

## Tactics of refusal: idioms of protest and political subjectivities in Italy's 'years 1968'

When in 2017 secondary school students protested in a number of Italian cities, occupying school buildings and engaging in ephemeral forms of urban rioting against new legislation which prescribed periods of compulsory apprenticeship for the entire student population, a number of newspapers, as if on cue, covered it in terms that evoked the period of the *contestazione*, as the years following 1968 are described in common parlance. On an online discussion forum for the right-wing newspaper *Il Giornale*, one comment struck me as revealing, in its banality. User Pippo1949 found no motivation whatsoever in the protest. It was since the 'notorious 1968', he remarked, that high-school students, every Fall, marched on the streets and occupied buildings, whether the excuse was 'Vietnam or the Budget Review'.<sup>1</sup> Such protests, it was implied, were meaningless, were they not amplified by the media. The comment spoke of one aspect of the complex politics of the memory of 1968 and how the latter continues to divide the country as well as to offer a lens through which contemporary Italy may be interpreted. The forum user drew on a specific trope of the public memory on 1968, one that it is indeed embedded in the common use of the word *contestazione* -- protest for protest's sake. This strand trivialises any real political motivation for '1968' (one could recall here Raymond Aron's characterization of it as students' carnival), decries it as a source of breakdown of discipline and authority that underpinned good education and, by extension, society, and ridicules young people in social movements as emulators who want to have 'their own 1968'.

Yet this discourse is also an unwitting acknowledgement of how the late Sixties produced a new political subjectivity, composed of university and senior high school students, which has since persisted in Italy. This segment, having been failed by representative politics, deploys their own repertory of direct political participation (occupations, general assemblies) and direct actions (marches, sit ins, graffiti slogans) at regular intervals. In the collective imagination 1968 is the foundation moment of forms of participatory democracy such as the *rifiuto della delega* ('refusal to delegate') and it might well be the case that it now endows contemporary action with symbolic legitimation. Then, the Italian 1968 looms large in that nation's political imaginary as a watershed 'moment' which generated and shaped political identities, idioms of protest, a repertory of tactics, institutional changes and societal rifts with which the country has wrestled for the past fifty years. Similar to other countries, but arguably with a more dramatic escalation of social conflict, the Italian 1968 was an historical period not a calendar year.<sup>2</sup> The killing of leftist student Paolo Rossi by right-wing militants ominously announced it in 1966, opening a long season of reciprocal violence and reprisals between radicals of a Marxist tinge and neo-fascists. The 'years 1968' lasted in Italy at least until 1977, with another outburst of social protest across the country which in part rejected the agenda of *sessantottini*—the '68ers'— in that it dismissed the significance of factory or the university (and the political identities that these institutions manufactured) as privileged

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<sup>1</sup> 'Gli studenti spaccano tutto per non fare due ore di lavoretti', *Il Giornale*, 14 October 2017 URL: <http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/studenti-spaccano-tutto-non-fare-due-ore-lavoretti-1452292.html> [visited 14/12/2017]

<sup>2</sup> Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The spirit of '68: rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956-1976* (Oxford, 2007); Klimke, Martin, and Joachim Scharloth, *1968 in Europe: A History of Protest and Activism, 1956-1977* (New York, 2008).

sites of political struggle.<sup>3</sup> Or until 1978, when the assassination of former Prime Minister Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades sealed the withdrawal of many activists from political participation. Another closing date could be 1980, when a self-defined 'silent majority' marched through the streets of Turin in reaction to workers' occupation of FIAT Mirafiori factory, condemning the workers struggles sparked by 1968 to political irrelevance for the following decades.<sup>4</sup> Archiving or reviving the legacy of 1968 has been a recurrent pursuit in Italian politics and both the myth and the spectre of the Italian 1968 are frequently evoked to stake political claims. The backlash against it was protracted and variegated as the interests, institutions and ideologies that it had threatened. Over time conservatives of various strands—from traditional Catholics to neo-fascists—produced an alternative, teleological narrative of the long 1968 that blamed it for the ills of Italian society. This described its challenge to authority and to traditional values as a nihilistic and hedonistic effort ultimately responsible for the fragmentation of the Italian political body and the decline of institutions such as the school and the family.<sup>5</sup> In the long term, the rise of Silvio Berlusconi in 1994 can be interpreted against this discursive backdrop as he pledged to reverse the left's "cultural hegemony" that he claimed was one of the (negative) outcomes of 1968.

