



Humanity trapped. The case of the two Roma women locked in the garbage cage in

Follonica

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The story begins on February 23, 2017, with a video in which two employees of the Lidl supermarket in Follonica, Tuscany, after having caught two Roma women rummaging in a "metal cage" - the garbage space outside the supermarket - lock them up by blocking their exit with a forklift.

Women react desperately. A third employee is filming the scene with his cell phone. "See, you can't get into the breakup corner!" referring to the unsaleable merchandise. The other two men laugh complacently. In a very short time, the footage is shared among the supermarket employees and then publicly broadcasted on the net.

The police open an investigation for false imprisonment just after seeing the video on Facebook. One of the two women, Margherita, is thus traced. Police collects her statement and the identity of the three attackers is hence revealed. In the meantime, the video and several parodies¹ of it go viral while the Lidl company is forced to issue an official statement to dissociate itself from the video content².

The post by Lidl on Facebook is echoed by hundreds of comments that criticize the management while expressing solidarity with the three men; they even threaten to boycott the chain if they will be fired. The public opinion is divided between those who attribute the episode to a clear example of xenophobia and racism, and those who belittle it, considering

¹ In addition to several videos and even carnival disguises, so commented by the Mayor of Cascina (PI), Susanna Ceccardi: "Carnival mask yesterday at Cascina! It makes me laugh!! At carnival every joke counts! The comment refers to a photo, posted by the mayor herself on her Facebook page, that depicts a woman masked by one of the women locked in the cage and a man masked as a Lidl employee. Please see R. Nenzi, "Si travestono da Rom ingabbiata e da dipendente della Lidl. Il sindaco: "A Carnevale ogni scherzo vale"", *Il Giornale*, 27 Febbraio 2017, in <http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/si-travestano-rom-ingabbiata-e-dipendente-lidl-sindaco-1369512.html>.

² Here the Facebook post from Lidl Italia <https://www.facebook.com/lidlitalia/posts/1473525486014726>.



it more like a stunt. The employees, for their part, declare that they never had bad intentions towards the two women, but that they only wanted to joke.

The reactions

The Follonica "cage" episode soon becomes a case discussed nationally, arousing a vortex of reactions involving representatives of national and local institutions, politicians and public actors, with often opposing positions.

The lawyer of the two employees who had recorded the episode, builds his clients' defense by refusing any accusation of racism and emphasizing the position of the management Lidl Italia, blamed for having unduly accused their workers, without considering that their behavior was aimed at protecting the supermarket and their jobs.

Margherita, one of the two victims of the attack, known in the area for her assiduous presence near the supermarket, in some interviews recorded in the aftermath of the incident, confirms her confidential relationship with the employees.

No official condemnation of the episode has ever come from Lidl's management in Follonica, except for a few timid attempts to justify the act by blaming the "exasperation" of the supermarket's employees due to the constant presence of a few Roma in the supermarket and the parking lot, and the numerous thefts that had taken place³.

Even a journalist from a national newspaper⁴ stated that exasperation can lead to these consequences.

Associazione 21 Luglio⁵ - a non-profit organization that supports groups and individuals in condition of extreme segregation and discrimination, protecting their rights and promoting children's well-being - is among the first to express great concern about what happened and

³"Rom chiuse nel cassonetto, dal supermercato: «Se sparisce merce anche di scarto perdiamo il posto»", *Il Tirreno*, 24 Febbraio 2017, "<https://iltirreno.gelocal.it/regione/toscana/2017/02/24/news/rom-chiuse-nel-cassonetto-dal-supermercato-se-sparisce-merce-anche-di-scarto-perdiamo-il-posto-1.14931195>."

⁴ On the national newspaper *Libero*, the day after the publication of the video the chief editor Vittorio Feltri writes "LA BRUTTA STORIA DI FOLLONICA. Vittorio Feltri e le zingarelle in gabbia al Lidl: "La verità, italiani esasperati", <https://www.liberoquotidiano.it/news/opinioni/12315050/vittorio-feltri-zingarelle-supermercato-lidl-gabbia-italiani-esasperati-.html>.

