

## CHAPTER 2: ITALIAN *AUTONOMIA*

Like nowhere else in Europe, Italy experienced a wave of protests in the 1970s that drew in millions of participants and challenged the control mechanisms of the entire social order. The long wave of Italian social movements began with sporadic student protests that reached a high point in 1968. Unlike most countries, however, as campus protests subsided, Italian students found support among factory workers. During the Hot Autumn of 1969, intense labor conflicts paralyzed industry, and for four years, workers and management battled for control of production and profits. Simultaneously, feminism and a countercultural youth movement transformed social relations. In the mid-1970s, outdated laws governing divorce and abortion were challenged and changed by an autonomous women's movement. Massive strikes and "red terrorism" punctuated factory life, and a cultural revolt against patriarchal paternalism and poverty were so intense that the rebels were named a "second society."

Amid all this turmoil, the nation's government proved unable to provide even a semblance of stability to the country. Indeed, in formerly fascist Italy, there were 48 different governments during the first 40 years after World War 2. After 1968, as social movements defined the agenda of public discourse, no government was able to satisfy the conflicting demands being made by workers and management, by women and the Vatican, or to amass a clear enough majority of parliamentary deputies to rule without intense opposition. Between 1968 and October 1974, there were eight different administrations, each no different than the others in its lack of clarity and leadership, leading many Italians to believe the political system was inherently unreliable.

In this chapter, I discuss *Autonomia*, as the diverse cluster of autonomous groups in Italy in the 1970s collectively became known. Beginning with the workers' Hot Autumn, I discuss the sources of *Autonomia* from movements of workers, women and youth. Although relationships among these three constituencies were often strained and contradictory, when taken as a whole, they constituted a movement whose militant opposition and autonomy from established political parties lend their actions continuing historical significance. In 1977, the combination of systematic political crisis, rapid economic change and growing popular opposition culminated in a militant revolt against the established system and its loyal Communist opposition. Subsequent guerrilla actions of organizations like the Red Brigades (RB) helped foster massive government repression and withdrawal of many people from activism, but not before autonomous movements had transformed the political landscape of Italian society: Women won greater legal protection and social freedom; workers saw their standard of living rise and free time expand; and young people were increasingly liberated from the remnants of patriarchal feudalism and benign neglect in universities, schools and families.

### WORKER ROOTS OF AUTONOMY

The first phase of the Italian New Left reached its high point during the "Hot Autumn" of 1969. Sixty national labor contracts were due to be renewed, and in the contest between labor and management, class struggle became acute and protracted. Five and a half million workers (more than 25% of the labor force) struck in 1969, and hundreds of thousands of workers demonstrated, occupied factories and committed sabotage. The government and corporations struck back, arresting 13,000 people and firing or suspending 35,000 workers.<sup>1</sup> When all was said and done, mammoth wage increases had been won, but even more significantly, the working class had reconstituted itself as a historical force. Their new demands and aspirations fell outside the traditional purview of unions. While unions negotiated wage increases, the workers fought speed-ups, piece-work, merit pay, production

bonuses and salary differentials; they wanted the elimination of poisonous fumes, unhealthy working conditions and much more: "We Want Everything!" is what they screamed in the huge Mirafiori Fiat plant in Turin where over 60,000 workers were concentrated. For the first time, many migrants from southern Italy, historically used as strikebreakers in the factories of the industrialized north, were in the forefront of these struggles.

White collar workers joined the strikes, and in some cases, they were the initiators or sole participants. Since office workers had been mostly excluded from agreements made between unions representing factory workers and management, concessions won by manual laborers were not passed on to the "new working class" (professionals, technicians and off-line office and service personnel like clerks, secretaries, accountants, and engineering workers). The new workers sometimes called for wage equality with their blue-collar counterparts in the factories. They also produced new types of demands. In 1968, telecommunication workers in Milan called for "a human and anti-authoritarian way of working that enables the valorization of professional capacities." A women's study group at the same Siemens facility wrote:

At the end of eight hours in the factory, women work at home (washing, ironing, sewing for the husband and children). They are therefore further exploited in the role of housewife and mother, without that being recognized as real work.<sup>2</sup>

Such insights had rarely appeared among grass-roots activists, but after they were articulated, they resonated among broad segments of the populace. When a strike was organized at this same plant, the first strike at Siemens in more than 20 years, the action drew the participation of over 90% of the office workers. Their autonomous committee clashed with the union over tactics and demands, arguing that struggle is "for abolition of wage labor and against the system of the bosses."<sup>3</sup> Over the union's head, they introduced the general assembly as a decision-making body.

The combination of newly-activated strata, new aspirations and the leadership of the movement by semi-skilled factory workers was unforeseen. During the Hot Autumn of 1969, unrest spread explosively, and the type of dissent was qualitatively new: The movement had clear revolutionary intent. Factory workers by the thousands took over their factories, not for the purpose of running them but to turn them into bases for organizing in conjunction with their new allies--ex-students experienced in the struggles of the previous year and office workers. "The factory is our Vietnam" was one popular slogan. New types of strikes--hiccups and checkerboard--were autonomously organized forms of creative resistance through which workers controlled production. (Hiccup strikes involved whole factories suddenly coming to a standstill. When management composed itself and workers were ordered back to work, the workers complied, only to repeat the scenario every half-hour. A checkerboard strike involved one section of a factory downing tools and walking off the job until ordered to return -- at which point, another sector took its turn in a prearranged sequence designed to stop production. Sometimes workers with last names from A-L took the first shift of the strike. At other times, the formula was reversed.)

As the struggles in the autumn of 1969 intensified, 50,000 engineering workers took part in a national demonstration on September 25th.<sup>4</sup> At the beginning of October, the city of Milan was brought to a standstill by roadblocks organized by workers from hundreds of factories and joined by thousands of students. In the province surrounding Milan, 100,000 engineering workers struck simultaneously on October 7th, and an estimated 71,181,182 total hours of work were lost in 1969 to unrest in the engineering sector alone.<sup>5</sup> As strikes spread throughout the country, they enjoyed overwhelming public support, and the Minister of Labor was compelled to sign an agreement with the unions that included all

their major demands. Nonetheless the workers were not quieted. The frenetic pace of work, long a source of agony which unions were incapable of changing, was slowed by concerted campaigns of workers reducing the speed at which they worked. The length of the work week was similarly reduced (through absenteeism) or simply leaving work early, and workers were protected from aggressive bosses by bands of "red handkerchiefs," named for the attire they wore to mask their identities when they were called on to intimidate foremen and management.

Such actions undermined the traditional hierarchy in the factories through which management ruled, and they also made the union's claim to control the workforce spurious. Particularly when workers called general assemblies during work hours and used these occasions to organize themselves, sometimes making free use of foremen's telephones to communicate inside factories, it was apparent that the Italian working class had reconstituted itself as an autonomous force controlling the factories. One commentator understood the process as one in which "the workers...learn to make the bosses dance to the rhythm of their music." Another compared it to:

an orchestra [that] had managed to play a difficult symphony harmoniously without the conductor and at a tempo agreed upon and regulated by the players of the single instruments.<sup>6</sup>

The president of *Cofindustria*, the organization of private employers, complained that the hiccup strikes "cost the industrialists a lot and the workers nothing...It is useless to come to agreements between generals [i.e. between union leaders and management] if subsequently the troops do not respect them."<sup>7</sup>

Italy's Communist-controlled trade unions were surprised by the intensity and demands of workers during the Hot Autumn. They had the loyalty of skilled factory workers but not of white-collar employees and assembly-line workers from the South, leaders of the new struggles whose dialects were strange and who cared little about the Communists and their slogans regarding the "dignity of work." Once the resolve of these workers to fight for their demands was understood, both management and the unions, hoping to pacify the young hotheads, negotiated mammoth wage increases: 23.4% from 1969 to 1970 and 16.6% a year later.

Inflation, however, quickly ate up workers' gains in wages, while housing and services like public transportation were outmoded and increasingly expensive. Alarmed by the prospects of future struggles, fascist groups began a "strategy of tension" designed to put Italy back on the road to dictatorship (then the rule in southern Europe from Greece to Spain and Portugal). Hoping to create the public impression that the Left was assaulting the government, the fascist "strategy of tension" began with the bombing of a bank in Milan that killed 14 people on December 12, 1969. Two anarchists were arrested and accused of the action, one of whom died while in police custody--a "suicide" which "proved" his guilt in some daily papers. The ruse worked. Years later, this bombing was shown to be the work of fascists connected to the Secret Service and protected by important Christian Democratic politicians, but during the heat of the moment, the media blamed the Left, causing it to lose public support at a critical moment, especially since it was under severe attacks from the government.<sup>8</sup> While thousands of activists were arrested between October 1969 and January 1970, scores of fascist attacks on movement activists were allowed to occur without police intervention.

In this context, it was only a question of time before the "years of lead" began, when Italians shot at each other with alarming frequency. When the fascists began their strategy of tension, no distinctive left-wing guerrilla organization of any consequence existed in Italy. A decade later, the Red Brigades had kidnapped and killed former Prime Minister Aldo Moro, and the armed struggle between guerrillas and government agents overshadowed all other aspects of Italian politics. In the ten-year

period from 1969 to 1979, politically motivated violence laid claim to 415 lives and an additional 1181 persons were wounded.<sup>9</sup> Although more than 35,000 Americans are killed by gunshots every year, making the numbers in Italy seem minor by comparison, it should be remembered that these refer only to overtly **political** violence in Italy.

For four years after the Hot Autumn, intense popular struggles continually reappeared as the working class responded to decades of unprecedented economic expansion based on assembly line production (Fordism). After World War 2, immense social and economic changes comprised the Italian "miracle." From the ashes of post-war ruins, the country rebuilt itself into the world's seventh leading industrial power. Urbanization and industrialization transformed Italy, and millions of people's lives were altered unexpectedly. As agriculture was mechanized, over 10,000,000 people were forced off the land. From 1951 to 1971, the percentage of the workforce in agriculture plummeted from 43.9 to 18.8%. Four million people left the South and moved from the countryside to northern cities. Between 1951 and 1966, the population of the country's largest cities grew by more than five million people.<sup>10</sup> In the same period of time, little was done to improve social services or to build the infrastructure needed to accommodate such massive migration. Rome, Turin, Milan and Naples had grown so rapidly that many families could not find decent housing. People slept in groups in a single room, and as shanty towns spread, so did occupations of vacant buildings by squatters. One estimate placed the numbers of squats in Italy between 1969 and 1975 at 20,000.<sup>11</sup> In Milan alone in 1977, about 50 buildings consisting of "2000 hard-core squatters and 3-5000 occasional participants" were occupied.<sup>12</sup>

Events in Milan, Italy's cultural capital, often set the tone for the nation in clothing, ideas and advertising. Beginning in 1969, Milan was also in the forefront of the impetus to housing reform, a struggle which produced a national general strike and bloody battles which resulted in the death of a policeman. In 1971, as these struggles continued, 2000 police were confronted by barricades and riots when they arrived to evict 70 immigrant families who had occupied empty houses. Workers from nearby factories also mobilized to defend the squatters. When the protestors regrouped at the Architecture Faculty of the University of Milan the next day, even more police met such determined resistance that they retreated. The struggle expanded to include the Polytechnic and tens of thousands of people.<sup>13</sup> Rent strikes and squatters struggles in Rome, Taranto, Palermo, Messina, Salerno and Naples represented a new type of grassroots resistance, often led by women. Neighborhood committees, previously affiliated with political parties, became involved in popular struggles for parks, schools, clinics and daycare facilities.<sup>14</sup> Unable to pay their rising bills, many people autonomously set prices at more acceptable levels. The massive character of this **autoriduzione** (self-reduction) movement made it hard to contain. In many cities, public transportation fares were set by what commuters would pay rather than what the companies charged. In Turin and Piedmont, about 150,000 families reduced their electrical bills; in Milan about 10,000; and in the rest of Italy, tens of thousands more.<sup>15</sup>