Despite its specific characteristics, the Italian 1968 did not occur in a vacuum. Even though historians have only recently arrived at a nuanced understanding of the transnational links and exchanges between the protagonists of the social protest that characterised those years, the global nature of student mobilization in 1968 was evident to both contemporary participants and commentators in Italy. Indeed, one influential argument would have the Italian student and workers' protest represent a copycat phenomenon, which had its origins in the United States, but no indigenous roots in Italy. For Indro Montanelli, the foremost right-wing journalist during twentieth-century Italy, 1968 was an 'imported phenomenon', which arrived in Italy on the crest of what had already occurred in the United States, France and Germany. This is contradicted by the occurrence of several episodes of protest in campuses, already in 1967, across the Peninsula, which anticipated the wider struggle of the following year. Such an argument also discounts the intellectual and political milieu of 1960s Italy, which provided a distinct set of ideas to the Italian protest, including the non-Stalinist socialism and communism of *Quaderni Rossi* and *Mondo Operaio* (two influential left-wing journals of the late 1950s), dissenting Catholicism, the memory and myth of the Italian Resistance and anti-fascism, local traditions of civil disobedience and community activism.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the idea of an American origin of the protest ignores the truly interconnected emergence of the political idioms of those years across national boundaries and the cross-fertilization between activists in different countries. However, in the face of 1968 as a 'global event', it is also worth asking what was distinctive about its unfolding and eventually its legacy on Italian soil and what Italian history contributes to the overall story of those years.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Luca Falciola, *Il movimento del 1977 in Italia*. (Roma 2015); Marcello Tarì, *Il ghiaccio era sottile. Per una storia dell'autonomia* (Roma, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Alberto Baldisserra, "Alle origini della politica della disuguaglianza nell'Italia degli anni'80: la marcia dei quarantamila," *Quaderni di sociologia* 1 (1984): 1-78.

<sup>5</sup> Sergio Belardinelli et al., *Requiem per il Sessantotto* (Soveria Mannelli, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Attilio Mangano, *L'altra linea: Fortini, Bosio, Montaldi, Panzieri e la nuova sinistra* (Pullano, 1992); Mangano, Attilio, Antonio Schina, and Giorgio Lima, *Le culture del Sessantotto: gli anni sessanta, le riviste, il movimento* (Pistoia 1998); Roberto Beretta, *Cantavamo Dio è morto. Il '68 dei cattolici* (Roma, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> George Katsiaficas, *The imagination of the new left: A global analysis of 1968* (Boston, 1987); Jeremi Suri, *Power and protest: global revolution and the rise of detente* (Cambridge, 2009).

As Maud Bracke also suggests in this forum, women too constituted themselves as a political subjectivity in the 1968 years. In 1970s, the Feminist movement in Italy created a wealth of political and theoretical analyses and grassroots organisations that now stand as one of the great accomplishments of that period. The movement challenged patriarchal relations and put gender politics at the heart of social mobilization. The events of 1968 are often investigated with a male bias, which has led to the facile interpretation of a 'revolt against the fathers' and the assumption of a masculine paradigm of radical militancy. A gendered perspective might offer different conclusions as the Feminist movement approached the oppression of family, class and state structure from a novel angle.<sup>8</sup> As occurred elsewhere, Italian women challenged the male culture that marginalised them to an apolitical 'private sphere' while focusing on the discourse of class politics in the 'public sphere'. Such distinction broke down because of women's activism in the 1970s. In fact, Feminism pointed out that under the strong scrutiny and regulation of both the state and the Catholic church, the sphere of family, sexuality and reproduction had been anything but private. More broadly, *a partire da sè*, the practice of 'starting from the self', forced activists to reconsider the political role of the individual vis-à-vis collective entities such as the party and how everyday life acquired a wider political importance. This stood in striking contrast both with the narrative of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and with the practice of the radical groups born out of 1968, such as Lotta Continua, Potere Operaio or Avanguardia Operaia, which, during the 1970s, veered away from movement culture and were fatally attracted to a party form.<sup>9</sup>

