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# The Criminalization of Dissent

## Protest Violence, Activist Performance, and the Curious Case of the VolxTheaterKarawane in Genoa

*Michael Shane Boyle*

*VolxTheater. People, who want to make theater. Volxtheater as a collective, nonhierarchical concept, whether onstage or in the street. Theater from below, from the head, the stomach, the ass, the fist, from each tiny toe and from the chest!*

—VolxTheaterKarawane (*No-Racism.net* 1995–2005)<sup>1</sup>

*[T]he last time I was in Italy was in June, more than a month before the protests. At that time, it was already clear that the police were running out of control, getting their excuses ready for a major civil liberties crackdown and setting the stage for extreme violence. Before a single activist had taken to the streets, a preemptive state of emergency had been essentially declared: airports were closed and much of the city cordoned off. Yet when I was last in Italy all the public discussions focused not on these violations of civil liberties but on the alleged threat posed by activists.*

—Naomi Klein (*2002a:149*)

### The Arrest

#### Genoa's Discourse of Criminality

When I first met Gini Müller in Berlin in late May 2007, it was just a week before the G8 Summit being held that year in the sleepy resort town of Heiligendamm, Germany. As a veteran of the VolxTheaterKarawane from its origin in the mid-1990s to its disbandment in 2005, Gini was happy to answer my questions about her time with the Viennese activist-performance collective. With the 2007 G8 summit looming, Gini and I could not help but chat at length about the demonstrations planned for Heiligendamm and the German government's massive \$130 million security crackdown. Since I knew of Gini's precarious legal position stemming from her arrest at the 2001 G8 Summit six years earlier, I was not at all surprised when she expressed serious reservations about joining the 2007 protests.

On the afternoon of 22 July 2001, a small but conspicuous convoy belonging to the VolxTheaterKarawane departed the Italian city of Genoa, leaving behind the G8 Summit and the tumultuous events of the previous days.<sup>2</sup> But while parked at a rest stop some 20 kilometers outside Genoa's city limits, the summit—or more specifically, a large group of heavily armed Carabinieri—caught up with them.

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1. "VolxTheater Konzept," [http://no-racism.net/volxtheater/\\_html/vktfset.htm](http://no-racism.net/volxtheater/_html/vktfset.htm); All translations from German into English, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

2. While not standard German spelling, "VolxTheaterKarawane" often appears in English articles and documents as "PublixTheater Caravan."

## Student Essay Contest Winner

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**The Department of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies at UC-Berkeley** houses the doctoral program in Performance Studies. The department interfaces regularly with campus organizations such as the Townsend Humanities Center, the Arts Research Center, Cal Performances, and the Berkeley Art Museum as well as an eclectic array of Bay Area arts and community organizations. In TDPS, we understand performance to be a mode of critical inquiry, a means of creative expression, and a vehicle for public engagement. The department aims to bridge the divide between practice and scholarship, and to create an environment in which students engage with theoretical and historical material—deepening their work as writers, thinkers, analyzers, and movers. The Graduate Group PhD in Performance Studies at Berkeley is composed of an unrivalled faculty drawn from across the arts, humanities, and social sciences. Doctoral students have the opportunity to engage in performance activities that complement dissertation research, which itself ranges across the contemporary horizon of drama, theater, and performance studies. Currently, PhD students are working on subjects that range from postcolonial theatricality to the performance of medicine, from puppets and performing objects to contemporary Shakespearean acting, from the discourses of Latino/a theater to feminist geography in contemporary drama. Students admitted to the PhD program are offered a full package of support, including fellowship and teaching assistantships. We take pride in our daily commitment to collaboration and to the kind of rigorously critical, team-based projects we develop with our students, staff, and faculty in the classroom, in our research, in our production season, and in collaboration with our community partners.

By that sweltering mid-summer Sunday in 2001, members of the VolxTheaterKarawane were certainly no strangers to police harassment. The tight-knit group had been touring central Europe for four weeks as part of a migrant rights activist tour performing actions, organizing demonstrations, and throwing parties on the streets of cities throughout Austria, Slovenia, and Italy. Their slow-moving caravan and colorful public spectacles routinely attracted the attention of local authorities, often resulting in searches, seizures, and in the case of the G8 summit in Genoa, indefinite detainment and torture. Despite being accustomed to the repressive tactics of the police, the surprise meeting with Carabinieri just outside of Genoa presented the group with an altogether novel although unwanted experience: this was the first time authorities confronting them had wielded machine guns.

All 25 individuals traveling with the caravan that afternoon were arrested and held in custody for the next three weeks.<sup>3</sup> There they were subjected to aggressive interrogations and physical abuse.<sup>4</sup> Italian police accused the activist-performance collective of forming a criminal organization and charged them under a law most often reserved for the mafia. While the

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3. The information presented in this essay on the VolxTheaterKarawane's arrest in Genoa comes from interviews with group members, documents on the VolxTheaterKarawane's website (<http://no-racism.net/nobordertour>), press releases obtained from the VolxTheaterKarawane, and secondary sources.

4. For a general overview of the group's detainment written in English by the VolxTheaterKarawane, see [http://no-racism.net/nobordertour/noprison/pk\\_20801\\_state\\_01.html](http://no-racism.net/nobordertour/noprison/pk_20801_state_01.html) (No-Racism.net 1995–2005).

VolxTheaterKarawane was eventually released following a massive public outcry that featured solidarity actions throughout Europe, diplomatic pressure by foreign governments, and open letters of support from such disparate sources as Amnesty International, Nobel laureates Elfriede Jelinek and Dario Fo, and the rock group U2, as of this writing 10 years later the dubious charges brought against the Vienna-based group are still pending. None of the 25 arrested have received their day in court, let alone seen the charges against them dropped.

