

**ExOPG “Je So’ Pazzo”**

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## Introduction

ExOPG “Je So’ Pazzo” in Naples, Italy used to be a forensic psychiatric hospital (Ospedale Psichiatrico Giudiziario). In 2015, a group of activists occupied the abandoned building. Although at first, they had the risk of being arrested, after one year of meetings with the prefecture, the police, and the municipality, they got the authorization to stay in the building. Currently, it’s a community center well-equipped thanks to community’s contributions, with a clinic, a theater, a library, an afterschool care center, a radio center, sports areas, and a gym. The activists hold an immigration legal assistance, and a chamber of labor help desks one day every week. However, with the changing political climate both at the local and the national level, they currently face the risk of being thrown out from the space.

## The History of the OPGs

The Ospedale Psichiatrico Giudiziario, or the OPGs, have their roots in the 19th century. In 1876, a “section for maniacs” was opened at the Aversa Prison, which was followed by other prisons in Italy. This was the birth of the mental asylums for the criminals. The penal code at the time, “Savoy Penal Code” distinguished between mentally ill people who have committed a crime, who were non-imputable, and criminals with mental problems. The section for maniacs were opened to accommodate the second type of people.

In 1889, Zanardelli Penal Code was accepted. According to this code, if the person who commits a crime do not have the mental capacity to understand his actions, he cannot be punished. However, if the court decides that the person is too dangerous to be released, they are referred to the criminal asylums.

Criminal asylums continue to exist through 1930s. According to the Rocco Penal Code of 1930, in the case that the person does not have mental capacity (as decided by expert opinion), they are acquitted. However, if the court decides that the person is “socially dangerous”, meaning that they are likely to repeat the crime, the court can send the person to a criminal asylum for a period in relation to the seriousness of the offence. In the case that the person is judged to have semi-mental capacity, the court holds a trial. If the person is found guilty, they receive one third of the sentence and are sent to criminal asylum after detention. Only when the person is decided to be not socially dangerous anymore, they are released from the asylum. If they are decided to be “socially dangerous”, detention continues. In this way, a person can be kept in a criminal asylum for more than 20 years. This is called “white life imprisonment” (“ergastolo bianco”) by the people.

During the 1970s, the criminal asylums were revealed to be below human dignity. The patients suffered gross abuse and mistreatment in the asylum. For instance, in 1974, a patient died because of a fire that broke out in her room. The nurses ignored the cries of the patient, who was tied to the bed, as delusions. The help came too late, and the patient died a few days later. In the same year, a patient recorded the inhumane conditions with his secret camera.

In 1975, the name of the asylums was changed to OPGs; however, not much actually changed. Improvement efforts continued throughout the last decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 2010, two surprise visits were paid to the OPGs by the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry. Videos taken during surprise visits to OPGs reveal the inhumane conditions and treatments in OPGs to the public.

In 2012, a new law about the OPGs was introduced. Law 9/2012 saw the closure of the OPGs and the opening of Residences for the Execution of the Security Measure (Residenze per la Esecuzione della Misura di Sicurezza, REMS) in their place. These new institutions were designed to be smaller and

more health focused. The law put the deadline of the closure of OPGs as April 1, 2013. However, with amendments in 2013 and 2014, the deadline was postponed to March 31, 2015. Despite this deadline, the closure of the last OPG took place in February 2017.

The new laws introduced significant reforms on the criminal asylum system. Firstly, the courts are asked to consider hospitalization as a last measure. The judges are asked to consider the continued detention of "socially dangerous" people as "exceptional" and "transitory". Secondly, the law dictates that the maximum period of detainment cannot exceed the maximum legal penalty, putting a stop to "white life imprisonments". And thirdly, the law states that social dangerousness needs to be declared based on the subjective qualities of the person alone, without taking the social situation of the person into account (for example, if the person is marginalized, or lacks economic or family support).

OPG of Naples was opened in 1925. The complex was originally built for the church in 1572 as the Sant'Eframo Nuovo Monastery. In 1866, the monastery was converted into a prison by the Kingdom of Italy. Used as a criminal asylum from 1925 and as an OPG from 1975, in 2000, the building was declared to be inhabitable. It was closed in 2008 and the prisoners were transferred to the prison of Secondigliano-Scampia. The complex was abandoned.