The working-class radicalism that the radical groups tried to capture and foster represents the most disputed aspect of the memory of 1968. Between 1967 and 1969, young workers, many of whom were long-distance migrants in their own country, questioned the authoritarian structure of the factory and the regime of production on the shop floor. Differently from elsewhere, 1969 turned the Italian '1968' into an uprising of workers, not students. The origins of the protest were as multipolar as the Italian student movement had been, with the most influential experiences occurring in Porto Marghera, Milan and Turin where the struggle against the titans of Italian industrialism, such as Montedison, Alfa Romeo and FIAT, sent political shockwaves that troubled and undermined a series of fleeting government coalitions.<sup>10</sup> In each instance what was remarkable about these struggles was not only their novel protagonists, their language and their aims, but the forms of organisation. Workers took control of canteens to improvise general assemblies, occupied plants, reinvented industrial relations through the use of factory councils (*consigli di fabbrica*), organised protest marches both within the factory, disrupted the routines of managers and white-collar workers, engaged in shop floor bargaining on the levels of production or simply embraced play and idleness to undermine discipline. Rather than simply more money, workers asked for more dignity, more free time and more protection from hazards in the workplace, thus revolutionizing trade unions' traditional agenda. 'Refusal to work' became more appealing than 'workers' control' as a disruptive political strategy.<sup>11</sup> Radical groups correctly read this agenda as expression of self-determination or 'autonomy',

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<sup>8</sup> Maud Anne Bracke, *Women and the Reinvention of the Political: Feminism in Italy, 1968-1983* (London, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Anna Bravo, *A colpi di cuore: storie del sessantotto* (Roma-Bari, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Sergio Bologna, "1968: Memorie di un operaista," *Il Manifesto*, 1 Novembre 1988.

<sup>11</sup> Mario Tronti, "La strategia del rifiuto," in Tronti, Mario, *Operai e capitale* (Torino, 1966).

(prefigured already during the 1960s by the theorists of *operaismo*) but, theorising the latter as a political moment leading to revolution failed to encapsulate its complexities and ambiguities. So, when, from 1975 onwards, levels of militancy waned, radicals struggled to find ways to keep the momentum alive. In the context of severe repression from authorities and a raft of bombings and plots from neo-fascists groups and conspirators, some of these militants formed in their turn terrorist groups that aspired, and failed, to trigger working-class revolt through the high-profile violent actions of a vanguard. The legacy of that period cast a long, dark shadow over the rest of twentieth century Italian history and informed the notion of the Italian 1968 as a breeding ground for terrorism, which still colours the public discourse today.<sup>12</sup>

Historian Silvio Lanaro has talked about 1968 as 'an event around which identities were constructed'.<sup>13</sup> The public memory of those years have long been informed by narrative accounts of those identities in the form of memoirs and accounts of protagonists. Like other countries, it is only in the past 20 years that more polyphonic historiographical reconstructions have emerged as people 'who weren't there' have slowly gained legitimation to speak. However, reflecting on the construction and self-representation of identities remains crucial to the historical investigation of this period. Luisa Passerini has demonstrated, in one of the most compelling books on the topic, that our understanding of 1968 must also take into account the way historical agents construct themselves as participants in the interviews that form the basis of many studies and how their subjectivity informs the memory of the event.<sup>14</sup> Thus, as we move past the fiftieth anniversary of the multifarious commotion of 1968, the politics of memory in itself must become itself a central component of the historiographical investigation of those years and this, in Italy, remains indeed a deeply contested terrain.

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<sup>12</sup> Guido Panvini, *Ordine nero, guerriglia rossa: la violenza politica nell'Italia degli anni Sessanta e Settanta (1966-1975)* (Torino, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Silvio Lanaro, *Storia dell'Italia repubblicana: dalla fine della guerra agli anni novanta* (Venezia, 1992), 347.

<sup>14</sup> Luisa Passerini, *Autobiography of a generation: Italy, 1968* (Middletown, CT, 1996).