The lingering case of the VolxTheaterKarawane concretely reveals and can help us analyze the consequences of the multiple, overlapping, and violent repressive tactics that state authorities exercised at the 2001 G8 Summit in Genoa, Italy. My argument makes a careful, albeit admittedly artificial distinction between the descriptive discourse of criminality that emerged from the Genoa demonstrations in the media and the discourse of criminalization that provided crucial conditions of possibility for the violent events that ensued in Genoa. I privilege the discourse of criminalization in my analysis of the VolxTheaterKarawane's arrest



*Figure 1. The VolxTheaterKarawane at the FreeRePublic parade a year after their arrest in Italy. Vienna, Austria, 15 June 2002. (Courtesy No-Racism.net)*

and detainment in order to examine how the police's handling of the Genoa demonstrations as a criminal problem that demanded a repressive response corresponds to the general refusal of political elites to recognize movements against corporate globalization as legitimate political interlocutors. My methodological decision to analyze how the discourse of criminalization operated on a specific activist group is an effort to study the demonstrations against the Genoa G8 Summit outside the abstract frames that typically have been employed by the mainstream media.

As a number of scholars, journalists, and activists have noted, the public memory of the Genoa G8 Summit is largely one of chaos and violence, what anthropologist Jeffrey Juris has described as “an iconic sign of wanton destruction” (2008:162). In his study of the Genoa demonstrations and their representation in the media, Juris writes, “Genoa has become synonymous with protest violence, a metonym evoking images of tear gas, burning cars, and black-clad protestors hurling stones and Molotov cocktails at heavily militarized riot police” (2008:161). His analysis corresponds to other studies that highlight how evocative images of violent confrontations between militant demonstrators and heavily armed police have adversely affected public perceptions of not only the Genoa demonstrations, but the anti-corporate globalization movement as a whole (see Graeber 2007; Perlmutter and Wagner 2004; Atton 2002). As is well known, the violence in Genoa led to intense public and legal scrutiny of the militant tactics of demonstrators and the brutal behavior of police (see Carroll 2002; Klein 2002b; Allen Jr. 2001). The drive to attribute blame and prosecute those responsible for the violence in Genoa yielded a powerful discourse of criminality (Hall et al. 1978) that quickly infiltrated the public memory of the Genoa demonstrations (Hooper 2008; Perlmutter and Wagner 2004; Hislop 2001). Like the “active forgetting of the events” that characterizes what Kristin Ross has described as the “afterlives” of the May 1968 protests in Paris, the demonstrations against the 2001 G8 Summit have also become “disembodied, increasingly vague in [their] contours [...] more and more a

purely discursive phenomenon” (Ross 2002a:182; Ross 2002b). This forgetting is not due to any “shroud of silence” around the Genoa demonstrations (Ross 2002a:184), but results from Genoa’s discursive prominence in the media, which focuses on the violence of the demonstrations. Yet responsibility for this framing certainly does not rest solely with the media. After all, the repressive tactics of police and the “protest aesthetics” of militant activists (Day 2007) combined to create an atmosphere of siege and conflict that lends itself to particular and predictable “framings” in the media (Juris 2005; Graeber 2002). Yet as Stuart Hall et al. have compellingly argued, the unsurprising narrative strategies used by the media to represent protest violence invariably presents such turbulence as a crime against society itself (1978). The many legal proceedings against demonstrators and police following the 2001 G8 Summit only intensified the sense of Genoa as being the scene of multiple crimes.

The descriptive and highly performative discourse of criminality that emerged out of the violent images and stories from the protests has undoubtedly shaped symbolic registers and public perceptions of the Genoa demonstrations to a dramatic extent. Such perceptions fixate, of course, on the militant and destructive actions of demonstrators. This focus relies on a depoliticization of the demonstrations into something amorphously criminal, which inevitably leads to a forgetting and/or discursive perversion of the political aims, goals, and subjectivities of the demonstrators themselves. Perhaps more importantly, this discourse of criminality has transformed Genoa into an abstraction, or as Juris suggests, a “metonym” for the alternative globalization movement as a whole. Abstract yet seemingly obligatory references to the Genoa demonstrations in the public discourse around the anti-corporate globalization movement carry strong performative effects. This discourse dramatically structures readings of related protest events, while also influencing public perception of the anti-corporate globalization movement as a whole, for which Genoa has become a central referent (FAIR 2003).<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the discourse of criminality that emerged in representations of the Genoa demonstrations, there was also a powerful discourse of *criminalization* that provided crucial conditions of possibility for the tumult itself. As the case of the VolxTheaterKarawane illustrates, the repressive tactics of police in Genoa were not anomalous, nor were their targets of application indiscriminate. Police behavior was guided by a potent discourse of criminalization that informed police training *before* the protests and which characterized demonstrators as potentially violent criminals whose assembly in Genoa required repression.

The conditions surrounding the VolxTheaterKarawane’s arrest and detainment following their participation in the protests against 2001 Genoa G8 Summit illuminate how the routine criminalization of dissent in liberal democracies operates on and influences activist practices themselves. Moreover, the particular case of the VolxTheaterKarawane reveals the material and discursive challenges facing movements against neoliberalism and corporate globalization. What does the case of the VolxTheaterKarawane reveal about the impact of this discourse of criminalization on activist practices as well as activist bodies? And finally, what possibilities does the case of the VolxTheaterKarawane offer for negotiating discourses of criminalization and their repressive manifestations?

