Spray Paint and Roadblocks: Ultima Generazione’s Fight for the Planet

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While droughts, floods and abnormal temperature peaks are becoming more frequent in Italy, policy-makers keep showing a lack of will and determination to address the causes of climate change. This failure to act has led climate activists to resort to more radical modes of protest to make their voices heard. In this conversation, two members of Ultima Generazione explain to journalist Elena Pioli the reasons and goals behind their disruptive actions of civil disobedience, and discuss the legal and media backlash they are facing.

Over the past year, the non-violent civil disobedience actions carried out by the environmental movement Ultima Generazione (Last Generation) have split Italian public opinion. Founded at the end of 2021 by a few Extinction Rebellion activists, the group has grown rapidly, and is now entirely independent from the UK movement, with dozens of non-violent actions performed in several Italian cities. These actions include, among others, road blockades and spraying washable paint on public buildings and monuments.

Elena Pioli: Despite your protests being non-violent, you often face verbal and physical aggression, while media and political representatives depict your actions as counter-productive or irresponsible. How do you train to face such backlash?

Carlotta Muston: Non-violence, the basic principle of our movement, is not simply the opposite of violence but a wider concept, an ethical and moral code that we try to apply in every aspect of our lives. We demonstrate to raise awareness of the violent system we live in, and of the climate and ecological collapse we are experiencing. But in doing so, we inevitably bring conflict to the places where we act. It’s crucial for us to empathise with the people who feel annoyed by our actions and angry. We want them to understand that we are also angry about having to sit on a highway and facing legal charges just because our government isn’t acting on the climate crisis. But these feelings do not affect our belief that what we do is necessary, in spite of the distress we may feel.

To prepare for an action, we try to continuously develop our emotional awareness: we focus on our intentions and motivations, work on non-violent communication, and simulate the reactions we might get. Being part of a group is an important part of the process. It’s easier to fight when you know you’re not alone.

Giulio Giuli: Every one of us has a different way to behave on the field: some reply to people, engage in conversation, express their feelings. However, it’s hard to be heard in those situations, as people are often focused on their anger. Personally, I tend not to get angry or shout. I look at the person in front of me and try to make them understand that I’m with them in their discomfort. It’s very important to make it clear to the people that we are not defying them, and that we care about them. By sitting down on roads, we choose to put ourselves in a position of inferiority. Believing that we are doing the right thing is the cornerstone of civil disobedience and it’s what pushes us to do what we do.
Speaking of reactions, what is the one you usually get from law enforcement officers?

**Giulio Giuli**: It depends. Sometimes they are rather paternalistic, or they try to scare us by telling us that we might be putting people in danger. Sometimes, on the contrary, we find sympathy among some officers who understand our motives: these occasions are a breach that we can use to further discuss with them and raise awareness. Some others act as friends to get information. They might seem sympathetic on the spot, and afterwards you see them staking out your house, or you meet them again at the police station and they don’t even say “hi”, as happened to me once.

Our trainings cover these situations. We learn how to try to establish a connection while always remembering what the role of police officers is, and to react respectfully but firmly when they ask for information we cannot disclose.

As for the legal backlash you’re experiencing, can you give us an idea of what the costs are for your organisation in terms of time and money? What are the consequences for the activists that are charged and face trials?

**Giulio Giuli**: One of the main costs are time-consuming trials, questionings, meetings with lawyers. Our work also consists of maintaining a video database that allows us to prove what actually happened during the actions. Legal training, in person or online, is less time-consuming, but it is crucial for our activists.

On the financial side, administrative sanctions represent a huge threat. In April, the Italian government approved a decree that increases up to 40,000 euros the fines for staining public buildings or monuments. Whether it’s one, two or forty thousand doesn’t change much for someone who doesn’t have the means to pay, but it may cause problems for those who have properties, perhaps inherited, that could be seized.

We are just beginning to see the legal consequences of our actions. We currently have four ongoing trials, plus a hearing about a special surveillance request. Another trial is charging us for the first time with participation in a criminal organisation. It’s curious that only some of the activists that took part in the actions have been charged.