⁵ <https://www.21luglio.org/>



to talk of an act of multiple discrimination linked to gender identity and ethnicity of the victims⁶.

The Codacons⁷ association affirmed that it was in favour of the firing of the two employees and, as the Committee for the defense of equal opportunities and against racism, urges the Grosseto Public Prosecutor's Office to extend the investigation to the members of some Facebook groups, responsible for having posted comments on the racist video and inciting hatred⁸.

The Secretary of the Chamber of Labour of Grosseto, Claudio Renzetti, ensures that employees involved in the episode and enrolled in his trade union will be expelled, with consequent deprivation of any legal protection.

Matteo Salvini, instead, take the employees' sides⁹ and calls for the eviction of Roma settlements and ethnic cleansing, a proposal that he will promptly put forward when he becomes Minister of the Interior, through the announcement of a so-called census of the Roma and Sinti population¹⁰.

⁶ Please see <https://www.21luglio.org/follonica-associazione-21-luglio/>.

⁷ Codacons is a non-profit association founded in 1976 in defense of consumers and the environment.

⁸ Please see Codacons press release here <https://codacons.it/nomadi-in-gabbia-codacons-chiede-licenziamento-in-tronco-per-autori-video/>.

⁹ "I am with the employees to whom we offer legal support and not with the #ROMA #ROOMMAGERS" Please see

https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/835081733389307904?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E835081733389307904&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.esquire.com%2Fit%2Fnews%2Fpolitica%2Fa13594062%2F10-peggiori-tweet-matteo-salvini%2F. The same post was published by Salvini on Facebook, with the same comment, then (repeatedly) modified, as the Facebook history shows. From "I'm with the employees (I will contact them already today to offer all our support, even legal) and not with the Roma "ROOMMAGERS" to here is the video of the nomads caught poking around in the corner of Lidl's broken products". To consult the cronology of modifications to the link, please visit <https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/posts/10154727113888155>.

¹⁰ On August 7, 2018 Aliesvki Musli, a Roma activist reported, via Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/musli.alievski/posts/2109857099039100>), has reported the Minister of the Interior for spreading ideas based on racial and ethnic hatred (under Articles. 43 TU Immigration and 3 of Law No. 654/1975), referring to some phrases pronounced at a television show in which Salvini announced: "I am having a dossier prepared on the Roma issue in Italy. It is necessary to understand who, how, how many are, then a census. Let's make a registry, a picture of the current situation. While irregular immigrants can be expelled, the Italian Roma unfortunately remain here". The physical removal of the Roma population and the material destruction of illegal settlements was the subject, in 2019, of the circular of the Ministry of the Interior n.16012/110 (https://issuu.com/opengol/docs/circolare_campi_rom), addressed to all the Prefects, having as its object "Settlements of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti communities", which asked the Territorial Offices to



The post of the Secretary of Lega Nord is echoed by several criticisms from politicians and journalists, from Enrico Rossi¹¹ - President of the Tuscany Region, - to the writer Roberto Saviano¹², from the Secretary of the Sinistra Italiana, Nicola Fratoianni¹³ and Andrea Orlando¹⁴, to the then Minister of Justice to Massimo D'Alema¹⁵.

A few days later, Andrea Maestri, lawyer and member of parliament from the political party Possibile, in opposition to Matteo Salvini's comment, offered free legal assistance to the victims and presented a complaint to the Court of Ravenna asking the judges to rule on Salvini's violation of the principle of parliamentary immunity, and for public condoning of a crime and incitement to racial hatred¹⁶.

Case dismissed

In spite of the numerous acrimonious comments, two months after the episode, Lidl Italia confirms its first decision of not renewing the work contract of one of the two men involved in the episode, and firing, for good cause, the other.

collaborate, to outline the picture of the situation of the illegal camps, to prepare a plan of evictions. Please see <http://www.cronachediordinariorazzismo.org/censimenti-e-sgomberi-delle-comunita-rom-una-nuova-circolare-ai-prefetti/>.

