

Anna Valente, Torino

Some thoughts about Strasbourg days

DIARY

- On Thursday April 2nd, before the WiB meeting, we (Margherita and I) visited the wonderful historical centre of Strasbourg; then the Women in Black (WiB) meeting.
- On Friday April 3rd we spent the day at the Conference, listening to international speakers in the morning; in the afternoon I attended two workshops: "NATO, Russia and the Enlargement to the East - Round Table" with speakers from Russia, Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia", and "NATO in East and Anti-Missile Defence"; then, of course, our women's workshop.
- Saturday morning Margherita and I started walking toward the place where the demonstration should start; we waited a long time because of the clashes and the blocked bridges. So we arrived very late at the place that we had decided on for our vigil, and this hotel ("Formula 1") was already damaged. We tried to find other women, but without succeed. We met - and missed many times - our friends from Naples. While some young people tried to demolish also the street lights, apart from the other things, we walked until the Pont de l'Europe, and we saw the building on fire (I think that it was the custom building). We came back, the police stopped us (they impeded anyone from going out the area) just while a great number of police vehicles with a lot of policemen in them were entering the zone at a high speed. So we decided to go away; to do so we passed through the wagons of a train for goods that was stationary on an unused track. Our way back to the city centre was safe, taking into account the time we spent waiting for the police blockage of the many bridges, and the huge cloud of smoke rising more and more from the area.
- On Sunday, April 5th, we left and were not able to attend the last session of the conference.

WIB MEETING

- I had a sudden perception - not rational - that I was at ease among so many unknown women, that were different but congenial. What make me feel so? Their gestures? The smiles, the dresses, the way of moving? The age? Maybe their eyes, so interested, so close, so concerned.
- I feel the will to understand each other, in spite of the many languages, despite all. Even the way to speak and the common approach to the arguments allow our mutual understanding.
- I also felt confused: because of the mental fatigue from listening and speaking in three different languages. It was difficult to understand the women speaking in their own languages, I was lazy about asking them to repeat, or saying that I did not understand. I felt confused because many women spoke at the same time; they seemed to need it, one wanting to tell about herself...
- In the meeting it was difficult follow a thread, a reasoning. The time was short and we needed to know each other before we could discuss together. Our discussion was not a neutral / cerebral / highbrow affair, it is first of all, a relationship.
- As Margherita says, to be 40 and not 400 is a good thing; so we can remember and recognise the faces, the voices. And we can speak a little even out of the meeting or the

workshop. So we can be more of a “person” for each other, also we can find one disagreeable or too much different.

SATURDAY

- Soon I feel that the situation is very critical, something like in Genoa; policemen that group everywhere, some ambiguous young men with little motorbikes, people with covered faces; very soon the clashes started between the usual people fond of war. It bothers me that you can't see them, or do not want to see them.

- I feel a great discomfort: facing the police - robocop (it seems to me that they can attack in any moment, so I look around for a getaway...) and in face of “rioters” armed with sticks and swollen bags and headscarfs on their face, even the women. I have a feeling of irrelevance - what am I doing here? I was afraid, certainly. But also there were the meaningless actions, breaking down the street lights, with people who were looking at it clapping. Destruction, smoke, fire.... And also the barbed wire unfolded by the police to impede our going out (this barbed wire with little blades, like in Palestine).

- In that situation I only wanted to go away; I felt like I was in a trap: physically, as we can verify later, when the police impeded our going out; and politically: how can we say something about our position in that place of war and violence? Amidst nothing? To whom? To people that have not our ideas (police, rioters) and do not want listen to us? To people that have our ideas and - as us - came and were entrapped there? I found no other solution than pass under the wagons of a lost train and go away.

- They silenced me, they took out any possibility of saying / showing what I think. I know that I do not want any more to be in similar situations; it is useless, maybe counterproductive, and energy-consuming.

- Who profits: probably the aim of police was to remove the demonstration from the centre, to protect it, and silence any protest that could be accepted and shared by the most part of people. But in this situation all the protest became a war between gangs, one worse than the other, of which one can be - at maximum - a supporter. This is too the way the media presented the events, even correct ones. And the official summit was not questioned. “After all”, said a lady that we met on our way back, “the leaders of nations gather to try to solve problems...”

- How can we foresee / prevent those traps? How can we find different ways to be seen and listened?

BACK AT HOME

- The conference and the workshop offered interesting points; not so much new information, but many examples, arguments, type of communication that will be useful for our actions here, in Italy, in the future.

- In Italy the silence was deafening, both before and after Strasbourg events. I understand the days after, because we had the terrible earthquake... But before it seems to me not to be justified. We are in the NATO alliance and in the war, and we are surrounded by military bases. Is it possible that is so difficult to discuss about these arguments? And to coordinate, to connect each other, at least for local initiatives?

Anna Valente
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