadly, for militarism and militarisation, for which interest is «almost absent» (Paragano, 2017, p. 337).

Among those investigating the deployment of the military on the Italian territory, rather than focusing on the effects that these have on society, most have focused on other aspects.

In security studies, some have addressed the domestic military presence and activities in the context of the deployment of military personnel alongside police forces, echoing a recent widespread trend in academia. However, beyond voicing concerns over soldiers potentially using a disproportionate amount of force in domestic scenarios (Striuli, 2016), these studies often lack the critical dimension that questions the very presence of soldiers in civil space and their impact on society; the presence is generally taken for granted.

Others ask questions that point in the right direction, such as Nicola Labanca (2016, p. 36), who raises doubts about the effectiveness of military involvement in solving security problems and asks whether these policies are merely a concession made to those supporting the securitisation and militarisation of social problems. However, Labanca only begins to scratch the surface; these issues require much deeper engagement.

This last point is also made by geographer Daniele Paragano (2017), who makes an explicit call to give these issues the attention they deserve. It is also compellingly demonstrated in his work, as he shows how the involvement of military forces in post-disaster activities can contribute to the spread of militarism in spaces where military presence is either absent or operates in unconventional ways (*ibidem*).

The theme of militarism spreading to civil space, and concerns over its far-reaching social implications did not receive much attention in Italian academia. At the international level, however, it has attracted a significant amount of interest, particularly by geographers writing from a critical perspective (Bernazzoli and Flint, 2009; Graham, 2010; Reche altri, 2015; Woodward, 2004; 2019). This literature is relevant in the context of OSS, as it emphasises how the militarisation of civil space occurs not only during armed conflict but also at times of peace, how it leads to more pervasive forms of social control in cities (Graham, 2010), and how militarism affects people's understandings of social relations, paving the way for future conflict by leading to militarised attitudes and behaviours (Woodward, 2004) and to militarism being taken-for-granted, as it becomes a form of cultural hegemony (Bernazzoli and Flint, 2009).

OSS: An Overview. – In order to develop a better understanding of its social impact, it is useful to first describe and contextualise OSS, before looking into what the ensuing military presence has concretely entailed. This allows to make some relevant considerations on what the actual purpose of OSS might be and how some of its features have made it so impactful at the societal level that Italians have come to think of the current, or an even greater, military presence as desirable and appropriate to address perceived security issues.

OSS is a military mission aimed at «guarantee[ing] public order and security» (Ministero della Difesa [MD], 2008) through the deployment of armed forces on the national territory; its stated goals include fighting

crime and terrorism, tackling emergencies, and controlling the territory (EI, 2022a). The soldiers deployed have ranged from 3000 to over 7000; higher numbers have been motivated by specific events, e.g. Expo 2015 in Milan, or to face specific situations, such as post-disaster scenarios e.g. following earthquakes (*ibidem*). The army's website states that, should it be necessary, OSS soldiers are specifically prepared to use force in a proportional and legitimate manner. Their widespread presence, we are told, «effectively contributes to the achievement of a safer environment» (*ibidem*).

OSS is only one of many Italian policies involving the domestic deployment of soldiers in response to declared crisis scenarios. For instance, post-disaster interventions have become so common that some now include them among the traditional uses of armed forces in Italy (Labanca, 2016, p. 35).

The deployment of soldiers occurring in the context of OSS is part of another trend established in the last few decades, consisting of sending soldiers to specific areas of the country as "agents of public security" entrusted with the task of controlling the territory. This trend started in the early 1990s after the perceived success of "Operazione 'Vespri Siciliani'", a large-scale intervention launched in Sicily in response to the killing of anti-mafia prosecuting magistrate Paolo Borsellino and his bodyguard (EI, 2022b). Since then, forces have been deployed on various occasions across the peninsula.

OSS, however, markedly differs from the previous "agents of public security" missions in terms of its geographic breadth (Camera dei Deputati, 2022). The preceding missions had a relatively circumscribed character. Some were aimed at surveilling specific borders or coastlines, e.g. 'Operazione "Testuggine"' on the Slovenian border and 'Operazione "Salento"' along the Apulian coast, or fighting organised crime by controlling parts of the national territory, e.g. 'Operazione "Riace"' in Calabria (EI, 2022b). Even post-9/11 homeland security 'Operazione "Domino" in place from 2001 to 2006, involving the deployment of troops across the country with the objective to protect sensitive objectives (EI, 2022c), did not lead to the diffusion of troops seen with OSS.

OSS is also unrivalled in terms of the number of troops permanently stationed across the Italian territory and the mission's duration. And yet, at first it would have been impossible to predict the extent of the nation-wide stable military presence set in motion by OSS, which over time

turned out to be «the armed forces' most onerous commitment in terms of people, vehicles and equipment» (EI, 2022a).

