



## "Let's burn them alive." Tor Sapienza, year 2014

Veronica Iesuè

Rome, night between 10th and 11th November 2014. The reception centre located in Viale Giorgio Morandi 153, in the Tor Sapienza district, in the eastern suburb of the capital, is being stormed by a group of local residents.

The protestors, around a hundred of people, chanted "Let's burn them alive!", "The niggers must leave here!", "Viva il Duce!" with xenophobic banners and placards such as "No more uncivilized immigrants!", "Stop the invasion! ". The mob had turned up at the centre to protest against the presence of immigrants, "guilty", according to them, of fostering crime and violence in the neighbourhood and "uncivilized" behaviour such as "harassing passers-by by exposing themselves naked at the windows ".<sup>1</sup>

Stones, paper bombs and firecrackers were thrown at the centre, triggering the reaction of the immigrants who, frightened, threw objects at the mob, and used bedframes and unhinged doors to barricade themselves inside the structure for fear that some of the protestors might enter and physically attack them. A legitimate fear, especially after the attack, which took place just in those days in Tor Sapienza, against a foreign 40-year-old man who was seriously injured with a deep cut on his head and immediately helped by the operators of the centre.

The police intervened to stop the acts of vandalism and defuse the tension, yet their intervention only fuelled the rage of the protestors who set fire to cars and dumpsters shouting at the officers: "Defend us, not them because we pay your taxes and salary".<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Please see also: "Tor Sapienza: se il rancore si trasforma in razzismo", 13 novembre 2014, here: <http://www.cronachediordinariorazzismo.org/tor-sapienza-se-rancore-si-trasforma-in-razzismo/>.

<sup>2</sup> Please see: "Scontri Tor Sapienza, aperta inchiesta. Aggredito un altro straniero. Salvini: Ci andrò", *AdnKronos*, 12 novembre 2014, here: [https://www.adnkronos.com/fatti/cronaca/2014/11/12/ancora-scontri-anti-immigrati-tor-sapienza-roma-bombe-carta-contro-polizia\\_TlYgBmeDeY1071xHgO0j2H.html?refresh\\_ce](https://www.adnkronos.com/fatti/cronaca/2014/11/12/ancora-scontri-anti-immigrati-tor-sapienza-roma-bombe-carta-contro-polizia_TlYgBmeDeY1071xHgO0j2H.html?refresh_ce); "Proteste anti-immigrati, riesplode la rabbia", *La Stampa*, 12 novembre 2014, here: <https://www.lastampa.it/cronaca/2014/11/12/news/proteste-anti-immigrati-riesplode-la-rabbia-1.35589937>; "Tor Sapienza, ancora scontri. Immigrati trasferiti", *Il Tempo*, 13 novembre 2014, here:



The clashes, of what had been described by many newspapers as a real "urban guerrilla warfare", caused several injuries among both the policemen and the protestors on the second night of the clashes, and were preceded, on the afternoon of 11th November, by a demo organized by locals to demand greater security in a neighbourhood "invaded by immigrants".<sup>3</sup> Hence, the municipal administration's decision to move the centre's immigrants to other municipal facilities in order to guarantee their safety.

The Rome Public Prosecutor's Office opened an inquiry to ascertain whether the citizens of Sapienza spontaneously organised the demonstration against the centre or whether there was a criminal network behind it.

The building affected by this harsh aggression is a large six-floor block of flats, run by the cooperative "Il Sorriso": it hosts a Sprar centre (Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees), a reception centre for unaccompanied minors (36 in all from Bangladesh and African countries), a family home and the cooperative's offices.<sup>4</sup>

### **The "arguments" of protesters**

The violent attack on the reception centre, according to the demonstrators, broke out due to an assault on a woman in the park located in Via Tranquillo Cremona, a few metres away from the centre in Viale Morandi. The woman claimed to have been attacked by men who, "because of the accent", seemed to be "of Romanian or Albanian nationality"<sup>5</sup>.

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<https://www.iltempo.it/roma-capitale/2014/11/13/news/tor-sapienza-ancora-scontri-immigrati-trasferiti-foto-959974/>.

<sup>3</sup> Please see: "Tor Sapienza, un'altra notte di guerriglia: bombe carta e cariche della polizia", *La Repubblica*, 11 novembre 2014, here:

[https://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2014/11/11/news/tor\\_sapienza\\_un\\_altra\\_notte\\_di\\_guerriglia\\_bombe\\_carta\\_e\\_cariche\\_della\\_polizia-100327280/](https://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2014/11/11/news/tor_sapienza_un_altra_notte_di_guerriglia_bombe_carta_e_cariche_della_polizia-100327280/).