Declaring that "workers don't break the law," the Communists stood against the self-reduction movements and squatters. Unlike immigrants from the South, unionized factory workers had something to lose: Their unions had skillfully negotiated higher wages and benefits for the organized working class, and the Communist Party of Italy (PCI) had consolidated its hold over millions of votes, growing to become the largest communist party outside the socialist countries. As it gained respectability among established politicians and industrial leaders, the PCI took over the newly formed workers councils in the factories that had been created during the Hot Autumn as autonomously constituted organs unconnected to party politics. Italian workers belonged to three different unions, each of which was affiliated with a particular political party. By 1972, a survey showed that autonomously constituted councils existed in about one-third of the workplaces sampled.<sup>16</sup> The bureaucratization of the councils

proceeded in two steps. Instead of general assemblies being the decision-making body, delegates were chosen. As these delegates became increasingly affiliated with the PCI, their allegiance shifted from the shop floor movement to the party.<sup>17</sup>

With Communists in control of their councils, workers in the factories had no one to turn to.<sup>18</sup> Older skilled workers loyal to the PCI were retiring, and Italian industry was modernizing. Management set a wage ceiling and told the unions it was their role to deliver a compliant working class, leaving the PCI to enforce discipline among the young hotheads. On the one side, management was imposing Taylorism (the time-management of tasks) while on the other side, workers demanded control of production and less work, raising the entire issue of how society should make basic decisions like how to allocate its resources. Since the PCI now controlled their informal councils as well as their unions, workers had no choice but to organize autonomous strikes and work slowdowns to fight the tightening economic noose. Influenced by the Vatican and the traditional values of the ruling Christian Democrats, Italian cultural conservatism also permeated the parties of the Left (whether the PCI or the PSI). The new aspirations of the Hot Autumn were not part of the understanding of these parties. Divorce, abortion and other crucial questions of everyday life were simply outside their discourse. As a result, many activists joined one of the newly-organized groups that had been appeared after 1968.

For the most part, the plethora of radical (or even self-described "revolutionary") parties and tendencies on the far Left differed with the reformist PCI over tactics and strategy, but not vision and structure. Despite their promising beginnings, they too proved unable to comprehend fully non-economic issues as vital to their politics. The largest of the groups to the left of the PCI was *Lotta Continua* (LC-Continuous Struggle). LC emerged as a major organization from the worker-student assemblies in Turin during the Hot Autumn and subsequently developed many adherents among Fiat workers. At its peak, it had about 50,000 activists, 100 full-time paid officials, branch offices in all 94 Italian provinces and 21 neighborhood offices in Rome alone.<sup>19</sup> First published during the Hot Autumn of 1969, LC's newspaper slowly gained circulation, selling an average of 13,000 copies a day in 1976, and by the end of 1977, 35,000.<sup>20</sup> *Il Manifesto* (which was expelled from the PCI in November 1969) also published a newspaper with a wide readership. *Manifesto* had about 6000 members in 1972 and reached a high point of about 8000 at its 1975 congress. They advocated council communism, an alternative to the PCI's notion of the party ruling society in the name of the working class. Council communists believe that workers can directly make their own decisions regarding how society should be run without any assistance from vanguard parties. Despite its radical veneer, *Manifesto's* style of politics was hierarchical, and its analysis remained bounded by traditionally-defined categories. Many of the movement's leading theorists were members of *Potere Operaio* (PO). In addition to LC, PO and *Manifesto*, there was a variety of other parties and groups. In the elections of 1972, all these groups together received more than a million votes. Significantly, several Maoist organizations rejected electoral politics, moving instead toward armed struggle, and, in 1970, one of them first used the "Red Brigades" as their signature.

Less formally structured than any of these parties was *Autonomia Operaia* (AO or Workers' Autonomy). Born in the 1950s from the needs of Italian workers in northern factories to assert their grassroots independence from both management and unions controlled by the Communists, AO became a significant force after the Hot Autumn because of its success in organizing within individual factories and its influence over regional assemblies of activists. In 1972, workers and students in Rome organized a headquarters for the "Autonomous Workers' Committees," and "Organized Workers' Autonomy" existed in an informal network and series of conferences attended by various collectives, organizations and individuals. AO believed in "raising the level of struggle within the state apparatus" and thereby

initiated head-on conflicts with the government at a time when the Communist-controlled trade unions were moving in precisely the opposite direction. Although they were often criticized for their forceful methods, many workers approved their efforts directed against the PCI and its trade unions, organizations that AO regarded as class enemies (and who considered AO to be fascists).

In September 1972, as new contracts were being negotiated, a general strike broke out in Turin. Inside the factories, militant demonstrations enforced strike discipline, and over the next months, autonomously organized tactics escalated the workers' sense of power. On February 2, 1973, an occupation at the Mirafiori plant by 20,000 workers led to a wave of factory occupations. On February 9, nearly half a million workers marched in Rome, the largest gathering of workers since World War 2, shouting "Power to the Workers!" and "Factory, School, Community--Our Struggle is for Power!" Workers' demands were not limited to higher wages. Many worked in excess of 50 hours per week, and they wanted to limit the work week to 40 hours. Even more significantly, many workers articulated their desire not to remain stuck in the factories with lives whose sole purpose was to make money to pay bills. On March 29, 10,000 militant strikers blocked entrances at Mirafiori, and by the next day, most of Turin's factories were in the hands of their workers. Both unions and companies rushed to reach an agreement to defuse the situation, but even when a new contract was quickly signed, more than half the work force at Mirafiori was absent the next day.

The struggles in this period were potentially revolutionary. Workers wanted more than what the Communists aimed for (the material benefits of consumerism). They wanted to cease being factory workers, to live lives of their own collective making, not ones determined by decisions in corporate boardrooms and government ministries. As one observer put it: "More than a struggle for a new contract, this has been a rage against work." A Mirafiori worker put it this way: "This occupation is different from the one workers did in 1920. In 1920 they said let's occupy but let's work. Let's show everyone that we can run production ourselves. Things are different today. In our occupation, the factory is a starting point for the revolutionary organization of workers--**not a place to work**."<sup>21</sup>

None of the Left organizations played a central role nor were there charismatic leaders in control of the movement of 1973. Despite histories which construct their roles as crucial, the myriad of organizations and publications like AO, LC and *Manifesto* were themselves transformed by the energy of the autonomous movement. It appears that tens of thousands of people were themselves capable of self-organization and direct action. In factories, the plethora of traditional Left groups was relegated to the sidelines when workers went on strike. The movement of 1973 even prompted PO, a major presence in Padua, the factories of Portomarghera and the University of Rome, to dissolve so that its members could become an organic part of workers' struggles. According to Franco Berardi (a prominent autonomist in Bologna known as Bifo), during the 1973 occupations:

Revolutionary groups such as 'Lotta Continua' and Potere Operaio were a marginal presence in this occupation. Thus within the takeover itself was contained the possibility of transcending those vanguard organizations that had come near to assuming the role traditionally played by the workers' movement: a role of authoritarian leadership, of bureaucratic intransigence in the face of the passions the new types of needs expressed, above all, by the young.<sup>22</sup>

The spontaneous character of the continuing struggles meant that by 1974, Fiat's largest factories were considered ungovernable.<sup>23</sup> Foremen were regularly intimidated and hated supervisors were often roughed up by militant groups that formed to protect workers' rights. Shop floor conflicts in Italy led annually to 227 unofficial strikes and a loss of 134 million working hours--not including

absenteeism that ran as high as 28% in a given week. The workers' desire to escape the drudgery of assembly lines was accommodated by new programs, especially the fulfillment of their demand for 150 paid hours of schooling. First won in 1972, this program became a vehicle for Italian workers to connect with student radicals and feminists. In the first three years of the program, 474,000 metalworkers participated, encouraging other workers to include the 150 hours in their negotiated agreements.<sup>24</sup>

The movement within Italian factories was undoubtedly a key part of the autonomous movement. The workerist bias permeating many interpretations of the Italian movement, however, has precluded discussion of its non-factory dimensions.<sup>25</sup> In particular, there has been a failure to note the significant contributions of students, women, and artists--constituencies not traditionally conceived as "proletarian."<sup>26</sup> When compared to the women's liberation movement and the Metropolitan Indians (MI--a countercultural youth group), even the most far-seeing of the factory-based parties appears today as mired in outmoded ideologies and actions. As I discuss in the next sections, movements of women and youth, sometimes conceptualized as autonomy to the second power (or "creative autonomy") because of their independence and cultural distance from autonomous workers' groups, showed the rigidity of even the most "revolutionary" of the autonomous factory-based groups. Indeed, the distance of eh later from the daily needs of women and youth helped stimulate the development of the women's movement and the youth movement. AO, MI and radical organizations of the women's movement are representative of the three main strands of what I regard as the Italian autonomous movement. More than a slogan or name of single organization, *Autonomia* became the name for movements which acted in their own right. Their language was in the first person, a departure from the language of established political parties that preached their message as if it were best for all Italians or the entire working class. Not only were these movements outside the factories (where they would have been the recipient of the Left's theoretical tutelage), but they developed their idea of autonomy from their own needs and experiences rather than adopting them ready-made from vanguard parties.

More than anywhere else, the concept of autonomy that unified and animated the movement of 1977 was developed by feminist movements. As early as 1966, the feminist Demau group (acronym for Demystification of Authority) clearly drew a line of demarcation between themselves and the culture of consumerism. Calling for "the search for a new autonomy for women," they opposed the integration of women into modern society as simply a form of the "masculinization of women." When they wrote their manifesto, there was no activist New Left, but within a decade, their ideas had profoundly influenced thousands of peoples' lives.<sup>27</sup> As I discuss in the next section, women were critically important to the eruption of 1977. They brought a new, more egalitarian style of interaction into being, and their autonomous organizations provided a model for others to emulate.

## THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

If Hegel was right when he said that to know Italy one must understand its origins as a den of thieves, he should have specified that it was a den of male thieves. The mythological origins of Italian women in the abduction and rape of the Sabine women refer to more than unfortunate fable. Over the centuries, blatant and brutal patriarchal customs have remained intact throughout much of Italy, particularly in Sicily, Sardinia and the rural areas. Violence in the family was often used to enforce male domination, and few legal sanctions could be invoked to prevent it--including in cases of murder if the wife had committed adultery. Even in the cities in the 1970s, women walking alone after dark could easily be in real danger; hence the need for being accompanied by a man. Although rape was a crime in Italy, it was a crime "against morality," (unlike murder and assault, which were considered crimes against

"personal integrity) and it was extremely difficult for a woman to press charges. She had to go the police within 24 hours, get a doctor to examine her and prove she had been raped. If convicted, the maximum sentence a man could receive was five years, although at the beginning of the 1970s, he could have the crime annulled by offering to marry the woman.