### **Occupation of OPG in Naples and the Transformation**

In 2015, a group of student activists occupied the abandoned complex. It is now a community center called ExOPG "Je So' Pazzo" ("I am crazy" in Neapolitan dialect). The student activist organization, Collettivo Autorganizzato Universitario di Napoli, was a grassroots student movement founded in Naples in 2008 as a reaction to Italian government's reform on the education system. They occupied the building in March 2015. To understand the history and the situation of the ExOPG "Je So' Pazzo", I conducted an interview with one of the activists that has been there from the start.

The occupation of the OPG was aimed as a way to come back to the people. "Around 2015, the type of organizing, the type that is particularly based on students, it failed. ... The little student groups, which were a lot at that moment, continued to do activities, but they were far from the actual people; the people who live in the peripheries of the cities and the workers. And Naples is Italy, yes, but it is different from the north of Italy. Here, we don't have a good system of welfare; the hospitals are terrible, the transportation system is terrible, we have very little social services in the districts ... So, we decided to come back to the people ... And we decided to do come back to the people through this space, through the occupation of OPG."

The OPG was selected for two reasons. One is that "because in in our genes, we are against the medicalization of the people. We are against the use of psychopharmaceuticals in the way with which the society does now. We think that it's normal if you don't have a job or if you were born in a destroyed family or if you have a parent with a mental problem..., then it's normal that you lose your mind. The medicine tries to resolve the problem created by the society with the use of psychopharmaceuticals. But we believe this is not the way and we decide to occupy the OPG. The other reason is that the OPG is very big, and it is possible to do a lot of activities here. In addition, it is in a very strategical position. The district in which the OPG is placed, Materdei, is between the rich part of the city, Vomero, and the poor part, the center, and we are in the middle."

After the occupation, the activists started to do activities in the building right away. "And immediately the people of Napoli area, the Campania, they arrived to see the place and to help with organizing and fixing the place. Old people came, young people come, and the TV came, and at last

the police. They tried to arrest me and another responsible person of the group. ... They informed us during the arrest that they want to throw us out by force.”

The activists managed to arrange a meeting with the prefecture and the chief of police and the municipality. They were released. “Because the pressure of the people was strong. The people and the activist in Naples and in Campania supported us.”. After a one year of negotiations, in 2016, they got the authorization to stay in the place.

When they first entered the building, there was a homeless ex-inmate who was still living inside one of the cells, because he had nowhere else to go. “When they closed the prison, they didn't provide any assistance for the people who finished their detentions. So, they just sent him on the streets, and he came back to his jail cell to live.”

Currently, the ExOPG “Je So' Pazzo” houses various activity areas, such as a library, a radio center, an afterschool care center, various sports areas, and a gym. The activists hold an immigration legal assistance desk and a chamber of labor help desk every week. There is a clinic that is open to anyone.

### **Immigration Legal Assistance at ExOPG**

Every Thursday from 14.00, the activists hold an immigration legal assistance desk at the ExOPG “Je So' Pazzo”. The desk assists the migrants to get their residence permits. The movement started in 2016 and has made considerable gains since.

“At the winter of 2016, we went to demonstration with the trade union Unione Sindacale di Base. ... At the demonstration I saw 10 African guys with their luggage. Just out of curiosity, I asked them why they have come to a demonstration with their luggage, and they opened my mind about immigration situation. They told me that the day before the demonstration, they had organized a demonstration in their camp ... because they didn't have a doctor, they didn't have a residence permits, they didn't have food, they didn't have clothes. Nothing. And two of them had very serious illnesses. The camp owner had called the police. The police arrived with security forces and beat them. After 6 hours, they kicked them out of the camp. The migrants had spent the night on the street. That's why they have come to the demonstration with their luggage.” The activist invited them to stay at the occupied OPG. “They taught me their language and they explained me the system and the situation at the camps. And the brutality, the abuse, the violence inside the camps, inside this part of the society. Because the white part and the black part of Italy are divided. If you don't have contact with the black people, you don't understand this part of the reality.”