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5. At the same time, it should be remembered that it is mainly activists from and demonstrations in Western Europe and North America that are even included in this public discourse around the movements against corporate globalization. This has a number of discursive and material effects for activists outside of Europe and North America, not the least of which is the general lack of attention to those activists who are murdered or injured elsewhere in the world while demonstrating for issues similar to those addressed by the Genoa activists (see Klein 2002a; Klein 2002b).

## The VolxTheater Konzept

### Vienna 1994–2001

The VolxTheater was founded in 1994 by squatters living in the Ernst Kirchweyer Haus (EKH), an autonomist social center in Vienna's 10th district whose residents included a mix of anarchists, students, artists, and migrants. Initially, the VolxTheater Favoriten (as participants originally called it) was an attempt by the EKH to expand its mission as a cultural center that regularly hosted events like concerts to one that actually produced and presented its own performances. The group drew on the vastly different theatrical talents and training of its members to create performance pieces defined not so much by their production quality as the group's production process. As member Gini Müller noted in 2002, "From the beginning, the working process was defined as a collective process and was accordingly long, lasting several months and rich in conflicts" (2002). Their experiments on the stage featured musical adaptations of works by prominent playwrights like Bertolt Brecht, Dario Fo, Heinrich von Kleist, and Heiner Müller. Productions invariably included loose dramaturgical interpretations of the chosen text's themes and staging practices that often yielded energetic, raucous, and highly tendentious performances.<sup>6</sup> While the group's membership would constantly change throughout its 11-year existence, the VolxTheater's founding principles of nonhierarchical organization, collective collaboration, consensus decision-making, and openness to all persons remained intact.

In addition to their stage work (almost all of which premiered in the EKH), the VolxTheater also regularly produced public direct actions that blurred the lines between site-specific performance and activism. The group's concerns with European migration laws and detention practices largely defined their political agenda. One of their earliest actions, *Flight from Transdanubia* took place in May 1995 and featured the VolxTheater working together with other activist groups in Vienna to raise awareness of Austria's deportation policies. In the middle of Vienna's second district, the VolxTheater publicly dramatized the plight of refugees in Austria by staging a highly theatrical exodus in which refugees from fictional "Transdanubia" struggled to swim across Vienna's Danube River to the other side. In early 1996, the group began holding what they called "racist purity checks" throughout Vienna. In one iteration of this intervention, the VolxTheater set up a portable toilet in front of Vienna's Hofburg Imperial Palace. There they sought voluntary stool samples from passersby, which they then ostensibly used to confirm the racial purity of citizens.<sup>7</sup> The group's interest in combining performance with direct action ultimately took precedence over their desire to produce work for the theatre. After being invited to the Vienna Schauspielhaus to stage the cabaret production, *Austria, a Country Goes Haywire...and the Foreigner Is to Blame*, an incendiary response to Austria's newly formed right-wing coalition government, only to be promptly banned, the VolxTheater began devoting its energy solely to activist projects. In these explicitly activist interventions, however, performance would remain a central part of the group's action strategy.

The end of the VolxTheater's theatrical work set the stage for their first caravan project: the so-called EKH Tour of May 2000 in which the group visited nine different cities throughout Austria in just nine days. The caravan was part of a larger Austrian movement called the Platform for a World without Racism, which had been founded in 1999 to protest Austria's

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6. These productions included Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* (1994), an adaptation of Kleist's *Penthesilia* (1996), Fo's *Can't Pay? Won't Pay!* (1996), and Müller's *Der Auftrag* (1997). Descriptions, pictures, videos, and sound files of these stage productions can be found online at: [http://no-racism.net/volxtheater/\\_html/vktfset.htm](http://no-racism.net/volxtheater/_html/vktfset.htm) (No-Racism.net 1995–2005).

7. Information on the VolxTheater's early performative direct actions can be found in texts by Raunig (2007) and Müller (2007), as well as online at [http://no-racism.net/volxtheater/\\_html/vktfset.htm](http://no-racism.net/volxtheater/_html/vktfset.htm) (No-Racism.net 1995–2005).



deportation practices.<sup>8</sup> On each stop of the tour, the group set up camp in the middle of the city's main square where they played music, held pie fights, distributed political literature, hosted a public kitchen to make food for passersby, and performed variety acts and excerpts from the VolxTheater's stage repertoire. The success of this first tour soon led to others, including a caravan the following October called The Culture Caravan against the Right Wing, which became a central part of the protests that swept through Austria in 2000 against the nation's new conservative government. In both of these early caravans, the VolxTheater experimented with street theatre and improvisational tactics while learning how to function as a traveling activist-performance collective. These early caravans laid the foundation for four more caravans over the next five years, including the one that led to their arrest just outside of Genoa the following summer.

## Performance and Policing

### The 2001 NoBorder Tour

The VolxTheaterKarawane's arrest in Genoa brought their 2001 tour to a sudden and surprise ending. Since 26 June, the group had been traveling through central and eastern Europe on an international activist tour, sponsored by the NoBorder activist network, which took aim at Europe's heightened immigration controls, biometric surveillance tactics, and detention practices. Under the slogan, "For freedom of movement and freedom of communication," the VolxTheaterKarawane (as it was renamed at the beginning of this tour) toured Austria, Slovenia, and Italy, where they conducted street performances, set up NoBorder Camps, protested deportation centers, and participated in demonstrations against the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Salzburg and the G8 Summit in Genoa.<sup>9</sup> Before their arrest on 22 July, the group had planned to conclude the tour in early August with a massive NoBorder Camp at the Frankfurt am Main Airport in Germany. Throughout their entire tour, the VolxTheaterKarawane emphasized transparency. In addition to their colorful and highly conspicuous caravan and camps, the group maintained an online tour diary, frequently broadcasted reports of their actions over the Viennese independent Radio Orange, and sent out regular mobile phone updates to supporters. The group also readily made room in the caravan for anyone they met along the way who wanted to come along.