In this context, it would be amazing if rigid patriarchal attitudes did not penetrate emergent movements. During the student movement and Hot Autumn, women who later formed the nucleus for the women's movement gained valuable experience. From the very beginning, many females were active in student protests, and some began to meet in women-only groups. Within the New Left, however, women were often relegated to roles as secretaries inside the movement, a situation reflected in the ironic slogan "From the angel of the hearth to the angel of the copying machine." In 1970, *Rivolta Femminile* (Female Revolt or FR) groups were created in Rome and Milan, and *Lotta Femminista* (Female Struggle) collectives in Rome and Padua.<sup>28</sup> In the next years, influenced particularly by American feminism and the defeat of a 1974 referendum which would have banned divorce, feminism gathered momentum. Women formed consciousness-raising groups and initiated collective projects like bookstores, journals and women's centers. In their discussions, they began distinguishing liberation from emancipation, the former dealing with the radical transformation of everyday life while the latter was seen as having a more limited focus on public life including the workplace.<sup>29</sup> Taking up significant issues of everyday life that established political parties (including the Left) ignored, this first wave of feminism soon gathered wide-ranging support. Their alternative health centers became popular sites for women to find information on mothering, questions of female health and birth control. (Contraceptives had been illegal in Italy until 1971.)

Of special importance was the issue of abortion. Fascist laws still on the books dictated that only in cases of rape or incest would abortions be allowed, an obsolete ruling that meant well over a million illegal abortions were performed in Italy every year, and an estimated 20,000 women died annually as a result of improper procedures.<sup>30</sup> In January 1974, 263 women in Trento were charged with having had illegal abortions. Since no political party called for a lifting of all restrictions, women took to streets to demand full abortion rights. On December 6, 1975, 25,000 women marched, the first time a separatist feminist movement had made itself nationally prominent. Unable to accept the autonomy of feminism, the PCI-dominated *Unione Donne Italiane* (Union of Italian Women or UDI) refused to participate in the march, but the appearance of so many marchers apparently helped change their minds. A few months later (on April 3, 1976), they joined with the feminists and some 100,000 women took to the streets to support abortion rights. As organizers lobbied parliament, 800,000 signatures were presented in support of a new referendum to extend the rights of women to include abortion.

Significantly, in some parts of the country, women organized illegal abortion clinics, an autonomous enterprise which was supported by doctors who had been students a decade earlier.<sup>31</sup> In 1976, a coordinating group for self-managed clinics in Rome grew out of the needs of such groups in and around the city. Their platform articulated their relation to a feminist movement, not simply by providing a service to women but also by involving them in attempts to transform society.<sup>32</sup> By establishing their own clinics, these women acted according to autonomous decisions--not on the basis of law but on what they considered to be right. Abortion was a mortal sin in the eyes of the church, and it was also a state crime punishable by a five-year sentence. To thousands of feminists, however, morality and justice were defined by their own standards. To them, the issue was power, and their autonomous abortion clinics were a step on the road to independence from the established patriarchal system.

As numerous groups formed and initiated a variety of actions, discussions elicited many disparate views on women's liberation. While all agreed on the need to reform existing laws, the radical wing of the movement, especially groups like FR, criticized the waste of feminists' energies on the patriarchal system:

...asking the male for legalized abortion has a sinister aspect, since both legalization of abortion and free abortion will be used to codify the pleasure of passivity as an expression of female sex, thus reinforcing the myth of the genital act, which is concluded by male orgasm in the vagina...Let us try and think of a civilization in which free sexuality does not appear as the apotheosis of free abortion and the contraceptives adopted by women; it will show itself as the development of a sexuality which is not specifically procreative, but polymorphous; that is free from vaginal finalization...In this kind of civilization, it would be clear that contraceptives are only for those who want to have procreative sex, and that abortion is not a solution for free women, but rather for women colonized by a patriarchal system."<sup>33</sup>

Within statements like this, we see the emergence of an erotic sensibility not tied to performance, nor dictated by biology: We see the freedom to act according to self-determined values.

Of course, given the reality of Italian politics, other women argued that such utopian thinking was futile and that the movement should devote itself to improving the lives of women endangered and degraded by illegal abortions. The ugly reality of male brutality intervened as well. In 1975, the rape and murder of Rosaria Lopez in Circeo and the trials of the rapists of Christina Simeoni in Verona the following year produced large demonstrations against male violence. In 1976, Claudia Caputi, a teenager who had migrated to Rome, was gang-raped by a group of pimps who apparently wanted to keep her from breaking away from their control. She later recognized some of them, and in an unusual move in Italy, called for police intervention. As her case came to trial at the beginning of April 1977, she was gang-raped again and slashed with razors over much of her body in a blatant attempt to prevent her from continuing with the case. Within a few hours, radio announcements on Radio Futura and telephone-chain calls led to 15,000 women marching through the neighborhood where Caputi and her rapists lived. Despite police intimidation, the women even marched past the fascist party's headquarters.

Caputi's case was not isolated. Like other women, she had answered an ad for baby-sitting and moved to Rome, where she was inadvertently caught up in a prostitution ring. The men who raped her each testified that she had been their girlfriend -- and therefore that they had some sort of sexual entitlement to her. Unbelievable as it may seem, the judge accepted what they said, adding: "A woman lying in a field is like after a battle...What is a man supposed to do when he sees her lying there?"

That same year, the first of the Reclaim the Night marches was held in Rome in November 1976. Many of the 10,000 women dressed as witches and carried broomsticks. Jettisoning their usual chants like "Divorce Now," their slogans reflected a new mood of anger and determination: "No longer mothers, no longer daughters, we're going to destroy families."<sup>34</sup> Sensing the need to reform its outmoded laws, the country's governing elite finally acted. In 1978, after much debate, the PCI brokered compromise legislation in parliament that left the decision up to the doctor, not the woman. The *Movimento di Liberazione della Donna* (MLD or Movement for the Liberation of Women affiliated with the small Radical Party) saw this compromise as "kicking us in the teeth" and they insisted upon the need to simply repeal all laws regulating abortion.<sup>35</sup> Feminists conducted a vigil outside parliament to protest the new law, and a few months later, parliament passed one of the most progressive laws in Europe governing abortion.

Even before they had reformed the country's law, the mobilizations for choice spread feminism throughout the country, transforming conditions of everyday life for millions of women by providing them with a new-felt sense of self. Inspired by the massive numbers at their marches, the MLD took over the abandoned district court building in Rome's Via del Governo Vecchio, setting an example for a new wave of militance. In January 1977, 81 feminist collectives joined the occupation, and as the movement consolidated itself, the MLD left the Radical Party (and the UDI left the PCI) in order to be true to principles of autonomy.

At the same time as feminists were becoming more radical and convinced of the need for their autonomy, members of the Left failed to comprehend what was happening. *Lotta Continua* provides a powerful case in point. Although it had been gradually losing members, LC dissolved itself after a crisis caused by its toughest security marshals in November 1975. Entrusted with protecting demonstrations from fascist and police attacks, the marshals themselves attacked an all female pro-abortion march because men were not allowed to join. The fallout from the attack was immediate. While some female LC members demanded an explanation from the leadership, many more simply left the organization. Over the next months, an internal struggle ensued. Finally at a congress in Rimini in November 1976, it was decided to dissolve the organization (although the newspaper continued to be published). Exchanges like the following typified discussions at Rimini. Ciro, a worker for Fiat, explained:

...the idea of workers' centrality expresses the fact that only the worker, as a worker, expresses what is expressed by the proletariat. Women, as women, do not express what is expressed by the proletariat. They can be women, just women, even bourgeois women. They can be reactionary women and not express the proletarian point of view...The same thing applies to students. The student, as a student, is not a proletarian. A student can be a proletarian, as can a woman, but simply as students and as women, they do not express the proletariat. It is very different for the worker, because the conditions of his existence in society force him to be a proletarian, because he has no alternative, while the woman is not forced to be a proletarian.

Donatella from Catanzaro responded:

As regards the 'centrality of the workers,' I would like to point out that there are workers among the women as well!...In Catanzaro, a girl of 15 was raped by someone who fancied her. The rapist was charged with obscene acts in a public place--but so was the girl! That girl comes from a village where the land has been occupied, where 800 farm workers have joined the Farm Workers Union. And yet, in a village where the class struggle has been so fierce, that girl is looked on as a prostitute. Men stop her in the street, as if they can use her as they want. I believe that these farm workers are not carrying out a real class struggle and will never make the revolution.<sup>36</sup>

Many feminists attempted to maintain a "double militancy"--simultaneously working in the autonomous women's movement and an organized political party or mixed radical group. Their initial orientation was revolutionary, often Marxist, although as their deliberations deepened their analysis, many became increasingly critical of LC, the PCI and the Left's acceptance of middle-class norms and values--especially the split between public and private domains of life.<sup>37</sup> As activists experienced in direct-action movements, they had begun with slogans like "There is no revolution without the liberation of women and no liberation of women without revolution." Disappointed by the failure of their organizations to

address specifically the oppression of women, they developed their own theories. Even when Left organizations were not hostile to feminism, it appeared that they could not deal with its autonomy. As Valeria Boccio realized, sympathetic organizations of the Left reacted to feminism by trying to incorporate it into their own hierarchies:

The principal preoccupation was that of adapting well-known categories to a new situation, introducing a new 'object' of discourse without dispensing with existing categories, as in the case of the specificity of women's struggle within class struggle. The protagonists who spoke did not reveal themselves in what they said, made very little use of the first person, and frequent use of impersonal forms or the equally impersonal 'we'. The interlocutor was generally an opponent - men, the institutions, the patriarchal order. It was rare for there to be a metadiscourse. Irony and ambiguity were entirely lacking.<sup>38</sup>

Within the movement, Italian feminism concerned itself with issues of everyday life, prompting a "crisis of the couple." Thousands of women, particularly those active in the movement, began to be more assertive in their relationships with men and began to explore alternatives to traditional patriarchal monogamy.

The feminist movement had developed when urbanization, the loss of women's jobs in agriculture, the advent of Fordism and the concomitant consumer society built by the economic "miracle" of the 1960s all meant women were increasingly required to work the equivalent of an unpaid mechanized job at home within the patriarchal nuclear family. Women's marginalization during the economic expansion of the 1960s was indicated by the fact that the number of women in the workforce dropped by nearly a million.<sup>39</sup> As Italy modernized, the transition from rurally-based extended families to urban nuclear families did not mean greater freedom for many women. In response, groups like *Lotta Femminista* and *Autonomia Femminista* called for wages for housework to dramatize the way women were exploited in arenas outside the factory.<sup>40</sup>

Developing step-by-step with the campaigns to keep divorce legal and to decriminalize abortion, women insisted that housework be paid. They refused to accept their non-paid status at the margins of society, and this demand was a way to show how much they wished to change everyday life. In 1973, when workers' struggles were reaching their high point, *Lotta Femminista's* anti-capitalism was evident in their reformulation of Marx's economics to include housework:

Housework is done by women. This work is never seen, precisely because it is not paid...As for the *workers*, we acknowledge their hard struggle over pay, at the moment of production in the factory. One part of the class with a salary, the other without. This discrimination has been the basis of a stratification of power between the paid and the non-paid, the root of class weakness which movements of the left have only increased. Just to quote some of their commonplace accusations, we are "interclassist," "corporate," we "split the class," and so on, and so on.<sup>41</sup>

As with the issue of abortion, theoretical differences opened within the feminist movement. Some feminists argued that wages for domestic work would continue to relegate women to the home--to split private and public spheres along gender lines. For them, women's liberation meant smashing this division, it meant freeing women from the gilded cage of home and hearth.

Besides rejecting hierarchy, feminist equality was a radical departure from traditional notions of equal rights. Within the movement, strong sentiment rejected equality with men as an "ideological

attempt to subject women even further." While freeing women from the stereotypical role of mother, formal concepts of equality impose an asexual identity that reduces them to the political categories developed by patriarchal governments. Becoming equal within such systems, it was argued, meant becoming more manly. It meant, as earlier defined, emancipation, not liberation. As Carla Lonzi, a key member of FR, wrote in 1970: "Equality is what is offered as legal rights to colonized people. And what is imposed on them as culture...Equality between the sexes is merely the mask with which women's inferiority is disguised."<sup>42</sup> (As I discuss in the next chapter, similar debates took place in Germany.) The energies of radical feminists went into other arenas.