Initially, it was established that the contingent deployed within the OSS framework could not exceed 3000 servicepeople (art. 7-bis law 125/2008). Over one decade later, nevertheless, the armed forces ordinarily deployed on the territory within the OSS framework were more than double the number initially approved, having exceeded 7000 units. This number was only recently reduced to 5000 as part of the government's 2021 budget plan, amidst much controversy motivated by concerns for the country's security (Ludovico, 2022).

Additionally, at first OSS did not contain the slightest hint that it would lead to armed forces permanently stationed on the Italian territory. Quite the opposite: from the very outset it was stated that the spirit in which the initiative was conceived was one of temporariness. As the Minister of Defence behind the security initiative, Ignazio La Russa, repeatedly declared in an attempt to defend the mission and put an end to initial criticisms from opposition parties (La Repubblica, 2008), OSS was authorised for six months and could be renewed only once (art. 7-bis law 125/2008). However, it is clear that these limits have been repeatedly and wilfully ignored, since OSS is currently in its 15th year.

The supposed temporary character of OSS was also implied by the rationale given for adopting OSS in the first place. OSS has consistently been justified by the state as an exceptional measure required by extraordinary circumstances (MD, 2015). Even though it is obvious that the assertion that "exceptional circumstances have incessantly perdured since 2008" is hard to reconcile with the very notion of exceptionality, this has not discouraged the state from using such a narrative over the years.

Overall, OSS has taken soldier deployments in Italy to a new level, making military presence more pervasive and established than ever before in many people's everyday. With OSS, Italian civil space has become militarised more systematically in a material sense, as military presence has progressively grown across towns on the peninsula. Going back to Enloe's definition (2000, p. 3), as military vehicles and soldiers in full camo uniforms with combat weapons have become a common sight across Italian public space such as town squares, train stations, and other areas deemed sensitive by Italian authorities, it can easily be seen that space has become increasingly controlled by the military. This has occurred as the state has

adopted measures giving the military growing levels of access to the civilian realm, both in terms of the geographical area covered and the number of armed forces involved.

Critical discussion. – While the stated objective of OSS is guaranteeing public order and security, the mission features mentioned above raise doubts about what it might actually be about.

First, the limited capabilities soldiers are endowed with as "agents of public security" hinder their actual ability to meet these goals. According to law 152/1975 (art.4), agents of public security can identify and search people (and vehicles) should their attitude or presence appear to be unjustifiable, e.g. a person acting in a suspicious manner around a sensitive objective. Aside from the fact that the notion of "seemingly suspicious behaviour" potentially opens up to vast and arbitrary interpretations as to what these might be, leaving ample space for abuse, what is noteworthy is that, as stated by law 125/2008 (art. 7-bis), should any further action be required beyond identifying and searching people and vehicles, police forces must necessarily become involved.

Restricting the soldiers' power while on duty is certainly necessary in a democratic society. However, if the vast majority of their interventions hinge on the presence of police forces, the very military presence is questionable and seems to have a mere symbolic value. According to a joint statement released by the two main Italian police unions, «the use of mixed patrol units […] is purely for image purposes, in some cases it can improve the citizens' perception of security, but it doesn't improve the real security» (Sindacato Italiano Unitario dei Lavoratori della Polizia and the Sindacato Autonomo di Polizia, 2011). While police unions have a vested interest in asserting this, as they hope to divert OSS funds to the police forces' benefit, if the soldiers' capabilities are restricted to the extent that they can hardly intervene, the concerns about their efficacy and ability to meet the stated objectives of the policy are hard to dismiss.

In light of soldiers' limited intervention power it does seem plausible that the policy might be largely a matter of image and visibility. The fact that military personnel should be visible was also made explicit from the outset by the MD, as shown by the statement accompanying the launch of the policy: «patrol units move around exclusively on foot precisely to be "visibly" present» (MD, 2008).

The vehicles used by patrol units also suggest that visibility is a key objective of OSS: large (armoured) vehicles with camouflage patterns that - quite ironically, for it is in stark contrast with the very notion of camouflage - do an excellent job at standing out in an urban setting (see EI, 2022a).

It would also not be the first military deployment aimed at establishing a visible presence of the state's forces on the national territory. It was also one of the stated goals of 'Operazione "Vespri Siciliani"' in the early 1990s, which lasted six years and saw a grand total of 150.000 servicepeople deployed (EI, 2022d). It was clear that sending troops to Sicily was not going to solve the problem of organised crime; the value of deploying the army was perceived to lie in the psychological effects deriving from having a visibly militarised landscape (Ginsborg, 2001, p. 267).