The NoBorder tour kicked off in Vienna on 26 June 2001 with a press conference and outdoor party. The next morning, 20 activists in cars, vans, and small buses decorated with NoBorder banners set out for Salzburg where they joined the demonstrations against the WEF. There the VolxTheaterKarawane organized street parties, conducted information sessions, and added their own colorful twist to the main demonstration. Dressed as UN soldiers in blue helmets and green fatigues or in bright orange jumpsuits emblazoned with the NoBorder logo, the VolxTheaterKarawane infiltrated the heavily guarded red zone around the WEF's central meeting place and constructed a massive and absurd-looking "WEF-monster" made of black innertubes. In what would become the first of many questionable accusations leveled against the group that summer, Austria's largest newspaper the *Kronen Zeitung* reported on a secret weapons depot the VolxTheaterKarawane was carrying in one of their vehicles. When the VolxTheaterKarawane responded to these allegations by holding a party and public viewing of

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8. The Platform for a World without Racism was a response to the death of Nigerian refugee Marcus Omofuma. Omofuma was killed during a deportation flight from Vienna to Sofia on 1 May 1999 when three Austrian officers strapped him to a seat of the plane and sealed his mouth with tape, causing him to suffocate.

9. A detailed daily log of the VolxTheaterKarawane's entire 2001 caravan can be found online. The log was updated daily during the tour until the group's arrest on 22 July. The contents of the "Caravan Diary" are in English, German, Spanish, and Italian at [www.no-racism.net/nobordertour/media/2606/2606.html](http://www.no-racism.net/nobordertour/media/2606/2606.html) (No-Racism.net 1995–2005).

their “secret weapons depot,” the Austrian police arrived to investigate.<sup>10</sup> The officers promptly left when all they discovered was a collection of cooking utensils, juggling sticks, and as the VolxTheaterKarawane’s tour diary explains, local children having “great fun with our inner-tubes and waterpistols.”<sup>11</sup>

Following the demonstrations in Salzburg, the caravan traveled to the Slovenian town of Lendava, on the border of Croatia, Hungary, and Austria to join other activists in setting up a NoBorder Camp. Here the VolxTheaterKarawane gave performances, held workshops on protest tactics using Boalian invisible theatre techniques, and distributed information about migration issues. In addition to the NoBorder Camp, the VolxTheaterKarawane produced a number of performative direct actions in Lendava. For the NoBorder Action Day on 7 July, members of the group dressed again as UN soldiers and set up temporary border stations on the highway along the Slovenian-Croatian border where they stopped cars to distribute NoBorder passports and information on Europe’s migration policies to drivers. After organizing a demonstration in front of a deportation center in Ljubljana with Slovenian activist groups “to protest the inhumane conditions faced by those denied the freedom of migration,”<sup>12</sup> the group’s next stop in Eisenkappel, Austria, once more attracted the attention of police. Following a lengthy and thorough search of their vehicles, the police demanded the names of everyone who would be heading to the Genoa protests. As their online diary entry for the day indicates, these aggressive police tactics made a strong impact on the group, prompting them to have “long discussions about the tour, responsibility and police repression and how these topics were influencing our groups dynamics.”<sup>13</sup>

From here the group began their journey to Genoa to join the protests against the G8 Summit. Before even crossing into Italy, however, the VolxTheaterKarawane experienced what has become a familiar ritual in the regulation of dissent by European governments. Beginning on 11 July 2001, the Italian government mounted a massive border control operation, which included suspending the Schengen agreement on the free movement of people within the European Union. This exceptional measure allowed the government to conduct border checks on over 140,000 individuals between 11 July and 21 July, the final day of the summit. These checks resulted in 2,930 entry refusals (Hajnal 2001; della Porta et al. 2006:157). Upon learning of these strict plans, the VolxTheaterKarawane decided to split up and cross into Italy at different border points. While most of the group entered Italy successfully, three members were refused entry because their names were on a dubious government watch list prepared specially for the summit. When the VolxTheaterKarawane reunited in the small town of La Spezia, about 100 kilometers from Genoa, they were again detained by local police. This time officials not only recorded their passport numbers but also conducted a full search of their vehicles resulting in the destruction of a number of the VolxTheaterKarawane’s theatre props. Despite these encounters with Italian police, the VolxTheaterKarawane’s tour diary reveals that heading into Genoa the group’s spirits were high, albeit wary of what loomed ahead:

Confronting the armageddon. Monday is the day to enter what has almost been built up to be something equivalent to entering the twilight zone, or alcatraz or a wicked combination of both [...] After another hour or so we began the trek toward Genoa. There was

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10. “Caravan Diary: Tuesday, July 2,” <http://no-racism.net/nobordertour/media/0207/0207.html> (No-Racism.net 1995–2005).

11. “Caravan Diary: Tuesday, July 3,” <http://no-racism.net/nobordertour/media/0307/0307.html> (No-Racism.net 1995–2005).

12. “Caravan Diary: Tuesday, July 10,” <http://no-racism.net/nobordertour/media/1007/1007.html> (No-Racism.net 1995–2005).