¹¹Please see, "Rom rinchiusi, Rossi: «Episodio gravissimo, frutto avvelenato della xenofobia»", *IlGiunco.net*, 24 Febbraio 2017, in <https://www.ilgiunco.net/2017/02/24/rom-rinchiuse-rossi-episodio-gravissimo-frutto-avvelenato-della-xenofobia/>

¹² R. Saviano, "Scusate se parlo ancora dei deliri di Salvini", *La Repubblica*, 25 February 2017, <https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2017/02/25/news/scusate-se-parlo-ancora-dei-deliri-di-salvini-159164230/>

¹³ "It is a shame. You are a barbarian and a leader who stands to lead the country and writes and says these things is unacceptable". During the TV show Tagadà, 24 February 2017, in <https://www.la7.it/tagada/video/salvini-sto-con-i-lavoratori-contro-le-rom-e-fratoianni-lo-attacca-sei-un-barbaro-24-02-2017-205440>.

¹⁴ "Can we accept that two people who lock two Romas in a cage have the praise of the leader of one of the Italian political forces, who even offers to pay the legal fees, without anyone from our party saying anything?". Reported on *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 26 Febbraio 2017, <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2017/02/26/pd-orlando-furioso-coi-suoi-salvini-plaude-per-le-rom-in-gabbia-e-noi-zitti-destra-trionfa-anche-se-vinciamo-noi/3417553/>

¹⁵ "A political leader who incites to commit a crime is dangerous for himself and others. We know that unfortunately that there is a polluted political climate in Italy" As reported by S. Rame, "Le Rom messe in gabbia al supermercato da un dipendente iscritto alla Cgil", on *Il Giornale.it*, 24 Febbraio 2017, in <http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/rom-messe-gabbia-supermercato-dipendente-iscritto-cgil-1368468.html>.

¹⁶ Please see <https://www.facebook.com/andrea.maestri.16/posts/10210528654946935> and C. Matteini, "Rom rinchiusi alla LIDL, esposto contro Salvini: "Istiga all'odio razziale"", *Fanpage.it*, 2 March 2017 in <https://www.fanpage.it/politica/rom-rinchiuse-alla-lidl-esposto-contro-salvini-istiga-all-odio-razziale/>.



The investigation for false imprisonment continues until the end of September, when the Deputy Prosecutor of the Court of Grosseto issues a decree of dismissal, considering the charge excessive and therefore unfounded.

Also, both the local and national label the case as of press playful.

The case is dismissed as a prank, "maybe of bad taste, but nothing more"¹⁷. The version of Margherita, the woman in the video who screamed from fright, is nevertheless different. A few days after the episode, she told to RepTv¹⁸ and Fanpage¹⁹ that both herself and the other woman in the video actually knew the two employees, who used to "joke" with each other. From these interviews it emerges the image of a frightened and humiliated woman, who declares to have reacted in that way because seriously frightened, confirming, in fact, that the mockery had actually gone beyond an innocent joke. Margherita's version however does not generate any compassion in the supermarket's customers who – in majority – take the employees' side while others inveigh against the woman²⁰. Once again, it is the Secretary of the Northern League, who, after hearing the news of the firing of the two employees, invites his "followers" to boycott the supermarket²¹.

Why to reflect on the episode happened in Follonica

¹⁷V. Feltri, "L'Editoriale", *Libero*, 14 September 2017, <https://www.liberoquotidiano.it/news/editoriali/13236166/vittorio-feltri-editoriale-scuse-burloni-follonica-assolti-giudici-rom-rinchiuse-gabbia.html>

¹⁸A. Lattanzi, "Follonica, la Rom ripresa nel video-scandalo: "Era uno scherzo, ma la paura era vera"", *RepTv*, 25 February 2017, <https://video.repubblica.it/edizione/firenze/follonica-la-rom-ripresa-nel-video-scandalo-era-uno-scherzo-ma-la-paura-era-vera/268805/269238?ref=fbpr&fbclid=IwAR1TCb9cKniTYquWjJ-KzLwLU5VFsgmvEBr9IINYT2RoQiRcAqyU4EE2njY>.