To cope with the costs, we collect money through crowdfunding campaigns, charity events, and donations from wealthy people. We have already spent part of our budget on lawyers’ fees, but with around eighty people being charged, in most cases for more than one crime, legal expenses are bound to rise.

**Charges such as participation in a criminal organisation and special surveillance requests are a striking backlash for non-violent actions of civil disobedience. Apart from your members who have a legal background, are there lawyers who help you pro bono?**

**Giulio Giuli**: Some of them work for us pro bono, but they still have expenses to be reimbursed. We are lucky to have some very proactive lawyers; one of them is trying to coordinate the legal strategies of all our legal representatives, which is of enormous help.

In March, 120 lawyers in the UK made a historic declaration of conscience: they will refuse to prosecute activists, and they will not represent polluting companies. This has been barely mentioned in the Italian news, and even in the UK it did not make the headlines, but it’s such an important sign to see lawyers...
standing up for those who try to protect the planet.

What are the main goals of your campaign “Non paghiamo il fossile” (Stop funding fossil fuels)?

**Carlotta Muston:** Last year the Italian government spent 41.8 billion euros in Environmentally Harmful Subsidies (EHS). We request that a dialogue is opened between politicians, civil servants and scientists to come up with short-, medium- and long-term plans. Some subsidies, such as the 80 million euros provided to research on gas and carbon or the one billion euros in fringe benefits, should be interrupted immediately, and the money used to fund research on sustainable irrigation methods, or to develop the public transportation network in Southern Italy and the many small municipalities whose inhabitants have no other choice but to use private cars.

Other types of funding require more time to be suppressed, but the main issue is that we’re lacking the political will to stop our dependency on fossil fuels. This is partly because of the extremely strong influence Eni (Italy’s State Hydrocarbons Authority) has on policy-makers and the media.

**Giulio Giuli:** We are aware that “stop funding fossil fuels” is not a magic formula that will solve all our problems. What we need is a deep socio-cultural revolution. Companies and states must understand that mere greenwashing is not the way to go. In Italy’s Lombardy region, huge investments have been made to replace diesel-powered trains with hydrogen. This might seem virtuous, but hydrogen will be produced from methane, whose impact on the atmosphere is 60 times worse than that of carbon dioxide. Alternatives, such as electricity-powered trains, are there; all we have to do is see them.

The Italian media, policy-makers and public figures in general show a tendency to belittle your movement and judge your actions by their form, instead of focusing on the content of your demands and stimulating public awareness of the climate crisis. Why does it seem so difficult for those who have power and privileges to acknowledge the climate crisis and take action?

**Carlotta Muston:** It is a form of cognitive dissonance: people are aware of the climate crisis but cannot realise what it really means and how hard it will affect everyone, privileged or not, sooner or later. This is partly due to the fact that the mainstream media avoided talking about this issue for so long, or when they did, it depicted it as something abstract, far away from us. People haven’t been given the psychological and emotional tools to understand what “ecological and climate collapse” really means.

Once I realised the magnitude of the struggle ahead, I felt a personal responsibility to put myself at the service of a cause I believe in, especially since I have capacity and resources to do so. Why keep living a hypocritical life in denial once we know what’s going on? Furthermore, not taking action means leaving us activists alone. Every time I participate in an action, I dedicate weeks or months to it, whereas if more people were involved, less effort would be required from each of us. We’d have more resources, more time.

**Giulio Giuli:** When we think about the climate crisis, we are drawn to believe that “someone will take care of it”, that at some point governments will take scientists’ advice and act accordingly. When I first saw footage of Greta Thunberg’s civil disobedience action in front of the Swedish parliament, I realised that the time to act had already come, and I also felt a sense of responsibility – a responsibility which eventually is also freedom, as is non-violence.

The media, governments, and the establishment have enormous power in shaping people’s vision of reality. The progressive dismantling of the education system over the past forty years has obviously played a role in the widespread belief that capitalism is the only possible system. My hope is that Ultima
Generazione can offer a different example, not only through our actions, but in the way we organise ourselves as a community focused on inclusion, democracy, respect for every individual – a model that already existed within movements such as Okupa in Spain.