13. “Caravan Diary: Tuesday, July 13,” <http://no-racism.net/nobordertour/media/1307/1307.html> (No-Racism.net 1995–2005).



an air of excitement, concern and anticipation as we drove upward through the beautiful mountains and Italian countryside. We stopped at one point to get out of the cars and take in a gorgeous view of the beach and mediterranean, before piling back in and continuing. I asked then “so how far is Genoa now?” with the reply of “we’re here.”<sup>14</sup>

## Confronting the Armageddon

The process of search, seize, and destroy the VolxTheaterKarawane experienced in La Spezia would only repeat itself upon the group’s arrival in Genoa. On their second morning in Genoa, the VolxTheaterKarawane was rudely awakened by a police search of their vehicles and campsite:

[W]e woke up at 8.30am when between 20–30 civil policemen (quite hard to tell) invaded the camp and searched the cars and busses and also sent the passport-data to the authorities in Austria. According to one of the policemen, the Austrian police had told them, that we would be terrorists, trying to smuggle weapons for the G8 Summit. Of course, no weapons were found and obviously no caravanists had terrorism-e[n]tries in the Austrian database. Therefore, we discovered, that all our jumping-balls and tires must have been sliced already at the controls at La Spezia. Still, nobody here can understand the danger of jumping balls, tires [...] and orange cloths.<sup>15</sup>

That afternoon the VolxTheaterKarawane began preparations for a migrant-rights march they were organizing the following day in Genoa with activists from Italy and the rest of Europe. As part of the so-called “Alien-Nation Block,” on 19 July, one day before the official start of the G8 Summit, the VolxTheaterKarawane led a highly theatrical demonstration in Genoa against Europe’s migration policies. The demonstration featured variety acts, street theatre, skits, music, and a crowd of over 20,000 people.<sup>16</sup> During the next two days of extremely violent clashes between protestors and police, the VolxTheaterKarawane chose not to appear in Genoa as a group. While some joined other demonstration blocks, the rest worked for the summit’s independent media center gathering photos, videos, and news of what would become the most violent anti-corporate globalization demonstration to date.

The Genoa G8 demonstrations resulted in over 1,000 injuries, more than 200 arrests, and the death of one protestor, 23-year-old Carlos Giuliani, who was shot by police (Juris 2008). On the first day of the protests, nearly 80,000 demonstrators took part in marches and an attempted siege of the summit venue. An unusually dry and terse diary entry from the VolxTheaterKarawane reveals the shock and gravity of that first day’s events:

Day of action against the G8-summit. One protestor shot dead, many injured with some of them seriously. For more information on the events, please go to it.imc, uk.imc, at.imc, ch.imc and de.imc.<sup>17</sup>

In response to Giuliani’s death and the heavy-handed tactics employed by police, nearly 300,000 people showed up for a solidarity march the following day, 21 July (Juris 2005). Although the demonstrations would end that evening, police attacks and brutal raids on activist centers con-

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14. “Caravan Diary: Tuesday, July 16,” <http://no-racism.net/nobordertour/media/1607/1607.html> (No-Racism.net 1995–2005).

15. “Caravan Diary: Tuesday, July 18,” <http://no-racism.net/nobordertour/media/1807/1807.html> (No-Racism.net 1995–2005).

16. For photographs and a video of the VolxTheaterKarawane’s actions at the march, see “Caravan Diary: Tuesday, July 19,” <http://no-racism.net/nobordertour/media/1907/1907.html> (No-Racism.net 1995–2005).

17. “Caravan Diary: Tuesday, July 20,” <http://no-racism.net/nobordertour/media/2007/2007.html> (No-Racism.net 1995–2005). The internet links referred to in the diary entry are websites of different Indymedia outlets.

tinued into the night and the following days (Juris 2008:186–88). The most notorious of these attacks was undoubtedly the midnight raid on sleeping activists in the Armando Diaz High School. At the time of the raid, the school was serving as the official meeting place of the Genoa Social Forum, the umbrella organization that coordinated most of the demonstrations in Genoa and was committed to a nonviolent activist strategy. During the attacks, police beat and arrested almost every activist inside the school building. An incredible 62 out of the 93 people had to be hospitalized following the raid, with three left in comas. Of the 93 arrested, only one person was officially charged.<sup>18</sup> Understandably unnerved by these events, the VolxTheaterKarawane was thankful just to get out of Genoa (relatively) unscathed the following morning on 22 July.

Yet as the group waited just outside of the small town of Mocconesi (about 20 kilometers east of Genoa) for a few members who had returned to Genoa to collect some theatre equipment that had been left behind, the VolxTheaterKarawane was suddenly confronted by a large troop of police. Officers detained the group outside in the hot sun for hours while they thoroughly searched the vehicles and hastily interrogated a few members before escorting the VolxTheaterKarawane back to Genoa where the group was eventually charged with forming a criminal organization. The evidence against them consisted solely of those items confiscated by police, including black clothing such as a bra and a few T-shirts, harmless theatre props like a 50-year-old gas mask and fire juggling equipment, and a set of cooking knives that the VolxTheaterKarawane used for their public kitchen. Although members repeatedly explained that they belonged to a theatre group and not any criminal organization, they were detained for over three weeks during which time they suffered through interrogations, sleep deprivation, and beatings. One member's description of their first night in custody reveals the physical and psychological ordeals the VolxTheaterKarawane was forced to endure in custody:

The things which happened at the station carried on in an atmosphere of systematic terror, some being beaten badly and some left with a feeling of guilt for being treated less bad. There were also a few policemen distancing themselves from what was happening to us that night. Before leaving the Carabinieri station the groups of men and women, now separated, were kept in a small cold cell with no blankets and windows open. Early in the morning they had to stand with their hands up in a painful position causing cramps, before they were handcuffed and taken away in chains, which were used to strain the handcuffs even more. Someone complained the handcuffs were too tight, whereby the police put them even tighter.<sup>19</sup>