Within factories, women trade-unionists organized female collectives to discuss their experiences as workers and activists. Beginning in Milan and Turin, such groups spread to Genoa, Padua and Rome.<sup>43</sup> While women comprised 30% of the workforce (and PCI-affiliated trade union membership) in 1977, they were only 6% of full-time union officials and 1% of the national leadership. Influenced by the feminist movement, they uncovered the reproduction of patriarchy in the unions and posited the need for social revolution:

According to the militants' analysis, the difference between men and women should not be denied but, on the contrary, recognized and built upon. Picking up the message of the new feminism, they saw women not only as victims of discrimination, but also the embodiment of an alternative approach to life and politics..."Equality of opportunity" was dismissed as a goal; the solution, instead, was to change the rules of the game for both men and women...The result of this analysis was that women confronted women with a request for autonomy."<sup>44</sup>

By 1978, coordinating committees at both local and national levels existed that orchestrated thousands of women into separate contingents at union demonstrations and raised their feminist consciousness, particularly in seminars designed for the 150 paid hours of schooling. Largely excluded from the universities, women created a network of women's cultural centers "as separate and autonomous sites of sexually connotated research in order to preserve, produce culture as/for women."<sup>45</sup> Within ten years of the founding of the first cultural center in Turin in 1976, about 100 existed in Italy. In 1979, the "Virginia Woolf" (also called the Women's Union) was established in Rome. Hundreds of women attend courses there every year, and many of Italy's leading intellectuals have participated. The synergy of women's centers and feminist unionists produced a convention of 600 women in 1983. After a year's preparatory work, the resolutions adopted called on women to strengthen their autonomous cultural/political work, both within unions as well as by building up women's centers. (At the beginning of the 1990s, there were still no women's studies departments, chairs or degree programs at Italian universities.)

By the end of the 1970s, the momentum gathered in the campaign for abortion rights dissipated, and the first wave of militant feminism subsided. Left behind, however, were millions of women whose lives had been changed and who continued to act in accordance with their feminist ideals. Women continued to struggle against sexual violence and succeeded in altering legal and normative regulations. In 1981, a rightist counteroffensive against the new abortion law failed miserably. Only 32% of the voters wanted to repeal the 1978 reform won by women. And in 1982, the UDI adopted the principles of autonomy and non-hierarchical relations and formally dissolved itself as a centralized organization affiliated with the PCI, embracing instead the autonomous women's movement.<sup>46</sup>

Italian feminists leave a legacy rich in strategic innovations. In the short run, the feminist explosion profoundly shaped the character of the movement of 1977, particularly in their reworking of organizational questions. In 1970, Carla Lonzi wrote a pamphlet entitled "We Spit on Hegel" as a

manifesto for FR that showed they were opposed to all forms of hierarchy. "We are seeking," wrote Lonzi, "an authentic gesture of revolt and we will not betray it either to organization or to proselytizing."<sup>47</sup> Feminist groups emphasized the importance and autonomy of small groups through which women could raise their consciousness rather than central committees which issued directives. The feminist movement's structure was composed of numerous small groups loosely linked together horizontally. Decisions were often made in open general assemblies, and an interactive style involving listening rather than the talking-at people style of the male Left was the norm.<sup>48</sup> Polemically charged and eloquently critical of one-dimensional Marxism that subsumed the "feminine problem to the classist conception of the master-slave struggle," Lonzi's essay was also vehemently anti-capitalist and posed questions of strategy in such a way that they had a significance far beyond the feminist movement. For her, the woman who rejects the family and the young man who rejects military service were partners on the path of refusing to participate in patriarchal structures. In the hippie movement, Lonzi located an anti-patriarchal impulse:

The hippie movement represents a flight in disgust from the patriarchal system, the rejection of the politics of power and of political patterns of predominantly male groups. Hippies no longer split the public and the private, and their lives are a mixture of the masculine and the feminine.<sup>49</sup>

Like the autonomy of feminism and its collective structure, Lonzi's analysis of culture was to become crucial to the formation of a countercultural youth movement. Influenced by feminist commitments to integrate the personal and political, politics was no longer conducted in the name of someone else--i.e. the working class or the nation. It had to flow directly from the needs of participants. Moreover, feminist conceptions of organization were not hierarchical and leader-oriented. As Antonio Negri summarized:

The feminist movement, with its practices of communalism and separatism, its critique of politics and the social articulations of power, its deep distrust of any form of 'general representation' of needs and desires, its love of differences, must be seen as the clearest archetypal form of this new phase of the movement. It provided the inspiration, whether explicitly or not, for the new movements of proletarian youth in the mid-1970s. The referendum on divorce (1974) itself gave a first indication of the 'autonomy of the social.'<sup>50</sup>

In many of the most significant dimensions of the meaning of autonomy, feminist currents were the most significant single source of modern autonomous movements.

### **STUDENT/YOUTH ROOTS OF AUTONOMY**

Still struggling to move beyond their fascist heritage, Italian universities, like the country's political system and gender relations, were sorely in need of change in the 1960s. Nowhere in the country at the beginning of the decade was there even a faculty of sociology, a fact tied as much to Italy's regional disparities as to the legacy of Mussolini. (Interestingly, it was at the country's first sociology faculty in Trento that the student movement subsequently found its epicenter.) As in many other countries in the sixties, the Italian student movement was militant, spirited and sparked wider social conflicts. One of the first reforms won by the movement was open admissions but without a commensurate expansion of university faculties and facilities, open admissions meant that few students or faculty even bothered to attend overcrowded classes. In 1968, there were 400,000 students in Italy; by 1977, a million were enrolled. In 1968, the economy was growing rapidly; by 1977, the aftermath of

the oil shock of 1973 combined with runaway inflation and unemployment meant that the economy was on the brink of bankruptcy. Estimates placed the number of job seekers at a hundred thousand students and half-a-million technical school graduates (accountants, draftsmen, etc).<sup>51</sup> High youth unemployment, an inadequate education system, a lack of housing, feudalistic family relations, and an increasingly repressive government all conditioned the emergence of a countercultural youth movement that fought for a new way of life that did not depend upon the existing system. The lack of faith in the system was reflected in graffiti at the university in Rome: "When even shit becomes marketable, then the poor will be born without an ass."

As far back as November 1968, the central concern of Italy's student movement was the need for autonomous self-government of student affairs. The demands of students who occupied the Catholic University were first and foremost:

- the recognition of the autonomy and self-government of the student movement.
- the withdrawal of disciplinary proceedings against activists.
- freedom of speech.
- provision of facilities and timetabling for student movement activities.
- the recognition of the power of the student general meeting over all important decisions concerning administrations, teaching, etc.<sup>52</sup>

The idea of democratic self-management was not confined to the Catholic University (nor to Italy in 1967-8) but it was crucially important there because of the paternalistic attitudes of that school's administration.

In 1968, when the student movement erupted throughout the country, Italian universities were transformed from careerist sites to revolutionary base areas, and high school students joined in the movement. In March, only six high schools experienced protests, but by November, the majority of high schools in Milan had become involved. The action-committee at one of the schools, Liceo Berchet, understood the movement's goal as:

...the control and eventual elimination of marks and failures, and therefore the abolition of selection in school; the right of everyone to education and to a guaranteed student grant; freedom to hold meetings; a general meeting in the morning; accountability of teachers to students; removal of all reactionary and authoritarian teachers; setting of the curriculum from below.<sup>53</sup>

High school students not only demanded their political autonomy, they acted independently, meeting and producing leaflets during school hours without bothering to ask permission from teachers or administrators. Their capacity for self-organization started in their classrooms and extended to city-wide coordinating groups. Their final decision-making body (as in the universities, and later in factories and offices) was the general assembly. As Robert Lumley observed:

The movement in the schools rapidly developed its own organizations, which started in the class and extended to the city-wide coordinating body. As in the universities, the key unit was the general meeting. A statute of the Cattaneo Technical Institute sets out the standard organizational structure; the general meeting was the sovereign body, and from it were elected commissions and study groups with special functions. Thus, there was a press commission, an administrative commission and so on, and study groups on subjects decided by the general meeting. Each class had a monthly meeting to plan and

decide on teaching questions. There was also a paper, which was directly accountable to the general meeting.<sup>54</sup>

Not being content to confine themselves to issues of formal control, student groups queried methods of learning and developed innovative proposals which helped change Italian higher education. In the decade after 1968, the movement's demands bore fruit. Educational reforms in 1969 permitted working-class students (not only those graduating from a "classical high school") to attend universities. Besides open admissions, also implemented was the idea of "150 Hours," a national program which provided thousands of factory workers with paid study leaves. Even as these reforms helped defuse the student movement, they also prepared the groundwork for the new type of worker-student who became the constituency of the next phase of the movement and created a context that influenced feminists, unionists and others. As one observer noticed:

The influence of the student' movement was evident in both the form and the content of unions' political action: against authority and the division of labor; for equality; for direct action and participatory democracy. The influence was not only cultural; interactions between workers and students (and later, the New Left) took place at the factory gates, in the streets, in meetings, and in various organizations of students and workers.<sup>55</sup>

As the student occupations of 1968 came to an end and the general assemblies which had provided them with identity and coherence dissolved, the movement was increasingly defined by Marxist-Leninist groups. Their democratic centralism and sectarian behavior effectively reversed the countercultural style, anti-authoritarianism and democratic self-management of the popular movement. Although sometimes credited with planting the seeds of autonomous thought in Italy, these Marxist-Leninist sects also helped kill the popular impulse, substituting for vital engagement in a popular movement the idle and stale prattle of the living dead.<sup>56</sup> The idea of autonomy and the capacity to realize it were spontaneously present among young people who had not read any of the obscure sectarian journals. They had no need for vanguard parties proselytizing them with the revolutionary truth or correct line. The alphabet soup of Trotskyist, Maoist and anarchist sects replaced the movement's autonomy with a coterie of cadre whose hierarchical politics changed the **form** of the mobilization from participatory spontaneity to programmed ritual. In the name of the working class, they trivialized student issues vis-a-vis the "real" world of the factory. While their organizations occasionally were able to recruit workers, the resulting relationship was usually one in which, paradoxically, masochistic intellectuals hid their own intelligence and education at the same time as they sadistically defined workers exclusively in terms of production. More often than not, they steered workers using their 150 study hours away from cultural courses (through which they might transcend the world of work) into courses like economics which they expected workers to find interesting. If anyone had bothered to ask, they would have discovered that many of the workers were often more interested in youth culture than in studying dynamics of production, and many women gravitated toward feminism rather than traditional leftist theory. In Turin, over 1300 women took part in 54 courses on women's health, medicine and politics.<sup>57</sup> In and around Milan, over 3400 women participated in 76 similar courses from 1977-1980.<sup>58</sup>

In reaction to the appropriation of the student movement by sectarian ideologues, youth activists became increasingly countercultural. Caught up in traditional ideologies, the various "New Left" parties were irrelevant to the political struggles of tens of thousands of proletarian youth. By 1977, when a new generation of activists synthesized culture and politics in a liberatory movement that was a product of both working-class origins and youth culture, these parties proved impotent when compared to

collectives and spontaneously generated action groups. The most spectacular such group among the dozens that comprised this wing of "creative autonomy" was the Metropolitan Indians (so named because they often painted themselves and dressed like Native Americans). Having grown up under conditions very different from those of their parents (depression, war and foreign occupation), the MI were working-class youth whose expectations of material and social freedom were dashed against the reality of the austerity measures of the 1970s. Socialized according to the logic of a consumer society as opposed to the logic of a producer society, they developed group identities that were not based upon massive hierarchical organizations with authoritarian leaders but circles of friends who formed fluid and egalitarian collectives. Like the Yippies in the U.S., they developed and reacted mainly to the media. Negating the cowboy mentality of the spaghetti westerns Italian cinema churned out in the 1960s, the group adopted the costume and aura of the "other" because they themselves were marginalized outsiders.