¹⁹T. Saveri, "Parla la Rom chiusa nel gabbiotto: "Avevo paura". I passanti: "Dovevano metterla nel tritacarne"", *Fanpage.it*, 24 February 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLUPXDF8qL0&feature=youtu.be>.

²⁰ "Even if the gesture of the employees was wrong, the women were stealing", these are "people who hinder you in your daily life", say some of the people to Saverio Tommasi, "in my opinion they should have set them on fire, because it's easy to judge, but these women have been living here in Italy for years now and they steal everything there is to steal [...] as soon as you see that they are in the wrong, you have to teach them a lesson". Please see the previous note for the full interview.

²¹"With a mortgage to and a family to feed, the two employees were fired for stopping and filming two thieves! Solidarity to Ramon and Andrea. #BOICOTTALIDL.P.s. Please, leave your comment here: www.facebook.com/lidlitalia". Please see https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10154727113888155&id=252306033154.



What is striking about this episode is not only the violence of the act and the ruthlessness of the video images. To lock someone in a cage implies a thought of contempt. The unconsciousness with which the three men make such a brutal gesture and the lust for exhibitionism expressed through the video are unacceptable. But even more impressive is the "success" recorded on social platforms, the hundreds of shares, the thousands of comments, the millions of views. An episode that poses once again the age-old question of digital space as a place without rules on one hand, and on the other exemplifies the development of a rhetoric that is expressed through social networks and increases even more the confusion between politics and propaganda. Astonishing are the statements of those, including politicians, who speak out about the "heroic act"²² of those who rightly wanted to punish two thieves²³. As well as surprising are the positive reactions to the call for boycott the supermarket chain for having distanced themselves from the gesture. It is disturbing that such a denigrating gesture is legitimized, trivialized and labeled as a "prank"²⁴.

By reading this kind of comments and looking at the interviews, one can understand how serious are the reactions of those who defend such violent actions, instead of condemning them. The other aspect worth noting is that - besides those comments in reaction to Matteo

²² As reported in some comments to the video, Facebook posts and online articles.

²³ "Solidarity with the Lidl employees. They are suffering unacceptable persecution, even risking their jobs. We can no longer resist in a state that forces people to take justice in their own hands because of the poor resources allocated to security sector and then it condemns them when they do so, leaving the real criminals with absolute impunity. I am with those who defend themselves!" So the words of the mayor Susanna Ceccardi. Please see <https://www.facebook.com/susanna.ceccardi/posts/10211123311893898>.

²⁴ "Lidl Follonica, beccano due nomadi a rovistare nell'immondizia e le chiudono in gabbia", Liberotv, 24 February 2017, <https://www.liberoquotidiano.it/video/libero-tv-copertina/12313521/lidl-follonica-nomadi-immondizia-chiuse-gabbia-video-facebook-bestiale-urlo.html>. "Stunt is the same term used to refer to the episode that took place in 2018 where Daisy Osakue was attacked with egg throwing. Please also see C. Sarra, "Daisy Osakue, presa la "banda dell'uovo": uno dei tre figlio di consigliere Pd", *Il Giornale*, 2 Agosto 2018, in www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/daisy-osakue-presa-banda-delluovo-hanno-agito-goliardia-1561225.html, "Daisy Osakue parteciperà agli Europei, gli aggressori sono tre giovani italiani: uno è figlio di un consigliere del Pd", *Il Mattino*, 2 Agosto 2018, https://www.ilmattino.it/primopiano/cronaca/daisy_osakue_aggressori_tre_giovani_italiani_goliardia-3892424.html, and ""Una goliardata", presi aggressori di Daisy", Adnkronos, 2 Agosto 2018, in https://www.adnkronos.com/fatti/cronaca/2018/08/02/presi-gli-aggressori-daisy_ptUcBflswBw0aApuK2ezpJ.html.



Salvini's statements - there have been very few explicit condemnations of the episode by political representatives and public figures. A silence most probably due to the imminent local elections in Italy.