In the media frenzy that ensued during their confinement, the head of Italy's antiterrorist task force accused the group of "spiritual complicity" with the Black Bloc, the militant activists blamed by police for the violence of the G8 Summit (Gipfelsoli-l@lists.nadir.org 2003). Austria's foreign minister Benita Ferrero-Waldner, a member of the right-wing Austrian People's Party, responded to the indefinite detainment of the VolxTheaterKarawane by expressing "her complete trust in the Italian justice system."<sup>20</sup> The group's arrest generated substantial news coverage in Italy and Austria, as well as around the world. Solidarity actions calling for the VolxTheaterKarawane's release took place throughout Europe and the United States and continued until the group's deportation from Italy on 16 August. When and if their trials ever take place, each member could face a 15-year prison sentence. Although convictions are highly unlikely considering the dearth of evidence and absence of wrongdoing, the question remains:

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18. Another investigation determined that the two Molotov cocktails, presented as the most serious evidence of the dangerousness of the people inside the school, had been planted in the school by the police themselves (Juris 2008).

19. [http://no-racism.net/nobordertour/noprison/pk\\_20801\\_state\\_01.html](http://no-racism.net/nobordertour/noprison/pk_20801_state_01.html) (No-Racism.net 1995–2005).

20. For more information on the security measures taken in Genoa in preparation of the summit, see Hajnal (2001).

How could an activist-performance group, whose sole collective action in Genoa consisted of organizing a colorful migrant rights march, be charged with forming a criminal organization and subjected to such police brutality?

## Genoa's Discourse of Criminalization

The arrest and detainment of the VolxTheaterKarawane is only one of a number of seemingly inscrutable actions taken by police against demonstrators in Genoa. Despite the group's identity as an activist-performance collective, the VolxTheaterKarawane was cast into the role of a criminal organization and members were subjected to unjust punishments none of the group's activities in Genoa warranted. When they were not fixating on the violence of protestors, Italian politicians and police officials told the press and the courts that much of the police brutality in Genoa was carried out against orders or by rogue officers (Carrol 2002; Klein 2002b). According to this rhetoric, the violent actions of police in Genoa should be understood as exceptions, or at least mistakes—certainly not representative of any policy decisions or police leadership. In what follows, I dispute claims that suggest the brutal and extra-legal measures taken by police in Genoa were aberrations or rational responses to activist behavior. Far from being anomalous, actions such as the arrest and detainment of the VolxTheaterKarawane were a direct consequence of the discourse of criminalization that guided the repressive tactics used by police in Genoa. Yet the criminalization of dissent practiced at the 2001 G8 Summit is not particular to Genoa. It corresponds to the general strategy taken by political elites toward the demands and subjectivities of anti-corporate globalization movements around the world.

To understand how this discourse of criminalization emerged in Genoa, one must remember that the Genoa demonstrations were the climax to nearly a year of harsh state repression against mass gatherings of anti-corporate globalization activists throughout Europe. Beginning in September 2000 with the first large-scale protest against the meetings of the World Bank and the IMF in Prague where 600 protestors were injured by police, anti-corporate globalization activists had routinely been targets of police violence. The violence in Genoa followed a series of increasingly violent protests that included the extremely brutal demonstrations just one month earlier in Gothenburg, Sweden. There 25,000 people protesting the meeting of the European Union were met by a highly militarized police force who fired live ammunition at protestors for the first time at a European globalization demonstration, leaving one activist in a coma (Juris 2008:54). The much-publicized turbulence at these protests engendered a powerful public discourse around the Genoa G8 Summit before it even began. This discourse legitimated a number of exceptional security measures taken by the Italian government and heightened tensions throughout Italy—tensions that were only intensified by a spate of bomb threats in Genoa that shook Italy just days before the opening of the summit.<sup>21</sup>

As Donnatella della Porta et al. have compellingly argued in their rigorous study of policing at the Genoa G8 protests, the public discourse that preceded the Genoa demonstrations profoundly influenced the attitudes of the various Italian police forces mobilized for the summit (2006). Suspicion, distrust, and fear of anti-corporate globalization activists was only exacerbated by a training program that instructed summit police to view protestors as potentially violent criminals seeking to disrupt public order. Through analysis of the training literature distributed to police before the demonstration used to “teach” officers about the anti-corporate globalization movement, della Porta et al. conclude: “The information strategies used for the Genoa G8 [...] led the police to an undifferentiated image of the ‘no globals’ as bad demon-

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21. della Porta et al. go on to note that while the image of protestors promoted by police before the demonstrations favored escalation strategies, a number of organizational features of the police further enhanced the violent response of police including the degree of militarization of the Italian state police and Carabinieri, their low accountability, as well as their politicization (174).

strators” (172). Protestors were depicted as young, misinformed, and destructive with little direct interest in the issues being protested. Such views were aggravated by rumors that circulated among police forces from dubious Italian intelligence findings, suggesting demonstrators were prepared to take such drastic measures as holding police officers hostage or using them as human shields (173). High-pressure situations demanding officers make quick decisions on how to react to demonstrators further pushed police to develop a stereotype of protestors “as possible sources of difficulty and danger” (172). As della Porta et al. argue, “These stereotypes, filtered through police knowledge, [became] a sort of guideline for the actions of individual policemen and the force as a whole” (171).