They decided to start an investigation into the camps. “Initially, we went camp by camp to do interviews with the migrants to understand the conditions, to see if the owner of the camp followed the rules and respected the rights of the migrants. And doing that we understood that for the large part of the camps, the owner was the mafia.”

He refers to an investigation did by a journalist from Rome in 2017 and says that the mafia opens migrant camps to launder their money. “The government pays you to keep the migrants, to provide them with a school, a doctor, with medicine, food, clothes, etc. And you, the criminal, you collect all the money, and you don't give anything to the migrants.”

They wrote reports on the conditions of the camps and tried to inform the authorities. However, the police did not reply nor started an investigation. They also reached out to journalists, but they did not want to publish “not because they're afraid but because they didn't want to investigate of the crime of the Italian people.” They preferred the immigrants who talk about their hardships on their country of origin. “The journalists wanted to say, “Migrants had big problems in their origin country”,

but they didn't want to publish that when migrants arrive in Italy, they face the same problems in the camps or in the streets."

During their investigation into the camps, they met some political activists who have migrated from Ivory Coast. They proposed a new strategy to organize and improve the conditions of the camps.

"The idea was to create a meeting in every camp with the responsibility of the camp. And once in every month, we would do a general meeting of all camps and organize demonstrations for residence permits, doctors, medicine, clothes, food... in the camps. And we accepted of course. It was an intelligence strategy. And we went back to the all the camps. And that time it was around 130 in the Napoli area."

"The first general meeting happened in February to 2016 and 600 people from all over the camps came. After the first meeting, we understood that a movement was born, and we decided to do a demonstration immediately on 1<sup>st</sup> of March. The demonstration was so big. A lot of people came from the camps, from the ghettos, from the streets. There were more or less 4,000 people at the demonstration. And we had our first meeting with the chief of prefecture and the chief of police to explain the problems inside the camps and explained our position and what we want."

The authorities accepted a part of their demands and the conditions inside the camps improved significantly. Additionally, the migrants started to receive their right of monthly allowance of 75 Euros, which they were not getting before.

"So, we continued to have demonstration after demonstration until 2018. In 2018, we had a demonstration with another migrant organization in Caserta. This demonstration was very important for our story, because around 20,000 migrants from Naples, Caserta, Rocca, Fasano and from the south of Italy came to the demonstration. There was two days of demonstrations. We had the first day of the demonstration in Naples and the second day in Caserta." Through this demonstration, migrants are now given one year of temporary reasons permit in the Naples area, which is six months in the other parts of Italy. "This is very important for the migrants. Because when you have six months of residence permit, your life and your options in Italy is just for 6 months. But when you have one year, your possibilities double; you have the possibility of have work, go to school, have a test of Italian language, rent a house..."

The immigration legal assistance desk at the ExOPG "Je So' Pazzo" started immediately with the investigation on the camps. "Because the 10 African guys needed help for their residence permits. And I studied philosophy at the university. But they taught me, and I taught them, and together we understood the law about residence permits together. And they got their have residence permit on the second month ... Initially, we tried a lot we because we knew nothing about residence permits. And from the first Thursday, one hundred- two hundred immigrants arrived ... So, we called some lawyer comrades to help us."

Every Thursday, activists at ExOPG "Je So' Pazzo" hold the immigration help desk. Outside of Thursdays, they go to the immigration office every day to make sure the police do their jobs. "The problem of racism is not just the man who offend the migrants on the street. The problem is the racism inside the institutions."

In 2017 and 2018, the government introduced two major changes to immigration law in Italy. Law 46/2017, also known as the Minniti law after the minister of interior of the time, abolished two levels of the judicial appeals for the immigrants. Before, when an asylum application was rejected, the asylum-seeker had access to three levels of appeal. After this law, the asylum seeker could only

appeal once. This discriminatory practice made the migrants and the citizens unequal before the law. Law 132/2018, also known as Salvini laws after the minister of interior of the time, abolished a type of international protection called humanitarian protection. This type of protection was given to people who did not qualify for refugee status or subsidiary protection but could go back to their home country due to objective and serious personal situations.