<sup>4</sup> Please see: "Cosa succede a Tor Sapienza", *Internazionale*, 12 novembre 2014, here: <https://www.internazionale.it/notizie/2014/11/12/cosa-succede-a-tor-sapienza>.

<sup>5</sup> Please see: "Guerriglia a Tor Sapienza, la rabbia dei residenti: Via i rifugiati o faremo da soli", *RomaToday*, 11 novembre 2014, here: <http://centocelle.romatoday.it/tor-sapienza/manifestazione-viale-morandi-11-novembre.html>.



Nonetheless, it is worth noting that none of the immigrants in the centre comes from Eastern Europe.

The residents who participated in the protest claimed to be "exasperated" by the situation in the neighbourhood: "We will not stop until all the immigrants have left our neighbourhood", "we are not racists but these people commit thefts, assaults and make our neighbourhood unlivable. If no one can guarantee justice and safety we are forced to take the matter in our hands, since it has become too difficult to live here" and again "We will carry on until everyone leaves: from the reception centre to the nomad camp, to the social housing where Romanians and Albanians live".<sup>6</sup>

Well-known arguments used by those who hide themselves behind the "I am not racist but...", and then instead represents and embodies exactly what they claim not to be. The unequivocal slogans pronounced or displayed on banners during the protest are proof of this.

The attack on the centre of Viale Morandi is one of the many cases in which, in the past decade, foreigners have been become the scapegoats of social pent-up frustration that has singled out the other - the foreigner - for being the convenient target.

The district of Tor Sapienza is located close to the Grande Raccordo Anulare, isolated and very far from the centre. It is mostly made up of public housing and large buildings where drug dealing and prostitution, unfortunately, are well known. There are many problems: poor public lighting, poor public transport service, lack of social and cultural services and a distance from the institutions which has favoured the spread of fascist and racist ideologies. The anger, triggered by decades of urban decay in the neighbourhood, has allowed far-right organisations to infiltrate in the fabric of the community and exploit their anger and turn it to the young foreigners who, after much suffering and hardships, arrived in Italy because of their dramatic past in their home countries.

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<sup>6</sup> Please see: "Roma, alta tensione a Tor Sapienza: scontri e feriti a protesta anti-immigrati. La procura apre un'inchiesta. Aggredito un altro straniero", *Il Messaggero*, 12 novembre 2014, here: [https://www.ilmessaggero.it/ROMA/CRONACA/roma\\_tor\\_sapienza\\_scontri\\_feriti\\_proteste\\_anti\\_immigrati/notizie/1007869.shtml](https://www.ilmessaggero.it/ROMA/CRONACA/roma_tor_sapienza_scontri_feriti_proteste_anti_immigrati/notizie/1007869.shtml)



The signs of intolerance towards the guests of the centre had already manifested in the past. The structure in Viale Morandi had already been targeted, even before the violent attacks in November: not only the residents of the centre, but also the operators of the Cooperative had been insulted for being "guilty of helping foreigners". Despite this, no attempt had ever been made to find lasting solutions.<sup>7</sup>

The problem of Tor Sapienza, as well as many other suburbs of Rome (the same "model" has been reproduced in other areas), cannot in any case justify senseless and violent attacks on vulnerable people who also have to face traumatic situations and overcome intolerable levels of hardship. Nevertheless, there have been those who have not hesitated to side with the aggressors. For example, Il Giornale entitled "Rome, the citizens of Tor Sapienza can't take it anymore: stones been thrown at immigrants",<sup>8</sup> as if the shocking violence on foreign citizens could find a justification in the "exasperation" of the residents of the neighbourhood.

The events of Tor Sapienza are symptomatic of how racism can stem from the social issues that blight our cities. For example, it is worth remembering that in the last few years, projects for the reception of asylum seekers received in the city have been concentrated in the eastern quadrant of Rome, without any rethinking and strengthening of the service system by local institutions.

The events of Viale Morandi have no winners, only losers: the residents, who with their racist violence have not found the solution to their problems, and the immigrants of the centre, moved to another area in order to guarantee their safety.

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<sup>7</sup> Please see: <http://www.cronachediordinariorazzismo.org/tor-sapienza-se-rancore-si-trasforma-in-razzismo/> and <http://www.cronachediordinariorazzismo.org/tor-sapienza-nessuno-parla/>

<sup>8</sup> Please see: <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/roma-i-cittadini-tor-sapienza-non-ce-fanno-pi-sassi-contro-1067069.html>.