What della Porta et al. describe as a guideline for action constituted a discourse of criminalization that relied on a discursive depoliticization of the protestors. This informed and legitimated the various brutal tactics used by police in Genoa. In the absence of any political demonstrations of similar scale in the years directly preceding the summit, superiors instructed Italian police to treat the demonstrations as a public-order disturbance, analogizing the protests to familiar criminal disruptions they had encountered with soccer hooligans, the mafia, or terrorists (2006:173).<sup>22</sup> Della Porta et al. argue that ingrained structural tendencies within Italian policing such as “a broad conception of public order as being a higher order than civil and political rights” further contributed to the discursive depoliticization of demonstrators (179). The discourse of criminalization combined with poor coordination among different police forces present in Genoa ensured a police strategy of escalated force that all but negated policies that prioritized protecting rights of dissent in favor of public order and the smooth functioning of the summit (154). Protestors were approached not as political interlocutors but as criminals to be repressed. The discourse of criminalization that structured the police strategy at the demonstrations led to brutal and even fatal actions, which every independent and international study has concluded were exacerbated or even provoked by police behavior. During the two days of demonstrations in July, police launched over 6,200 tear gas grenades, and at least 13 officers fired pistol rounds at protestors, with one fatal outcome (della Porta et al. 2006:160). The arrest of the VolxTheaterKarawane offers a concrete example of how this discourse of criminalization manifested itself in the tactics used by police. The VolxTheaterKarawane’s case was far from an anomaly especially since the measures taken against them were repeated against several other groups, perhaps most shockingly in the aforementioned Armando Diaz High School incident.

Although the VolxTheaterKarawane’s conspicuous dress and actions clearly did not fit the profile of militant activists who typically prefer the protection of anonymity to avoid arrest, they were not targeted indiscriminately. In fact, the conditions of their arrest followed logically from the discourse of criminalization at work in Genoa. Yet many scholars, activists, and even police officers have argued that police in Genoa created what Jeffrey Juris has called, drawing on Giorgio Agamben, “a zone of indistinction” in which activists were attacked and arrested without regard for their tactical choices (Juris 2008:162; see Agamben 1998). According to this argument, the Genoese authorities’ inability (or in Juris’s words “refusal”) to differentiate between “‘good’ and ‘bad’ protestors” led them to “quash dissent altogether within a ‘zone of indistinction’” (2008:162). Juris’s study draws a stark contrast between the efforts made by activists to distinguish themselves according to their tactics and what he deems to be the

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22. As Juris explains, before the protests, the Genoa Social Forum, a coalition of more than 800 organizations from around Italy who coordinated many of the demonstrations in Genoa, put forth action guidelines urging activists to avoid damaging the city’s infrastructure or physically attacking the police. After extensive debate, and in the spirit of a “diversity of tactics ethic,” there emerged a tacit agreement among diverse groups to dedicate predetermined spaces in Genoa to specific action tactics. Many activists sought to further differentiate themselves by demarcating their tactical choices according to the colors worn. Examples of this included an avowedly non-violent and carnivalesque “pink bloc” march, a large action led by Tute Biachi (the White Overalls), and militant Black Bloc confrontations with police (Juris 2005:417).

indiscriminate targeting of groups by the police (2008:172).<sup>23</sup> Yet as Juris notes, these activist attempts to demarcate themselves according to tactical choices proved futile as police proceeded to treat the protestors as a single undifferentiated mob, attacking and arresting them in what seemed to be a haphazard manner. While Juris's argument emphasizes the extent to which police suppressed all forms of dissent in Genoa, it does little to explain the discourses that informed the police brutality. Instead, it leaves unexamined the larger structures of power within which police behavior in Genoa was enmeshed.

The repressive tactics used by police against the VolxTheaterKarawane in Genoa were not arbitrary and their targets far from indiscriminate. In fact, it was the VolxTheaterKarawane's very distinctiveness from other protestors that led police to notice them in the first place. Departing Genoa as a caravan and stopping just outside the city limits attracted police attention, the same as it had throughout their entire tour. The VolxTheaterKarawane was arrested because of, not despite, their distinctiveness from other protestors. As Gerald Raunig writes, "[I]nstead of having an exonerating effect, the Caravan's self-chosen conspicuousness actually backfired at the moment of attack by the state apparatus: nothing was easier for the police than to isolate a group setting out from Genoa so visibly and so slowly" (2007:234). The dependence of their arrest on their conspicuousness followed from the discourse of criminalization that instructed police to approach the demonstrations as a public-order disturbance. For a police force unnerved by the turbulent events of the previous two days and trained to assess demonstrators as "possible sources of difficulty and danger," a large group of activists waiting on the side of the road would of course raise suspicion (della Porta et al. 2006:172).

The VolxTheaterKarawane's criminalization must also be understood as part of the state's own performative response to the protests. The huge crowds and provocative tactics of demonstrators undoubtedly challenged established structures of authority. As should be clear, the VolxTheaterKarawane's arrest and detainment was not about exacting any form of justice. If it were, the group would likely have received some sort of trial by now. Instead, the VolxTheaterKarawane's arrest was, to paraphrase Michel Foucault, not meant to reestablish justice but to reactivate power ([1977] 1995:49). Thus, the 25 members of the VolxTheaterKarawane were sitting ducks for a police force eager to reassert their authority and establish order. In his study of police behavior toward mass anti-corporate globalization demonstrations in the United States and Europe, David Graeber details numerous recent cases in which police have gone out of their way to defame and criminalize anti-corporate globalization activists, often using extra-legal means to do so (2004 and 2007). The cases Graeber cites resonate strongly with that of the VolxTheaterKarawane and others from Genoa, including the controversy caused by Italian police who confessed to planting the Molotov cocktails in the Armando Diaz High School, prompting the 21 July raid (Carrol 2002). Graeber argues that such exceptional efforts on behalf of police to "change the script" of protests constitute a "calculated campaign of symbolic warfare" that aims at damaging public perception of activists as well as legitimating the harsh tactics taken against them (2007:396). According to Graeber, heavy-handed measures by police against even nonviolent activists is only further evidence of police disregard for the right of dissent that is supposedly guaranteed by liberal democracies. Instead of protecting this political right, police are chiefly concerned with preserving their own "right" to be in control. Graeber asserts, "If you want to cause a policeman to be violent, the surest way is to challenge their right to define the situation" (2007:404). Anti-corporate globalization activists and their provocative actions challenge not only the operations of global capital and neoliberal governance, but structures of authority as well. "Police represent the state," Graeber writes, drawing on the work of Max Weber, "the state has a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence within its borders; therefore, within that territory, police are by def-