As time went on, they developed a position on self-defense similar to that of the Black Panther Party--except that in Italy it was the P38 handgun, not the shotgun which was embraced. Their manifesto, published on March 1, 1977, called for:

- all empty buildings to be used as sites to establish alternatives to the family.
- free marijuana, hash, LSD and peyote for anybody who wanted to use them.\*
- destruction of zoos and the rights of all animals in the zoos to return to their native land and habitats.
- destruction of the altar of the Fatherland, a memorial sacred to fascists in Rome.
- destruction of all youth jails
- historical and moral reevaluation of the dinosaur Archeopteryx, unfairly constructed as an ogre.

Their first communique was released after the storming of a jazz festival in Umbria and noted that the "weapon of music cannot replace the music of weapons." The June 1975 issue of the magazine *A Traverso* reported the explanation offered by the MI:

Music as spectacle is the attempt to reduce every collective moment to 'free time.' Between the organizers of the concert and the mass of proletarian youth is an objective contradiction which is not simply a question of administration, of whom music serves. The problem for us is that the concert serves up a spectacle just like the ritualized demos and rallies serve up politics as spectacle. In both cases, we're reduced from a public to spectators.<sup>59</sup>

As news of the jazz action spread, groups of young people began to do the same thing in movie theaters. Entering as a group, forty, fifty or more people would simply refuse to pay or pay something reasonable for movies. These were not "spoiled children of the rich," as film director Bertolucci had referred to the students of 1968. They were children of workers lacking money to live as full members of society. For them, *autoriduzione* was a necessity. Calling them the "illegitimate child of a secret mother and a Marxist father," the media focused on trivial things like their painted faces or failure to

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\* At the Black Panther Party's revolutionary people's constitutional convention in 1970, the same drugs were called life drugs as opposed to death drugs like cocaine, speed, and heroin. After 1978, the wide availability of heroin and the simultaneous dearth of life drugs in Italian cities (most of all in Bologna) was blamed by many on the Mafia and the CIA. The ill effects of this situation on the movement were obvious.

show up as promised at demonstrations but said little about their propensity to plunder record albums, liquor or clothes from expensive stores--or to feed themselves at the best restaurants and refuse to pay. The media and police ignored the posters of hard drug dealers the MI put up in their neighborhoods, but when they arrived at the opera in Milan with leaflets criticizing "noodles for the proletariat and caviar for the bourgeoisie," the police attacked them, arresting 40 and injuring 250.<sup>60</sup>

The MI carried irony and paradox to their political limits, and even in circumstances which would have been taken seriously by most people, the group avoided fetishizing their own importance. In March 1977, they broke into armories to steal guns to defend themselves from police attacks, but they also made off with tennis rackets and fishing poles. By putting play and joy at the center of political projects that traditionally had been conducted in a deadly serious manner, the MI did to Italian cities what Dada had done to the European art world at the beginning of the twentieth century. As Dada's anti-art scandalized the world of galleries and parodied the seriousness of artists, the MI's anti-politics broke with traditional conceptions of political conduct and revealed a wide gulf between themselves and previous generations of radicals.

Artists also contributed to the development of the concept of autonomy. Playwright Dario Fo, for example, asserted the autonomy of culture by bringing his plays directly to unconventional sites like bowling alleys, plazas and factories. After his first year, Fo estimated that he performed in front of 200,000 people, 70% of whom had never before attended a play. Fo reminded his audiences that for centuries popular culture had been autonomous from the rulers of society. Modern mass culture, increasingly centralized and regulated by giant corporations, restrained the autonomy of popular culture, thereby necessitating the political development of a counterculture.

At the end of 1975, legislative decisions had voided the government's monopoly of the airwaves. Within a year there were 800 "free radio" stations and 100 new television channels (about 20% of which were left-wing, the rest being special interest groups, minority groups, and, in the case of radio, non-commercial, 24-hour rock 'n roll).<sup>61</sup> None of these were run by the PCI since the Communists believed their loyalty to the government would gain them access to the mammoth state-controlled broadcasting system. The women's movement established its own network of radio and television stations in the 1970s, a network which grew out of a proliferation of feminist writing and the setting up of a daily feminist newspaper.<sup>62</sup> *Radio Futura* was set up in Rome with funds from two of the small parties to the left of LC, and in Bologna, *Radio Alice* reflected that city's vibrant countercultural radical scene. In addition, about 100 leftist magazines regularly published.

By the mid-1970s, Left groups like LC and *Manifesto* had begun to lose membership to the PCI, whose electoral successes brought it a share of power. In the local elections of June 1975, the PCI won stunning victories with over 10 million votes (almost exactly one-third of those cast), enough to form governments led by communists and socialists in vast areas of Italy: in the states of Piedmont, Liguria, Tuscany, Emilia-Romagna and Umbria as well cities like Naples, Rome, Milan, Turin, Genoa, Bologna and Florence. Left coalitions governed more than 2700 cities comprising more than half the country's population.<sup>63</sup> At the same time, Italian cities were alive with housing occupations by poor families, spontaneous community struggles, and "Mao-Dada" happenings where small groups of friends disrupted official ceremonies and demonstrations. A wave of mini-Woodstocks, music festivals swept the country. In Milan's Lambro Park, 18,000 working-class youth danced a giant sun-dance, "blowing everyone's minds," and then were compelled to fight the police for several hours.

In the 1976 national elections, no single party won a majority, and if the Communist Party had not subsequently endorsed an "historic compromise" with the conservative Christian Democrats, no one would have been able to form a government. With over 34% of the popular vote and the country's

major trade unions firmly under its control, the PCI agreed to abstain from defeating Christian Democratic initiatives.<sup>64</sup> When the latter embarked on a program of cut-backs designed to make industry more profitable, it fell to the PCI to discipline the working class and deliver social peace to the national effort. Participating as a junior partner in the Christian Democrats' austerity program meant justifying wage cuts, reduced cost of living subsidies, cancellation of public holidays, rising prices and closed factories; it meant explaining why university fees were raised and why poor families living illegally in vacant houses were evicted when a severe housing shortage existed. Last but not least, it meant controlling the vibrant youth scene. In places like Bologna, the PCI government paid more attention to the complaints of wealthy merchants about hippies than to the social needs of working class youth. In February 1976, the Communist city government of Bologna sent bulldozers to demolish the building in which one of the city's autonomous youth groups, the "Red Berets," met and partied. Given these dynamics, is it any wonder that the popular movements to challenge the government's austerity programs would be autonomous of existing political parties?

In May 1975, the Christian Democrats and their allies had passed an act (the *Legge Reale*) giving Italy's police legal authority to fire their weapons at unarmed demonstrators whenever they felt "public order" was threatened. Going beyond laws remaining on the books since the days of Mussolini, the act criminalized possession of handkerchiefs, ski masks, and helmets at demonstrations. Licensed to shoot, the police went on a rampage between May 1975 and December 1976. A 1979 study put the number of innocent people killed by the "forces of order" since the *Legge Reale* was adopted at 53.<sup>65</sup> Another estimate put the number of victims of the new law at 150.<sup>66</sup>

Now that the Communists were part of the forces of order, the movement would only have enemies among the major parties. In 1968, 1969 and 1973, while trade union leaders and PCI members had been heckled and abused, the movements and their spontaneously-formed organizations had tolerated an uneasy dialogue with the Communists and other organizations of the Left. The events of 1977, however, revealed a much more radical mood among activists, many of whom were working-class youth who would have been expected to be sympathetic to Communists.

### **1977: A YEAR OF CRISIS**

The escalating spiral of repression and resistance in 1977 marks a turning point in the history of *Autonomia*. In Rome and Bologna, major confrontations were ended by the use of overwhelming police force. The provocative cycle of violence and counterviolence began on February 1, 1977, when about one hundred armed fascists attacked the university in Rome, shooting unarmed students protesting the government's educational reform bill. The next day, when thousands of youth protested in front of the office of the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement, the police opened fire with submachine guns, wounding four people (as well as a policeman caught in the crossfire). In response to these attacks, thousands of people occupied the university, and their ranks swelled to an estimated 30,000 by February 9. To guard against any new fascist invasion, students patrolled the campus and created checkpoints at all gates. All over Italy--Palermo, Bari, Milano, Turin, Venice, Bologna, Florence, Pisa, Cagliari and Naples--students occupied university buildings in solidarity with Rome. The striking students joined the ranks of hundreds of women who had occupied the old district court in the Via del Governo Vecchio since October 1976. Within the occupied universities, feminists, hippies and autonomists based in factories came into intense discussions, and a new set of issues vital to the movement became defined.

At this point, the most famous scene from the movement of 1977 transpired. On February 17, Luciano Lama, chairman of the Communist-controlled trade unions, went to the University of Rome to

convince students to end their occupation. To guard against possible disruption of his talk, he entered the campus on a flatbed truck with his own sound system and hundreds of hand-picked security men. He also brought about 2000 union members who were told they were needed at the university "to liberate it from fascists." Communists regularly referred to students as "petty bourgeois" (a derogatory term meaning unreliable and money-loving), but Rome's University was the world's largest (over 300,000 students), and students were largely children of the proletariat. To call them fascists was certain provocation.

The night before Lama was to come, the general assembly of those occupying the university finally agreed to let him enter but to try to defeat him politically, and they adjourned to watch a film about the 1968 student movement. The next morning, between five and ten thousand people gathered to hear Lama speak. The Metropolitan Indians, armed with rubber tomahawks, streamers and water balloons, surrounded his platform and began to chant "Lamas belong in Tibet!" "More churches, Fewer houses!" and "We want to work harder and get paid less!" Referring to the military coup in Chile, they shouted "In Chile, tanks; in Italy, the Communists!"

Soon after Lama began his talk, cries of "Idiot, Idiot" arose when he referred to students as "parasites at the expense of productive labor."<sup>67</sup> As shoving began near the stage, a brawl ensued between the security forces and the autonomists, many of whom quickly donned masks and unceremoniously threw Lama and his entourage out of the university. During the full-scale battle between Communists and autonomists, Lama was spat on, and the platform where he had been speaking was destroyed. In the fighting, at least fifty people were seriously injured. After Lama and his entourage were expelled, the rector called in the police. Hundreds of Communists stood and cheered the police on as they went through the gates. To the students, the Communists shouted "Fascists, Blackshirts, Your place is in the cemetery." A Communist sociology lecturer was heard to remark:

I think the police were quite right to clear the university. After all, there weren't any real students in there, only hippies, queers and people from the slum districts.

In describing what they dubbed a "little Prague," *Lotta Continua* put it this way:

You could imagine you're hearing the voice of the KGB thundering against the dissent movement in the USSR. Only this time what they are attacking is a mass movement, not just of students, but of thousands and thousands of young people who are jobless. This is a movement that is reacting with organization and struggle against a regime that is devastating our social life and forcing poverty and unemployment upon us.<sup>68</sup>

Two thousand police roamed the university, using their tear gas and clubs against anyone in sight. They injured dozens of people, many of whom were uninvolved in the movement. Later that day, thousands of people gathered to discuss the events and plan their next actions. Two days later, more than 50,000 people marched through Rome against the police, the unions and the PCI. They shouted slogans like "They've kicked us out of the university, now let's take over the city." Minister of Interior Cossiga went on television to announce new repressive measures against the movement, and the Metropolitan Indians quickly responded to his war-like language. Here is their entire text:

Dear Big Chief Paleface Minister,

Hail Paleface of Teutonic design. How happy we were to see you on the Magic Box. Your forked tongue hissed wondrously; and your metallic voice spat Poison on the human tribe. You said:

"We are telling these gentlemen that we will not allow the University to become a hide-

out for Metropolitan Indians, freaks and hippies. We are determined to use what they call the forms of repression, and what I call the democratic forms of law and order." We continued to stare in silence at the Magic Box. Our silence contained all the Hatred that the human tribe can muster against your Vile Brood, all the Hatred that hundreds of thousands of young people from the ghettos of the inhuman Metropolis will howl against a Monstrous Society that tells us to swallow our suffering.