He explains their struggle during this period with these words: "Salvini laws abolished humanitarian protection altogether, which 65% of the asylum seekers had. This produced a lot of irregular people in Italy. And from 2018 to 2020, we resisted. We did a lot of demonstrations in front the police office, and we had a series of conflicts with the police during the demonstrations. Luckily, nobody got detained or arrested. In 2020, with the other movements in Italy, we did a national meeting that proposed to the new government to introduce a new immigration law." In 2020, a new special protection permit was introduced by the government, replacing humanitarian protection.

Currently, the migrant help desk at the ExOPG help around 10,000 migrants. "In English, the word is client. But I refuse to call them clients, I prefer to call them our members."

It is not a one-sided helping. The migrants become part of the ExOPG community and movement. "For example, during the Covid period and the lockdown, we organized the distribution of the food and the clothes for the people. A lot of members of the migrant movement came to help with the distribution. Or around 4 years ago, we had major earthquakes in the center of Italy and a lot of people died and lots of people lost their houses. A lot of our members, they organized the bus and the food and the clothes to send to the people. A lot of migrant comrades came out and went to help to the people in Amatrice."

### **The Chamber of Labor Help Desk and The Clinic**

Another help desk in ExOPG "Je So' Pazzo" is the Chamber of Labor desk that takes place every Wednesday. It is a legal help desk that support the workers in claiming their rights and fighting against exploitation. Migrants consist of a large part of the members that come to the help desk "because the second part of our struggle for the freedom and the rights of the migrants is for jobs."

The help desk shows that the migrants are open to exploitation in the workforce because they cannot read Italian. "For example, the employers don't want to do contract ... And when they do contract, if the workplace gets a problem, they ask the migrants to sign a paper. And a lot of our members don't know how to read Italian. So, they sign a paper saying that they resign from the job. ... Or the employers use some right-wing trade union, for example. A lot of our members work in service industry. So, the owners of the restaurants use this from written by the union which says that the employee reject their rights for holiday etc. They go in front of the union officer to sign the documents and they don't inform our immigrant comrades of what's written. And they sign because their colleagues at work say "Sign, sign.". So, they sign. It's not legal but it's done every day. The migrants come to worker's legal assistance, and they show this paper and say "Okay, I signed it, but what does it say?"

The ExOPG "Je So' Pazzo" has also a clinic. The clinic, still in operation today, was opened during the investigation into the migrant camps. There were people in the camps who faced serious illnesses; however, there were no doctors at the camps. So, the activists at ExOPG "Je So' Pazzo" organized a clinic inside the building, "because it was not possible to wait for the camps or the institutions in Italy. There were people who had the risk of dying. So, the first thing we did was that we called our doctor comrades and organized a little hospital." The clinic is open to all and underprivileged people around ExOPG come to the clinic to get free healthcare.

### **The changing situation**

The authorities gave the activist the authorization to stay at OPG building in 2016, after a year of negotiations. However, the political situation in the city and in the country is changing, and they face the risk of being thrown out.

“The property belongs to the Ministry of Justice because it was a jail. The ministry has an agreement with the municipality, so the property is 50/50. And now, the political party in the city has changed”. In July, the municipality sent the activists a letter inviting them to a meeting to discuss their departure from the building. They refused to attend the meeting. “Before the municipality was on our side. Their political position was very similar to us. But now we have Democratic Party, which is a central left party. And in Italy, the central left party is right.” Italy will hold general elections on September 25, 2022. The activists expect the extreme right-wing party will win.

“So, right now the future does not look easy for us. But we continue to resist. If they come to kick us out, the activists will kick the police out instead.”

### **Conclusion**

The ExOPG “Je So’ Pazzo” has revived an abandoned building at the heart of Naples and brought it back into the community. Through their work, the organization touch the lives of a lot of people. The immigration legal assistance desk assists migrants to get their residence permits. Since its beginning, they made significant gains, from improving the situation of the camps to the duration of the temporary residence permits. With the chamber of labor help desk, they support the workers against exploitation. The clinic allows underprivileged people of Naples to have access to healthcare. However, currently they face a threat of being thrown out from the space they use to support the community and to organize. They need support from other organizations.

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