

"The Africans Will Probably Save Italy"

George De Stefano (May 14, 2009)



Saviano hails the “forgotten courage” of immigrants

Once again, Roberto Saviano is speaking truth to power in Italy.

As the Italian government moves to enact the harsh and discriminatory anti-immigrant policies favored by the Lega Nord, the anti-Mafia journalist and author of “Gomorra” has published a searing denuncia in La Repubblica. It is must reading for anyone concerned about Italy’s decision to address immigration issues by criminalizing immigrants.

“Forgotten Courage” is the title of Saviano’s essay. The “coraggio” of which he speaks is that of Africans in Italy who are refusing to submit to the will and power of Italy’s various mafias.



Saviano begins by taking on the recent move by the Italian government to send back undocumented immigrants who approach Italy by sea. (This is in addition to the other anti-immigrant measures included in the government's "security" decree passed in February.) These immigrants, many of whom are desperately poor and fleeing war and political oppression, will be denied the opportunity to apply for political asylum. Many will face imprisonment, or worse, if returned to their ports of departure.

The government and its supporters, Saviano notes, say the boats probably are full of criminals.

Saviano counters, "Those who say that the arrival by boat of immigrants brings an avalanche of criminals, who say that violence and social decay are rising, perhaps are forgetting two very recent and extremely significant episodes that have become part of the history of our Republic."

"The two most important spontaneous revolts against the mafias in Italy were not waged by Italians but by Africans. It's happened only twice in 10 years that there were here... public demonstrations organized not by associations or unions, without busses and without political parties."

Saviano notes that after camorra gangsters murdered six young African men in Castelvoturno, near Naples, last September, it was Africans who took to the streets in spontaneous anti-mafia demonstrations. Rage over their killings sparked a "revolt" by other Africans near the scene of the murders. "Their revolt," writes Saviano, "brought TV cameras from all over the world, and the images they transmitted were of an entire people that stopped everything to demand attention and justice."

"In the six preceding months, the camorra killed a shocking number of innocent Italians. On May 16, 2008, Domenico Noviello, who ten years ago had reported extortion, was killed right after losing his police protection. But nothing, no protest at all. No Italians took to the streets. The few who were outraged....felt ever more alone and powerless."

"But their aloneness was finally broken on the morning of the 19th [of September 2008] when hundreds and hundreds of African men and women occupied the streets and screamed their indignation in the face of Italians." Saviano notes that there was vandalism during the protests, but "the extraordinary thing is that the day after, the Africans took it upon themselves to repair the damages." "Their objective was to attract attention and say, 'Don't try it ever again.'"

Saviano then writes about Rosarno, a town dominated by the 'ndrangheta, the Calabrian mafia. There, last December 12, two farm workers from the Ivory Coast were attacked and seriously injured. That same evening, hundreds of foreign agricultural workers gathered to protest. Two days later, the attacker was arrested, an 'ndrangheta extortionist who targeted African immigrants.

"The demonstrations against the 'ndrangheta, which rules as if by natural right, had never occurred in prior years," Saviano notes.

After the Rosarno protests, the Calabrian anti-Mafia writer and researcher Antonello Mangano published a booklet titled, "The Africans Will Save Rosarno, and Probably Italy, Too." Mangano hailed the Africans for, as Saviano states, having "introduced into the daily life of southern Italy antibodies necessary to confront the mafia, antibodies that the Italians seem to lack, antibodies that are born from the basic desire just to live."



The Africans in Italy, Saviano continues, don't feel bound by omertà, nor do they share the widespread attitude of native-born Italians "that everything has always been this way and always will be." Their circumstances, their necessity to adapt to a new life, require them not only to fight to survive but also to defend their human rights. "And this," says Saviano, "is the beginning of every battle against the mafia clans."

Saviano is outraged that the Berlusconi-Lega government is intent on criminalizing undocumented immigrant workers when Italy "has exported mafia to every corner of the earth." Italian criminal organizations, he notes, "have taught the world how to structure their mafias politically and militarily." Mafia investments, he says, helped developed the cocaine trade in South America.

Italy wants to bar immigrants arriving from Africa on boats. But as Saviano notes, Italy has "exported" worse to Africa – "Italian gangsters have used African shores to bury toxic waste – in one single operation in the Ivory Coast, 851 tons of toxic waste were dumped."

Saviano doesn't deny that there are foreign criminal gangs in Italy. "There are foreign mafias in Italy, and they are very strong, but they are allied with Italian gangsters. Their power is nonexistent without the consent and financial backing of the Italian groups."

Among these foreign gangs are Nigerians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, and Romanians. "The Ukrainian mafia monopolizes the illegal market in home attendants and construction workers, the Nigerians prostitution and cocaine trade, the Bulgarians heroin, Romanians and Moldavians car theft. But these are a miniscule portion of their communities and they are fed by Italian criminality. None of these organizations lives without the consent and alliance of Italian mafias."

The government's latest decree targets immigrants arriving by sea. But as investigations by Neapolitan prosecutors have shown, "These Nigerian mafias don't arrive on crowded boats but on airplanes."

"Even the desperately poor who carry cocaine in their bellies to pay for their trips and earn some money don't arrive on ships, ever."

Saviano fears that "If all the immigrants become criminals, the criminal groups will be able to establish themselves as their representatives and there will not be a document or an arrival that they do not handle." Criminalizing these migrants "helps the mafia organizations because it forces every migrant to align himself with the mafias if they have to depend on them alone for documents, places to live..."

"I know," Saviano concludes, "that the part of Italy that has acted with understanding and acceptance, is that part that sees in the immigrants new hopes and new forces to change that which we have not managed to change. The Italy in which it is good to see one's self and which carries in itself the memory of the persecutions of its own immigrants and will not permit this to happen again on its own land."

Click here to read the entire text of Roberto Saviano's essay, [Il Coraggio Dimenticato](#) [2].



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