But "swallow your suffering" are words that only exist in your language, in your putrid social relations, in your eyes that are lifeless and without humanity.

No, Minister Kossiga, we will never "swallow"!

BECAUSE OUR WILL TO LIVE IS STRONGER THAN YOUR THIRST FOR DEATH. BECAUSE, IN THE BRIGHT COLORS OF OUR WARPAIN WE WEAR THE RED OF THE BLOOD OF HUNDREDS OF COMRADES, OF YOUNG PEOPLE MURDERED IN THE STREETS BY YOUR "DEMOCRATIC" LAW AND ORDER, MURDERED BY HEROIN IN THE DESPERATION OF THE GHETTOS, AND MURDERED AT POLICE ROAD-BLOCKS JUST BECAUSE THEY DIDN'T HAVE A LICENSE FOR A MOPED!

You have built the Reservation for us, and now you want to chase us back into it, into the ghettos of marginalization and despair. No more is this possible! Because it is precisely out of the ghettos that our Rebellion has exploded. Today Human Beings have found themselves again, have found their strength, their joy of collective living, their anger, and their thirst for communism.

Your police-goons, dressed up like Martians, have chased us out of the University. They thought they could smash our dream, our desire to transform ourselves and transform the world. But you have not understood. Your Tin Brains can only think up hunger, repression, violence, special laws and death. You have not understood that you will Never Again be able to destroy us. Because our anger and our imagination howl more loudly than your thirst for vengeance!

Minister Kossiga, we accept your Declaration of War, so that the battle may be turned into a War for the total defeat of your Vile Brood.

As long as the grass grows on the Earth, as long as the Sun warms our bodies, as long as the Water bathes us and the Wind blows through the hair, WE WILL NEVER AGAIN BURY THE TOMAHAWK OF WAR!

The Metropolitan Indians of North Rome

For *Autonomia*, Lama's expulsion marked a crucial turning point. As the news about the expulsion of Lama and the fighting in Rome spread, students went on strike throughout the country. As both the government and the movement gathered their forces and planned the next steps, contradictions appeared within the autonomous movement, particularly between what has been called its "creative" and "organized" wings. For example, during the occupation of the university in Rome, women had to close their meetings to men after some "comrades" attacked women. At a national conference called by striking students on February 26 and 27, over 5,000 people showed up, including more traditional Left groups like LC. At one point, feminists and the Metropolitan Indians walked out of the meeting to discuss what to do in their own circles. Only after prolonged discussions did they agree to come back to the meeting, where they insisted on confronting the traditional groups that were trying to assert their leadership over a movement that had little to do with traditional politics. After much discussion, all those

present united in a call for a national demonstration on March 12.

The intense drama surrounding March 12 was overshadowed by events the previous day in Bologna however. An activist and former member of LC, Francesco Lorusso, was shot in the back and killed by the police after a scuffle broke out between a fanatic Catholic youth group and other students at the University of Bologna. Bologna is in the center of Italy's most progressive region, and with Radio Alice quickly notifying its listeners, the murder produced an immediate reaction. That same night, crowds set two police stations on fire, wrecked the Catholic sect's bookstore and occupied the main train station.

The next morning, although many people boarded buses to head for the national demonstration in Rome, thousands more marched through Bologna. In the afternoon, while Francesco's brothers and friends were holding a press conference, news reached them that the police were attacking the university. Thousands of people spontaneously counterattacked, liberating the city center and setting up barricades and beating back the police. In the enthusiasm of the moment, one participant wrote:

The police have gone away. Tiredness. Anger. Joy. The whiff of rebellion after years of cringing submission. The faces of comrades are smiling; their eyes are all red from the tear gas. Bottles of good wine taken from the bars are passed around. Champagne, joints, Molotovs... A piano is playing Chopin. It's in the middle of the street. Somebody brought it out of a bar. Right behind a barricade...Nobody's giving orders today. Tomorrow? Tomorrow they'll come with tanks. They'll crush us again. But today, for a few hours, this land is free. Chopin. Wine. Anger and Joy.<sup>69</sup>

With the city liberated from the police, the university became a free space where general discussions about strategy and goals took place. While the movement formulated its options, the police raided Radio Alice and shut it down. At dawn the next day, 3000 *carabinieri* and police accompanied by armored cars moved into the university, which they found deserted. Dramatically illustrating once again which side it supported, *L'Unitá*, the PCI's daily newspaper, smugly reported: "As regards the role played by Radio Alice as an organ of subversion, it is worth saying that the repressive measures inflicted on it have come rather late in the day."

Like the expulsion of Lama, the murder of Lorusso was an event of national significance. Clashes broke out again in Rome, Turin, Padova, Lecce and Messina, and a veritable state of siege was imposed on "Red" Bologna by its Communist authorities: Video cameras were installed on the main streets so the police could keep constant watch; activists were whisked off the street by police if recognized as leaders, and groups were forbidden to congregate. Some activists were charged with "conspiracy against the democratic state" and accused of being paid agents of foreign governments (both Moscow and Washington). Autonomists who attempted to leaflet factories were prevented from doing so by PCI goon squads. Perhaps the greatest affront to the movement, however, was the PCI insinuation that Francesco had been shot by provocateurs inside the Left--an insinuation made despite many eyewitnesses who testified that a uniformed policeman had shot him in the back.

The PCI did its best to repress the new movement, pressuring doctors not to treat those wounded (many of whom would not go to hospitals for fear of arrest) and lawyers not to defend the 216 people arrested on serious charges. The feminist center, a former cafe which had long stood vacant before women squatted it, was cleared out and boarded up. The Communist mayor of Bologna mobilized 200,000 to march against violence (in a city whose population was only 600,000). At the same time, about ten thousand autonomists demonstrated, notably many young people who were brought into the movement: While some of the PCI's demonstrators exited to go with the younger

militants, events in Bologna portrayed graphically the generation gap that was tearing Italy apart.<sup>70</sup>

Interior Minister Cossiga refused to grant a permit for the autonomists' March 12 demonstration in Rome, and he called on the government to use the army against the marchers--something which had not happened since 1898 when cannons were used against workers in Milan. The police raided bookstores, newspapers, and magazines in Rome, Milan, Bologna, Verona, and Mestre, shutting them down, confiscating materials which were being printed, and arresting many people. Despite the government's intimidation tactics, more than 100,000 people turned out on March 12, one indication that the movement, far from being isolated (as the Communists and government insisted), was growing stronger. In other cities--including Bologna, Milan and Iglesias--there were also large demonstrations. Delegations of marchers arrived in Rome from as far away as Sicily, and there were contingents of hospital workers, construction workers, white collar workers, steel workers from Naples, high school students and women (who were forced to bear the brunt of the subsequent police attacks). Worried that the marchers would reach their national headquarters, the Christian Democrats ordered the police to attack while many people were still crowded together waiting to begin marching. In Piazza Venezia, the fighting was particularly heavy. Clouds of tear gas reduced visibility to zero and firearms were used to scatter the demonstrators. Once the marchers regrouped, the police opened fire again.

After the violence of the police, the PCI was used to justify it. On March 23, they mobilized 100,000 people in Piazza San Giovanni. On the same day, 25,000 autonomists staged a demonstration that took the winds out of the PCI's sails. Early in the day, high schools emptied and bank workers, public employees and even many PCI members assembled for *Autonomia's* march. Some people linked arms, others danced in the streets, and the Metropolitan Indians marched in arrow formation. Despite government threats designed to intimidate the autonomous marchers, this was the moment in which *Autonomia* upstaged the new party of order. Overwhelmed by the huge throng which approached, the ranks of PCI marshals (who had been instructed to keep the "700 savage autonomists" away from their rally) had to let them through.

In this poignant moment, when these two disparate political forces stood face-to-face, the autonomists used irony and paradox as their weapons. Entering the Piazza at the same moment as Luciano Lama began speaking, dozens of autonomists knelt on the ground before the podium, sarcastically imploring "Lama, Forgive Us!" while others waved cardboard replicas of 38 caliber pistols in his direction. At one point, they chanted "Liberate Your Tongues! Use them for making love, not licking the boss's ass!" Rhythmically repeating what was said from the podium, they made Lama's message appear ridiculous. Even normally conservative engineering students began to chant slogans against the PCI's support of the government, and the PCI crowd begged for unity with chants like "Workers, Students, Unemployed--Organized Together, We Shall Win!" Many people joined the autonomous march as it filed past the podium. When they reached their final destination for the day in the Piazza Santa Croce, the autonomists entertained themselves with guerrilla theater and spontaneous raps from various unannounced participants, not prolonged monologues from recognized leaders.

For a few months, it appeared that ever-larger sections of the working class might break loose from the Communists' control. On April 6, over 3000 workers representing 450 factory councils gathered in Milan to discuss how to oppose both the government's and unions' collusion in their wage reductions. Adopting the language of the Metropolitan Indians, they referred to the unions as "palefaces who speak with forked tongues." Women articulated the need to confront discrimination against them inside the unions and argued passionately for cultural revolution--to fight against the family as the "kernel of unpaid labor and oppression of women."<sup>71</sup> To some, a revolutionary moment had arrived. As disenfranchised workers mobilized, they joined together with students already in the middle of two months

of strikes at major universities. On April 21, a general assembly of students at the University of Rome demanded the expulsion of the police who continued to patrol the campus since the Lama incident. Several faculties were occupied in support of this demand. The rector again called for the police to clear out the student protestors, and in the ensuing battle, the police used armored cars and tear gas while students overturned buses to build barricades and hurled Molotovs. As injuries mounted on both sides, the police began to use their pistols. This time, the students shot back, killing a policeman.

That night, heated discussions took place at the mass meeting in the Architecture Faculty. The free-flowing discussion contained a diverse range of reactions to the shooting. Some advocated adopting further violence in self-defense while others warned of the consequences of such a decision. More than a few called for full-fledged guerrilla warfare as the next step. *Lotta Continua* summed up its position:

The movement is being driven towards its self-destruction today by the theorization of 'armed struggle now,' by the search for 'higher levels of struggle'...It is possible to assert the movement's right to mass self-defense only on condition that the movement has the right to defeat positions inside which are adventurist and suicidal. Thousands of young people have been in the forefront of the struggles of the last few months, and have reaped some very rich experiences. The issue now is to let these experiences bear fruit. We must...prevent the suffocation of the mass initiative of the students which, over the last few days, has seen a fresh upsurge in towns all over Italy.<sup>72</sup>

This same tactical division (guerrilla warfare vs. popular movement) had already spelled the end of the New Left in the U.S. Few people in Italy were aware of that history, nor would it have mattered much even if they were since the situation was not controlled by anyone. The movement was trapped in a deadly spiral of confrontation with the government. Each time a demonstrator was killed, some activists felt that a policeman should also die. That is precisely what happened again three weeks later on May 12 and 13, the third anniversary of the successful referendum defeating the attempt to outlaw divorce. Despite Minister Cossiga's ban on all demonstrations in Rome until May 31, civil rights and feminists activists decided to celebrate peacefully the anniversary of their victory. Without any provocation, heavily armed police went on a rampage in the city center. Journalists and members of parliament, elderly women and passers-by were all savagely attacked with truncheons and leather gloves. Later, the police opened fire on unarmed demonstrators, killing 19-year old feminist Giorgiana Masi and wounding another woman. The next day, demonstrations took place throughout Italy. In Milan 20 people broke away from the march and fired on a squad of police, killing one.