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23. [http://no-racism.net/nobordertour/noprison/pk\\_20801\\_state\\_01.html](http://no-racism.net/nobordertour/noprison/pk_20801_state_01.html) (No-Racism.net 1995–2005).

inition incommensurable with anyone else” (2007:401; see Weber 1958). The challenge anti-corporate globalization activists pose to this incommensurability, according to Graeber, often leads police to take extreme measures to regain “their right to define the situation.”

Yet as Graeber makes clear, the situation he describes is not limited to the Genoa G8 Summit protests. In fact, the discourse of criminalization at work in Genoa corresponds to the general strategy taken by political elites toward the movements against corporate globalization, characterized chiefly by the refusal to recognize anti-corporate globalization activists as legitimate political interlocutors. The criminalization of the VolxTheaterKarawane involved both a discursive and material shifting of the group from a political to a criminal frame. Even before they took any action in Genoa, the police positioned VolxTheaterKarawane as a problem that needed to be dealt with criminally. As the case of the VolxTheaterKarawane clearly demonstrates, this translation of political actors into criminals has profound discursive and material consequences for activists—consequences that continue to present dire challenges to anti-corporate globalization movements. Moreover, the discourse of criminalization mobilized against the VolxTheaterKarawane and other activists in Genoa was not the work of errant police officers. The brutal behavior of police in Genoa cannot be understood simply as a question of activist provocation or the poor training and coordination of police. As della Porta et al. have argued, the repressive measures taken in Genoa are not a question of technical or practical missteps; they “reflect the quality of democratic systems” (195). It is the discursive processes of criminalization and the corresponding repressive tactics that the state routinely uses to regulate dissent that most clearly reveal both the limits and the rationality behind neoliberal governance.

### “But the Caravan Goes On!!!”

*Apart from the political aspects of the arrest and charges, being held in prison for three weeks not knowing for how long or what will happen, has psychological implications and this is just another way of trying to prevent people to take action and stand up for their beliefs. BUT THE CARAVAN GOES ON!!!*

—VolxTheaterKarawane Press Conference, August 2001<sup>24</sup>

When asked during our May 2007 conversation about the impact of the Genoa arrests on the VolxTheaterKarawane, Gini Müller described it as “a near disaster for the group” (2007a). Although the arrests brought the VolxTheaterKarawane widespread international support and solidarity, the group was for a time shattered both emotionally and physically. Their detainment produced multiple schisms within the group. While in custody, disagreements arose over whether members should cooperate with authorities. When it came time for their arraignment, the group was split over whether they should even respond to the charges brought against them. For some, the mere acknowledgment of the charges was out of the question; to do so would be to recognize the legitimacy not only of the charges, but the corrupt legal structures positioned against them. Their legal counsel, however, convinced them to speak, warning that to say nothing before the judge would be tantamount to offering a confession.

The massive publicity the VolxTheaterKarawane received following their return to Austria only worsened the multiple rifts growing within the group. As Gini told me, the media’s interest in the group made life “hell.” She recalled being personally hounded by reporters for interviews, even being confronted at her home on multiple occasions. This publicity had a dramatic effect on the group’s internal dynamics. When it came to speaking with the press, struggles arose over who would talk and what would be said. Still others expressed skepticism over the need to speak to the mainstream media at all and questioned the motives of those who willingly stood

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24. It is important to note that the disbandment of the VolxTheaterKarawane in 2005 was not due to their arrest or pending legal case from Genoa. For more information on their disbandment, see Müller (2007b).



in the limelight. As a result of these divisions, not to mention the physical, emotional, and psychological torture many endured during their indefinite detainment, some members left the VolxTheaterKarawane.

Yet the group never allowed the “Genoa-Repression” (as Gini described it in an article commemorating the VolxTheaterKarawane’s 10-year anniversary in 2004) to stop or define them (Müller 2004). Lest one be left with the false impression that the VolxTheaterKarawane acquiesced to the passive and powerless position they were subjected to in Genoa, it is important to note how ardently the group refused to be a “‘tortured’ subject” (Feldman 1991:109). Instead of succumbing to the terror of their detainment, the group made use of the surprising opportunities their arrest afforded them. They utilized the attention their case received in the press by going on the offensive and making public the full details of their arrest and detainment in press conferences and documents released online. In addition, their newly acquired notoriety helped them to recruit new members and resources. They took full advantage of the financial support they received from sympathetic donors as a result of their arrests. These donations would not only support their legal struggles but also fund future projects. The VolxTheaterKarawane even used some of these funds to purchase an old double-decker bus that would become the centerpiece of the group’s future caravans with the NoBorder network. Before disbanding in 2005, the VolxTheaterKarawane continued to create actions that sought novel and provocative ways to combine performance with activism. They continued to tour Europe and, of course, continued to attract the attention of police.

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