

Erri De Luca and the No TAV: “This Trial is About Words”

Judith Harris (January 28, 2015)



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ROME – “This trial is about words and, yes, freedom of speech,” prize-winning author Erri De Luca told www.i-italy.org [2] in a telephone interview. “I am incriminated because of phrases I had said in public.” De Luca, 65, was speaking at the conclusion of the first hearing today before a court in Turin, where he is on trial for saying that to “sabotage” work on a 35-mile tunnel for a high-speed train link between France and Italy is legitimate.

The tunnel known as the TAV, under construction by the French company Lyon Turin Ferroviaire



(LTV) and another in Italy, is being cut through a reportedly asbestos-ridden (and if so, potentially polluting) mountain in Piedmont, and has been vigorously opposed in demonstrations that have ended in violence. The case against him was brought by the LTV and is opposed by many Italian intellectuals.

De Luca is the popular author of over 50 books – his *Il Peso della Farfalla* alone sold a half million copies in Italy and has been translated into 20 languages, from Korean to Persian. For his words in the course of an interview with the Huffington Post in September 2013 he risks from three to five years in prison for alleged “incitement to commit crimes.” To this De Luca responded on Facebook, saying, “They want to use the court to censure free speech.” However, he was also careful to say in an Italian interview today that any free-speech comparison between “my whacky little judiciary event” with the Charlie Hebdo murders in France was inappropriate.

Only the day before this another court, convened in a bunker-like hall at a maximum security prison in Turin, sentenced 47 anti-tunnel demonstrators to a total of 150 years in prison on charges of provoking extreme violence during the summer of 2011, and acquitted six. Known as the “No TAVs” for their opposition to the tunnel, the rock-throwing demonstrators had battled with police for two days, with 180 injured on July 3 that year in the Valle di Susa. According to defense attorney Claudio Novaro, police forces had provoked the incidents by hurling “a floodtide of tear gas” at the thousand-strong demonstrators, and called the report prepared by the Interior Ministry DIGOs “a caricature.” However, after yesterday’s verdict was announced, No TAV sympathizers threw rocks at police and blocked a highway.

At today’s preliminary hearing on the related De Luca case, the presiding judge rejected at least one of the arguments of the prosecutors, who had tried to link the author’s words with the validity of the No TAV. “Oddly,” De Luca told this reporter today, “it is not the Italian state that is prosecuting me – it is the French company, accusing me of being damaging to them. The prosecutor accepted this even though one would think that the state would be the more interested party.” At the next hearing, which will take place only March 16, De Luca will be questioned.

At that time the word “sabotage” itself is likely to be challenged since its meaning can be ambiguous. “It means many things – even Gandhi used it. Besides material damage the implication is also ‘obstruction’, even in a Parliament. A transport workers’ strike, too, can be a form of sabotage, and demonstrations for civil rights.”

As a writer De Luca considers that he has a responsibility to speak out, for, he said, quoting the Bible verse words of King Lemuel, “Open your mouth [to speak] for the mute” –that is, speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves. For his lawyer in Turin, Gianluca Vitale, “The words of an intellectual cannot constitute a crime. The judge held that a debate on the question was useful, but we continue to be convinced that this is a process against free speech, and we will calmly show this this is not an instigation for a crime.”

Senator Stefano Esposito, 46, of the Partito Democratico is Vice President of the Transport Commission of the Senate. For Esposito, the projected train line is important, a position which has brought him intimidations and even death threats. “I do think that the Turin court has finally shown that the violence of the summer of 2011 existed, even though this was denied for years by the intellectuals and media circus that protected the violent part of the movement against the high-speed train, beginning with Erri De Luca, who spoke of a ‘political trial’ so as to shift attention away [from the violence] and make it all about ideology. This is delinquency [teppismo].”

De Luca has a long background of fairly radical activism, as was vouchsafed to this reporter by one of his fellow leftists from the Sixties, when a certain degree of anarchism was widespread. Said this admitted anarchist, who spent months in prison for political violence, “That was in the winds – we all felt that way.” But is his trial really necessary? asked Cesare Martinetti in *La Stampa* Jan. 8. Since “nobody can deny that freedom of speech exists in Italy,” just let the intellectuals, including from the far leftists who are De Luca’s old buddies, sit around and talk their heads off over a plate of polenta.



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