It mattered little that the bulk of those involved in the movement disapproved of the shooting. Indeed, in Milan right afterwards, two AO members were beaten up by other demonstrators, and even the AO publicly distanced itself from the use of firearms. Nonetheless the government used this killing as a pretext to enforce even more ruthlessly its ban on demonstrations. The curtailment of public space for protests drove many activists underground (into a guerrilla struggle), thereby intensifying further the government's use of force: Police provocations aimed at depoliticizing the movement, at ending the involvement of hundreds of thousands of people, began to succeed. Dynamics internal to the movement, particularly the patriarchal legacy inherited from the society, wrecked havoc on the movement's ability to act on its own initiatives.

Some activists welcomed the intensification of the struggle with the government, believing that they--not the forces of order--would win a civil war. In retrospect, their shortsightedness is evident, although at that time, no one could have been sure of such a judgment. The police killing Giorgiana Masi

sent a clear message that peaceful demonstrations would no longer be allowed. When the movement responded in kind to the police violence, the prospect of a continually expanding popular mobilization was dissipated. Caught in a vise between the police and gun-toting radicals, the movement was denied public space vital to its existence. Squeezed between the violence of the police and the small-group actions of armed militants, the popular movement came to an abrupt end, and the drama of guerilla warfare (as I discuss in a moment) began in earnest. What is most problematic is how a movement hoping to create a more democratic society can defend itself from armed attacks while simultaneously strengthening popular participation. One activist expressed this dilemma:

When the act is secret, calculated, it still needs to be thought "elsewhere," somewhere other with regard to the consciousness of the person who lives, struggles, makes demands, achieves, changes and is changed, who doesn't make weighing up in advance the life of others, be it an enemy or even an army of enemies, the be-all and end-all of his militancy. To fight with a gun is like taking it upon oneself to think for others, not only for the moment of rupture, of revolt, but holding hostage an ideal of life which lay behind the rupture, bringing it about.<sup>73</sup>

Two developments merit special attention here: The tragedy of heroin sapped the life forces of the counterculture. At that time, many people blamed the Mafia and the CIA for its abundance on the streets of most cities, but simply blaming the suppliers cannot explain why so many activists substituted the thrill of death drugs for the erotic bonding of a liberatory movement. Simultaneously, government repression became the major fact of Italian politics. Historically, fascism has short-circuited liberatory impulses, as with Hitler's destruction of Germany's political movements and cultural avant garde. From the strategy of tension beginning in 1969 to the five attempted fascist coups after World War 2, Italian fascists had conducted an elaborate strategy aimed at curtailing civil liberties and forcing the government to the right. The government's ban on demonstrations after was a small victory for the fascist strategy compared to subsequent ones.

### **Repression and Resistance**

In the final phase of Italian *Autonomia*, government repression became the main focus of the movement's energies, and small groups of guerrillas took centerstage in the country's dramatic political upheaval. On September 22, 23 and 24, 1977, at least 40,000 people (some estimates were 100,000) responded to a call from the Metropolitan Indians to attend an anti-repression gathering in Bologna -- center of creative autonomy. As the streets became jammed with people, parks, squares and any public space were made into campsites. Hundreds of small groups involving thousands of people discussed heatedly what the next steps of the movement should be while others made music, performed theater and danced in the streets. In Bologna's soccer stadium, thousands of people (mainly those affiliated with organized groups) debated the question of armed struggle. Some used prearranged cards from their seats to create mammoth images of P-38s and slogans advocating armed struggle. One after another, sectarian groups paraded their members and slogans, finally deciding to exclude various groups for their lack of revolutionary resolve or incorrect beliefs. One participant related how:

This part of the Movement, about 8000 people, was divided and clashed among themselves, smashing chairs over one another's heads and failing to arrive at any solution (generally, a political solution is represented by written motion approved by a majority). Another part of the Movement, the majority, entered the city, sleeping anywhere in the streets, under porticoes, creating an enormous curtain, exploiting a few upright

sculptures in a small square, conveying furniture and chairs outdoors, conducting discussions and seminars in thousands of small groups, passing out the little legalities that had been produced for the occasion (fake train tickets, drugs, keys to open telephone coin boxes and traffic lights, etc.).<sup>74</sup>

Perhaps the outcome of the conference would have mattered more if there had been no centralized Left parties intent on seizing the center of political attention through spectacular actions. The powerful eruption of 1977 convinced incipient guerrillas that the time for armed insurrection had arrived. Since the movement was not permitted to assemble in the streets, armed actions provided an outlet for those who not content to exist as political spectators. Clandestine actions reinforced their group identity, and there was no shortage of supportive communes, collectives, circles of friends and acquaintances.

So many actions were claimed by groups in this period that it is possible to speak of "armed autonomy" in terms similar to "workers' autonomy" and "creative autonomy" as describing a tendency composed of the independent choice of action made by thousands of people. Of the more than 5000 armed actions attributed to left-wing groups from 1970 to 1982, over 500 different signatures used to claim credit for armed actions, a number which reflected both the decentralization of decision-making as well as the growing role played by armed, small-group actions. While there were many groups that followed this strategic choice, the majority of actions were attributed to two, the Red Brigades (RB) and *Prima Linea* (PL or Front Line).<sup>75</sup> Between 1974 and 1981, bank robberies attributed to those two organizations alone grossed over \$3 million, and kidnap victims paid them an additional \$4 million.

The RB emerged from currents of dogmatic Maoism present in 1968 at Italian universities. Their earliest action was in 1970 when they temporarily abducted two managers at Fiat. Organized hierarchically along Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist lines, the RB consisted of base groups of 3-5 individuals in a factory, school or neighborhood. In the larger cities, several base groups capable of acting together formed columns. The central committee directed these columns, and a group of 10-15 met yearly to set the organization's strategic direction. The man destined to become its overall commander and most important media personality, Renato Curcio, was a veteran of the student struggles in Trento, where he married a brilliant local student, Mara Cagol. While there is evidence that very few of the RB's hundreds (some said thousands) of members actually went underground and abandoned their identities, Curcio and Cagol were compelled to do so, particularly after she led a group that broke Curcio out of jail in 1975. Cagol was killed by *carbonieri* later that same year, an action some believed was deliberate murder since she had been captured alive and, like Che Guevara, was executed after falling into enemy hands. Unlike RB, PL's internal structure and actions were decentralized and spontaneously organized. While the RB believed that the heart of the state could be struck by a dedicated military cadre, PL thought a longer-range civil war could only be won if the armed struggle spread to involve hundreds of thousands of people. PL publicly attacked feminists, labeling separatism a "petit bourgeois" tendency. They insisted that "genuine" revolutionaries become part of the organizations of the armed struggle. A third guerrilla group, Armed Proletarian Nuclei, formed in 1974 in Naples. Its membership and actions reflected the mobilization of Italy's lumpenproletariat.<sup>76</sup> Not surprisingly, the writings of George Jackson and the Black Panther Party were a major influence on its members. When one of them was killed, he was buried with a page from Jackson's book, *Blood in My Eye*, in his hands.

The many individuals and groups constituting "armed autonomy" acted independently of one another. There was no central organization, no central committee in control. All that changed on March 16, 1978, when the RB abducted one of the country's leading politicians, Christian Democratic President Aldo Moro, after ambushing and killing his bodyguards. For 55 days, the media made Moro

into Italy's most famous man, and the RB became the central concern within the established political system. Their demand was straight-forward: release members of their organization who were in prison. After nearly two months of negotiations, it became obvious that the government would not make any concessions, and the group carried out its threat to kill their captive. All that was left was to have a state funeral attended by 10,000 people without Moro's corpse present, a clear sign -- a necrosimulacrum -- of Italy's transition to postmodern politics.

The armed guerrilla struggle had begun as an outlet for continuing resistance to police violence and fascist attacks but it ended up serving to highlight the central importance of the political system. More than any other single event, Moro's kidnapping and murder constricted the possibilities of autonomous political engagement. By kidnapping Moro, the RB reproduced the values of the system, helped to turn thousands of former activists into spectators, and made the popular movement seem unimportant. After Moro's execution, the country witnessed the capture of one after another of the RB's main columns. When new laws were passed allowing those who had committed criminal actions to be granted immunity if they would testify against others, former comrades turned against each other, and the organization completely collapsed.

As government repression against the popular movement continued to mount, fascists broke into the studios of the *Radio Donna*, an independent women's radio station in Rome, and shot and wounded four of the women who worked there. Denying the movement opportunities to exist publicly, the government enacted a variety of laws enabling the forces of order to seize control of the situation. The period of time persons suspected of "subversion against the state" could be held prisoner before a trial was lengthened to an incredible twelve years. On April 7, 1979, the government imposed an iron fist. They arrested over 300 activists on such charges, including many workers and students as well as several prominent intellectuals (among them Professor Antonio Negri, whom they then accused of the ridiculous charge of being the secret leader of the RB). The arrests were the beginning of a wave of repression that sapped the remaining strength of the movement. All that was left was to demand justice for the prisoners. In July, a prominent group of French intellectuals including Jean-Paul Sartre wrote a public letter of protest demanding the immediate release of these political prisoners:

...Italy has been shaken by a revolt--a revolt of young proletarians, the unemployed, students, and those who have been forgotten in the politicking of the Historic Compromise. Faced with a policy of austerity and sacrifices, they have replied by occupying the universities, by mass demonstrations, by casual labor, by wildcat strikes, sabotage and absenteeism in the factories. They have used all the savage irony and creativity of those who, ignored by the powers that be, have nothing more to lose...When they are accused of plotting and conspiring, and of being financed by the CIA and KGB, those whom the historic Compromise has excluded reply: 'Our plot is our intelligence; your plot is to use our rebellion to step up your terror campaign.'

In 1980, new anti-terrorist measures were implemented, and at least 3000 activists were incarcerated in maximum security prisons, incommunicado without normal legal rights. Many complained of mistreatment and torture.<sup>77</sup> The trials faced by members of the autonomous movement were not trials in any normal sense of the word. It was unclear in many cases what charges individuals faced, and the prosecution was allowed wide leeway in fishing for violations of the law. At the same time, defendants were required to answer all questions. Many gave eloquent public testimony, even swaying justices before whom they were brought.

Despite the differences between guerrilla groups and popular movements, both the government

and the Communists equated the RB and *Autonomia*, considering them to be neo-fascists because they didn't respect the norms of democratic dialogue nor operate within the forms of parliamentary democracy. Apparently, the PCI could not understand a distinction made by one of the chief justices of the Italian court system. In the words of this magistrate: "The *Autonomia* groups refute in principle every rigid, verticalizing, hierarchical structure; are not of a coordination among diverse, associated organs but of a spontaneity which has very little in common with the character of professional crimes" (like the RB). He went on to distinguish RB attacks as aimed at the "heart of the state" from *Autonomia's* attempts to create its own independent life.