During one of your protests, in which you blocked Rome’s GRA motorway, one of the stuck drivers asked the activists, “Do you think India and China will listen to you now?”. This reflects a widespread way of thinking. How would you respond?

Giulio Giuli: We should set an example and lead the change, especially because our countries were the first to start destroying the planet and exploited natural resources for longer. So we should also be the first to abandon a poisonous lifestyle based on having – and wanting – more and more. Until we change this model, which we exported abroad, we cannot ask other countries to make sacrifices. And this is actually the opposite of sacrifice, as by giving up what we don’t need we ultimately become richer.

I’d remind those who ask about India and China that a big part of what these countries produce is exported to the West, and Europe in particular. We have only moved pollution from here to other parts of the world, but the consequences for the environment are the same.

Ultima Generazione was born inside Extinction Rebellion, which recently shifted away from disruption as a primary tactic. Are there other European movements you are in contact with?

Carlotta Muston: Ultima Generazione is part of the A22 network (named after a crisis declaration made in April 2022) together with organisations such as Dernière Rénovation in France, Letzte Generation in Germany, and Renovate in Switzerland. We are in close contact with them, we support each other and keep up to date on how our campaigns are going.

We also maintain relations with Italian movements outside the A22 network, but in the landscape of the country’s civil movements, characterised by marches as the main form of protest, we are currently the only organisation with defined strategies and modes of operation. The idea is to get to know each other, with the aim that other movements – not necessarily environmental, but also feminist, anti-racist, etc. – join the civil disobedience network.

In Milan, we keep a very close relationship with Cobas, the trade union that historically has suffered the most legal attacks, because it does not compromise. It is the only union that is still trying to fight against a job insecurity that has become structural.

One of the most frequent criticisms of radical climate activism is that its disruptive methods might draw people away from the cause; is there a risk of losing more support than you gain?

Carlotta Muston: Our goal is not to please people, but to ring the alarm bells on a climate crisis that everyone needs to acknowledge, regardless of whether they like Ultima Generazione or not. What we demand are immediate measures to ensure a safe future for our country and our world. Our numbers are slowly but steadily growing, which means we are reaching more and more people. But what we’d like to achieve is a more radical attitude shared by the whole spectrum of climate movements.

What would you say to someone uncertain about embracing civil disobedience and disruption as forms of protest?

Giulio Giuli: Marches and other forms of protest do have their significance, but everything that has been tried so far clearly hasn’t worked. Apart from the suffragettes, there haven’t been many examples of civil
disruption movements in Europe, so why not give it a try?

I don’t think civil disobedience is the only possible strategy. I wouldn’t be surprised if even more “radical” movements centred on sabotage appeared. The climate emergency is at a stage where every form of disruption is legitimate. We chose disobedience because of our beliefs, cultural background and political will.

**Carlotta Muston:** I embraced non-violence as one of my main values, but as a movement we don’t have any identity attachment to one form of protest or another. It seems that what we do is the best way to get results; despite the backlash, it’s working. If we are seeing more and more articles or debates on the climate crisis, it’s because a group of citizens had enough determination to decide that enough was enough. There is still room for creativity: if someone comes up with a more effective method, we’ll be happy to provide our support.

*This is the translated and edited version of an interview conducted online on 13 April, 2023.*
Carlotta Muston was a member of Extinction Rebellion before joining Ultima Generazione. Carlotta started participating in civil disobedience actions last autumn, and has an important role in managing, along with other members, the community aspects of the movement, such as meeting facilitation, training, and team building.

Based between France, Italy and the Middle East, Elena Pioli works with newspapers, magazines and localisation companies as a freelance translator and author. Her main fields of expertise are women’s rights, environment and sustainability, cultural and social issues.
Giulio Giuli is a former member of the Extinction Rebellion legal support team, he was brought to focus on Ultima Generazione as the group that was facing more legal challenges. Besides his legal support position, he started to take part in civil disobedience actions in the summer of 2022.