In addition to visibly militarising space, OSS has had far-reaching social implications. While the effectiveness of OSS in terms of its stated goal - i.e. increase security - is up for debate, it managed to convince the vast majority of the Italian public that security issues are best dealt with by deploying soldiers in the streets. According to Milex, a yearly report on Italy's military expenses, the public derive a perception of heightened security from having the military deployed across towns (Piovesana, Vignarca, 2017, pp. 4-5). This is also confirmed by a 2018 survey carried out by the University of Padua, showing that vast sections of the public considered the existing (26%), or an even stronger (60%), military presence in Italian towns appropriate to tackle perceived security problems (ACPG, 2018). While it is true that the latter also shows strong support for interventions undertaken by civilians with an expertise in non-violent practices in those same areas where soldiers are deployed (*ibidem*), the views on military presence suggest a clear belief in the suitability of military solutions to address civil problems. There seems to be close to no opposition to military deployments in civil space as a matter of principle, for instance because it is a practice reminiscent of those occurring in authoritarian regimes. This implies the normalisation of violence, as the Italian public adopt a security approach that takes the use of force for granted and struggle to imagine alternative ways of dealing with the post-9/11 challenges.

Hence, the strong propensity for using the military for security purposes suggests that Italian society is militarised, as it has come to depend on militaristic ideas for its well-being. OSS has militarised space, since

these militaristic views have become established in society. This is due to the long duration of armed forces' presence in the context of OSS: something in place for a long time eventually becomes normalised and, as time goes by, even harder to be considered from a critical standpoint and questioned. As military presence becomes constant in the wake of an event, it gives rise to the norm and, as such, it does not require any further questioning (Paragano 2017, p. 340). Nones (2022) captures well what has happened with OSS since its launch: «we have become addicted to the idea that, to guarantee the presence of the state, military personnel and vehicles need to be present on our streets».

Final Remarks. – The present study set out to assess whether OSS has been a key driving force in the militarisation of Italian society. Taking as a starting point the concrete ways in which the military presence has impacted space in Italian cities, this investigation has shown that the visible military control of land over a prolonged period of time has normalised both the military presence and militarised approaches to perceived security issues, effectively leading to a militarisation of the Italian public.

The state's insistence on having a visible military presence in towns suggests that having a militarised landscape, and by extension a militarised society, are a deliberate outcome of the policy, and not simply a by-product. This invites a reflection on the rationale underlying this militarisation process. Looking at the most prominent example of militarised democracy, i.e. the US, provides some indication as to what militarising societies might be about. A militarised society is one where violence is normalised, as illustrated by US militarised police forces intervening during demonstrations in full riot gear and with an arsenal worthy of warfare scenarios, rather than of a democratic power tackling dissent. By advancing the militarisation of society, the state can use force with greater ease, encountering less resistance, be it against external threats, like terrorists, or internal ones, e.g. manifestations of dissent.

This raises some considerations on Italian society and points to the need for a wider debate on the theme of militarism in Italy centred around the following questions.

The first aspect worth reflecting upon concerns the military's contemporary role. Considering the soldiers' canonical role, should soldiers be deployed for missions like OSS? A popular view is that using the military

makes sense during crisis scenarios, as they are readily available (Li Gobbi, 2016). This approach is shortsighted, however, as it fails to consider the wider social implications of using the military in the societal context, especially over prolonged periods of time. Instead, it might be worth considering reducing the resources devoted to the armed forces altogether, and funding alternative bodies, in an attempt to provide non-militarised solutions to security or societal problems.

Another aspect worth reflecting upon is what could lead the vast majority of people in Italian society to feel more secure thanks to the deployment of military forces on the territory. This question becomes even more important in light of all the limitations that soldiers experience with regard to their ability to intervene. The question that arises then is whether those that want the military in the streets are looking for security, or rather for an image of security, such as the one provided by soldiers with military gear.

The last question that deserves attention is whether the actual military presence itself is what makes the public want soldiers on the territory. Were it not for the soldiers' presence, the Italian public might not feel the same sense of insecurity. One might think that if the military are there, there must be a reason for it.

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'Operazione Strade Sicure' e la Militarizzazione dello Spazio: Una Prospettiva Critica Sulla Sicurezza Italiana nel Post-11 Settembre. – I temi del militarismo e della militarizzazione hanno recentemente generato una spiccata crescita di interesse nel campo degli studi sociali. Partendo da un'analisi concreta dei modi in cui lo spazio civile italiano è stato militarizzato con "Operazione Strade Sicure" (OSS), questo contributo esamina la militarizzazione

dello spazio generata dall'approccio italiano di sicurezza nel post-11 Settembre, focalizzandosi in particolare sulle interazioni tra attività militari e spazio civile cui ha dato luogo OSS, e ne discute l'impatto sociale in termini di diffusione del militarismo - inteso come un'ideologia che mette la violenza al centro dello sviluppo delle relazioni sociali.

Keywords. – Militarismo, Militarizzazione dello spazio, Ideologia

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