In contrast to the RB attempts to attack directly the government and diminish its sovereignty, *Autonomia* aimed to choke off the legitimacy of the government among the citizenry, to undermine its popular support while building new sources of dual power. The RB went for the jugular while *Autonomia* sought to clog up the capillaries by creating non-hierarchical organization forms as part of a political culture that had little to do with parliamentary policy and elected representatives. The RB prematurely posed the question of power, attempting to take over the central government themselves, not to dissolve its powers and make room for autonomously constituted forms of self-government. In contrast to a system that produces politics as spectacle, where citizens are little more than powerless spectators, autonomous movements sought self-governance. The political intuition of activists within *Autonomia* understood that any attempt to change the government from within was corrupting since it involved traditional politics. That was one motivation to remain autonomous--to have nothing to do with established politics.

In the 1960s, the movement's demand for autonomy of the universities had reached a dead end in a practical realization of its social limits: A free university is not possible in an unfree society. Unlike the repression suffered by the youth movement, feminists saw abortion conditionally legalized and the major parties accommodate women's voices. A similar fate befell the workers' movement of 1969-1973. It was used by the PCI to improve union contracts and to give Communists greater political power. If there had been a workers' revolt in 1977 on the scale of the ones in 1969 or 1973, a revolutionary situation might have resulted, although it is doubtful insurgent forces could have won an armed contest for power.

The Italian movement was defeated by government repression, but its inability to maintain momentum and continuity can also be traced to internal dynamics, particularly the widespread reliance on traditional analysis used to understand society and to formulate movement strategy. Despite its break with traditional political parties, *Autonomia* failed to understand itself in non-traditional ways. Instead, activists relied on previously formulated notions and ideas. (See Chapter 6 below for a more specific analysis.) Publicly available for the first time in the 1960s, Antonio Gramsci's theories--penned when Mussolini was in power--seemed new to activists in 1977. Despite thousands of factory workers and office workers uniting against the unions, obsolete politics, workerism and the failure to connect with the youth culture and feminism spelled the end of any hope for the continuation of the autonomy. The death of the factory movement was obvious in the disastrous failure of the Fiat strike in 1980 during which assembly-line workers and office workers joined together to march against the unions.<sup>78</sup>

While remnants of the RB continued to act, kidnapping NATO General James Dozier in December 1981, their actions were of little consequence. Dozier was rescued in January 1982, and even though renamed elements of the RB continued to act for the next six years, they were marginalized players in a political game of little interest to most Italians. The feminist movement continued long after the campaigns of violence and counterviolence came to an end. Women led popular movements against NATO's stationing new nuclear weapons in Sicily and continued to build their autonomous cultural

centers and counterinstitutions.

Even if the RB had never existed and government repression had not been so intense, could *Autonomia* have won over a majority of the country? Or was this movement doomed to be a transient expression of a militant minority like the factory councils of the 1920s or the American Wobblies? Despite political crises and economic dislocations, the affluence of consumer society was an option for far too many Italians for them to follow the lead of autonomous movements. Only when faced with no acceptable alternative will most people choose the path of revolution. Although it failed to provoke the revolution it advocated, *Autonomia's* impact helped reform Italian universities and workplaces. The work week was shortened, housing modernized, the universities brought into the modern era, and women's status improved. Emergent popular aspirations expressed in social movements prefigure the future, and the impact of movements is often directly proportional to their militance. While the Italian movement was dispersed, its lessons and legacy were powerful influences further north, as I discuss in the next chapter. Both the reality and the myth of *Autonomia* helped inspire and provide direction to the next generations of activists.

## NOTES Chapter 2

- 1..Frank Brodhead, "Strategy, Compromise and Revolt: Viewing the Italian Workers' Movement," **Radical America** Vol. 18, No. 5 (1984) p. 54.
- 2..Robert Lumley, *States of Emergency: Cultures of Revolt in Italy 1968-1977* (Verso, 1991), p. 202.
- 3..Alessandro Silj, *Never Again Without a Rifle* (Karz Publishers, 1979) p. 102.
- 4..Lumley, p. 211.
- 5..Lumley, p. 226.
- 6..as quoted in Lumley, p. 189.
- 7..as quoted in Lumley, p. 227.
- 8..For discussion, see John Downing, *Radical Media: The Political Experience of Alternative Communication* (South End Press, 1984) pp. 225-6.
- 9..Robert C. Meade, Jr., *Red Brigades: The Story of Italian Terrorism* (St. Martin's Press, 1990) p. xx.
- 10..Meade, p.18.
- 11..Eddy Cherki and Michel Wieviorka, "Autoreduction Movements in Turin," **Semiotext** (Vol. 3 No. 3) 1980, p. 73.
- 12..Lumley, p. 300.
- 13..Lotta Continua, "Take Over the City," **Radical America**, March-April 1973, pp. 93-98.
- 14..Judith Hellman, *Journeys Among Women* (Oxford University Press, 1987) p. 22.
- 15..Cerki, p. 715..
- 16..Brodhead, p. 55.
- 17..The diary of one these struggles illustrated this trend. See *Tagebuch eines Betriebskampfes*, herausgegeben von Genossen der "Assemblea Autonoma" von Alfa Romeo (Trikont Verlag, 1973).
- 18..See Carl Boggs, *Social Movements and Political Power: Emerging Forms of Radicalism in the West* (Temple University Press, 1986) pp. 72-3.
- 19..*Italy 1977-8: Living With An Earthquake* (Red Notes, 1978) p. 110. This is one of the best single sources of information on the Italian movement of this period, and I have relied heavily on it for parts of this section. Other sources include *Armed Struggle in Italy: A Chronology* (Bratach Dubh Anarchist Pamphlets #4,1979); *Dossier on Torture and Prison Conditions in Italy: 1979-1983* (Second State, 1983); *Indianer und P38* (Trikont, 1978).
- 20..Earthquake, p. 110.
- 21..Potere Operaio, "Italy, 1973: Workers Struggles in the Capitalist Crisis," **Radical America** (March-April 1973) p. 31.
- 22..Bifo, "Anatomy of Autonomy," **Semiotext** (1980), p. 151.
- 23..David Moss, *The Politics of Left-Wing Violence in Italy 1969-1985* (Macmillan, 1989) pp. 90-91.
- 24..Judith Hellman, p. 78.
- 25..See Harry Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically* (University of Texas Press, 1979).
- 26..For discussion of this issue, see my book, *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968* (South End Press, 1987) Chapter 5.
- 27..Demau's "Manifesto" is contained in an excellent anthology edited by Paula Bono and Sandra Kemp, *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader* (Blackwell, 1991) pp. 34-5. Hereafter referred to as IFT.

- 28..The collectives of *Lotta Femminista* developed from the groups associated with Female Revolt in the same period when *Lotta Continua* was formed.
- 29..See Judith Hellman, pp. 46-7.
- 30..This was a minimal number. *Rivolta Femminile* estimated the number of illegal abortions at one to three million per year while the more conservative World Health Organization gave a figure of 800,000 to 3 million, and attributed 20,000 female deaths per year to improperly administered procedures. See J. Hellman, p. 42 and IFT, p. 214.
- 31..Most Italian doctors were hostile to feminism. Even after abortion had been decriminalized, many invoked a conscientious objector clause to abstain from performing them.
- 32.. See IFT, pp. 220-221.
- 33..IFT, pp. 216-218.
- 34..Bifo, pp. 94-5.
- 35..IFT, p. 226.
- 36..Quotations from Earthquake, pp. 85-87.
- 37..Judith Hellman, pp. 40-1.
- 38..Lumley, p. 331.
- 39..Some women were not counted since they worked in non-unionized jobs and were paid under the table. See Bassnett, p. 116.
- 40..See IFT, pp. 260-272.
- 41..*Lotta Femminista*, 1973 as quoted in IFT, pp. 261-2.
- 42..IFT, pp. 15, 42.
- 43..Bianca Beccalli, "Working Class Militancy, Feminism, and Trade Union Politics," **Radical America**, Vol. 18 No. 5 (1984) p. 42.
- 44..Beccalli, pp. 43-4.
- 45..IFT, p. 139. The originality and vibrancy of Italian feminist theory is refreshing. They theorized epistemology, not simply politics, and took on Weberian neutrality, the one-point perspective of scientific thought, the absence of the body from theory, and the notion of dual subjectivity.
- 46..Joanne Barkan, "The Genesis of Contemporary Italian Feminism," in **Radical America** Vol. 18 No. 5 (1984) p. 36.
- 47..Bassnet, pp. 108-110.
- 48..Deborah Tannen's more recent work on male and female conversation patterns reveals a microsociological basis explaining why organizations of women should be so different than male-dominated ones.
- 49..Carla Lonzi, "Let's Spit on Hegel," (1970) in IFT, p. 51.
- 50..Antonio Negri, *Revolution Retrieved* (Red Notes, 1988) p. 236.
- 51..Silj, pp. xiv-xv.
- 52..Lumley, p. 80.
- 53..Lumley, p. 96.
- 54..Lumley, p. 97.
- 55..Bianca Beccalli, p. 40.
- 56..Umberto Eco took particular pains to point out that they had not read Bifo. See his article in *Zwei Kulturen*. The anarchist pamphlet "Workers' Autonomy" published by Bratach Dubh) illustrates the degree to which any kind of leftist can become isolated from popular movements. What the authors of

this pamphlet have done is to construct an ideal-type of the world in which they develop the correct line on autonomy. Not only do they fetishize the working class by reducing the broad concept of autonomy (feminist, creative, cultural and proletarian) to one of its component parts, but their idea of the working class is their own invention. They are unable to relate real-world experiences to their model. Instead they develop a recipe for autonomy which is nothing but a formal shell of empty logic.

57..IFT, p. 276.

58..Judith Hellman, p. 99.

59..*Indianer and P38*, p. 18.

60..Birgit Kraatz, "Der Traum vom Paradies: Über die Stadtindianer und Autonomia in Italien," in Michael Haller (Hg.) *Aussteigen oder rebellieren: Jugendliche gegen Staat und Gesellschaft* (Rowohlt, 1981) pp. 39-41.

61..Significantly, media mogul turned Prime Minister Berlusconi's control of Italy's main television stations dates from this period as well. For an excellent discussion of alternative media, see John Downing, *Radical Media: The Political Experience of Alternative Communication* (South End Press, 1984).

62..Susan Bassnett, *Feminist Experiences: The Women's Movement in Four Cultures* (Allen and Unwin, 1986) p. 128.

63..Meade, p. 72.

64..For a detailed view, see Stephen Hellman, *Italian Communism in Transition: The Rise and Fall of the Historic Compromise in Turin, 1975-1980* (Oxford University Press, 1988).

65..See *Panorama*, March 20, 1979, pp. 146-156.

66..Bifo, pp. 153-4.

67..*Zwei Kulturen*, p. 63.

68..quoted in *Earthquake*, p. 56.

69..*Earthquake*, p.23.

70..A faction of the PCI attempted to take the party away from the conception of attacking "parasites" and "privileged" by instead talking about a "second society." The chief architect of this position was Alberto Asor-Rosa, a theorist associated with the movement of 1968 who subsequently joined the CPI. For Asor-Rosa, "productive labor" remained the "first society" and the "subproletariat" (unemployed, marginally employed, youth and women) was the "second society" to whom the CPI should reach out.

71..*Indianer und P38*, p. 119.

72..**Lotta Continua** Editorial, April 23, 1977, as quoted in *Earthquake*, p. 73.

73..Roberta Tatafiore, "A look 'outside' the armed struggle," IFT, p. 310.

74..Bifo, p. 150.

75..Moss, p. 37.

76..Italian Marxists sometimes called them the "subproletariat" to avoid the issue of Marx's disregard for the lumpen because of their reactionary role in France in 1848.

77..Dossier on Torture and Prison Conditions in Italy, 1979-1983.

78..Sidney Tarrow, "Constructing Meaning through Action," in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, edited by Aldon Morris and Carol Mueller (Yale University Press, 1992) p. 196.