Anatomy of Autonomy

Bifo

Franco Berardi, alias "Bifo", was one of the main figures of the Movement of '77 in Bologna. He was arrested at that time under the charge of "subversive association". We asked Bifo to write the following presentation on the context in which the Movement developed and the problems it had to confront up to, and after, the April 7 arrests.

On April 7, twenty-two militants and intellectuals from Padua, Rome, Milano and Torino were arrested. What they have in common is their participation, until 1973, in the group Workers' Power (Potere Operaio) which then dissolved and became an element in the movement of Autonomy. They were arrested on the charge of leading the Red Brigades, the strongest of terrorist organizations in Italy. And in particular, they are accused of directing the kidnapping and execution of Aldo Moro, head of the governing Christian Democratic party. There are no grounds and no proof whatsoever for these charges. And practically everyone in Italy who has read a newspaper knows it. It is not only false that the militants of Autonomy and the intellectuals arrested on April 7 directed the Red Brigades, but, in fact, the political and theoretical lines of the Red Brigades diverge drastically from those of the individuals arrested. Essentially what is clear in all this operation is that the prosecution—and thus its sponsoring agency, the government—has decided to make this group of intellectuals pay for the last 10 years of mass revolutionary struggle in Italy. The government thinks it can succeed, and that the balance of power may be shifted decisively to its advantage. But we can make no sense at all of the actions taken by the government during these past months if we do not understand at least some things about the political situation in Italy, and about the Italian revolutionary movement.

FIRST: The crisis of Capitalism and of the Italian State subsequent to the workers' struggle during the Sixties.

SECOND: The Historical Compromise, an attempt to get beyond this crisis and to defeat the revolutionary movement.

THIRD: The novelty of the revolutionary movement for Autonomy with respect to the historical Socialist and Mandat Workers' Movement; its theoretical originality and its political praxis, as seen in 1977.

FOURTH: The problem of the civil war, and of the Red Brigades.

The experience of the revolutionary movement in Italy, from 1968 to 1979, is unquestionably the richest and the most meaningful within the capitalist West. To comprehend the novel elements that this experience contains we have to look at the theoretical and organizational currents that come to a head in Potere Operaio—until 1973—and are then dispersed and articulated in various organizational forms within "Workers' Autonomy" (Autonomia Operaio).

It is precisely because the progress of the workers and of Autonomy constitutes the most interesting and essential element of the entire revolutionary movement in Italy during those 12 years that we should consider the repressive initiative on the part of the judiciary in Padua. It is the Paduan court which was responsible for the arrest of most of the militants and intellectuals who took part in the movement. And the court's action must be seen as a real attempt at a final solution, an attack directed toward the elimination of those forces that constitute the elements of continuity in the history of the revolutionary movement, those forces that have provided the catalyst for very significant theoretical departures.

1. In order to understand the history of the last 10 years in Italy, we must start with the wave of conflicts begun in 1968 at universities and at some factories (Montedison in Portomarghera, FIAT in Torino, Stino in Turin). Spreading then, throughout the following year, in the "troubled autumn" of 1969, the conflict eventually involved all the Italian working class in strikes, demonstrations, take-overs, and acts of sabotage. During those two years of struggle a division occurred between the Left and the Workers' Movement. And in the following years this division produced a variety of organizations to the left of the Italian Communist Party—outside the official Workers' Movement, at the local level, and in the factories and schools.

During the same period, the group Workers' Power (Potere Operaio) was formed at the national level; it was composed of smaller groups already in existence: the Workers' Committee at Portomarghera, groups for workers' power in Padua and Emilia, and a part of the student movements at Rome and Florence. In September, 1969, the PO consolidated itself and began publishing a newspaper by the same name.

But to understand the political and theoretical ferment underlying the creation of the PO, we should first of all say more about the new organizational experiments of 1968 and 1969, made by the working class in the larger factories of the North.

For the present we seek to identify the consequences which this class struggle during those years had for the country's economic and institutional equilibrium.

The struggles of 1968 had their greatest effects in the university, where they were waged hand-to-hand by the students and the young (as in most of the world, the West in particular). These struggles forced a definitive crisis for the politics of the Center-Left (an alliance among the Christian Democrats and Socialists) which throughout the '60s had made possible a government founded on the policy of vague reform.

The anti-authoritarian assault by the Movement of '68 made problems and ten-
sions emerge which the Center-Left could not absolutely control. And in a general way the Movement brought the politics of the D.C. under accusation— for being partly responsible for the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie in Italian society and for the nation's dependency on the Church and authoritarian elements.

The Italian Communist Party, meanwhile, maintained an essentially ambiguous link to the movement of the students and the young. While disapproving of their radical actions, and despite the claim to autonomy from which the movement wavered, the PCI nonetheless saw an opportunity, in the events of 1968, for breaking the Christian Democratic hegemony and pushing for a displacement of the political balance to the left.

Naturally enough, the vanguard of workers who were organizing in the factories had quite different aims. During those years, in fact, the worker's cause tended increasingly toward bargaining for equality (equally increased salaries for everyone; abolition of piece-work and salary differences; abolition of job classifications and against the interests of production (abortion of promotion by merit, of production bonuses; rejection of accelerated production, etc.). The cumulative effect of the workers' demands provoked a crisis in the economic balance on which industrial development, until then, had depended: that is, the balance between low salaries and intensive exploitation of the labor force, a balance maintained by high unemployment and a large labor supply. An important element in the social scene of that period was the initiation of an organizational campaign among migrant workers from the South. Until then these workers had provided the mass-base for controlling union pressures in the large labor centers; however, between '68 and '69, especially in Torino, they became the mass-base at the forefront of the union struggle (and the base, too, for organized political revolution).

Unquestionably the crisis over political control of the production cycle, and thus the economic crisis of 1970 as well, have their roots in the strength and continuity of this workers' struggle, and in the considerable results achieved by it (across-the-board salary hikes which in 1969 alone, increased labor costs by more than 20%, with continued wage pressures in the following years). The dominant political class revealed its inability to deal with this struggle. Thus there arose in those years a policy—directed and supported by the D.C.—called the strategy of tension (strategia della tensione). This policy amounts to the artificial creation of moments of extreme tension through such means as incidents provoked by fascist groups or by agents that often have direct links to the government's Secret Service. The first large-scale act resulting from this strategy was the assault on the Agricultural Bank of Milano that killed 14 persons on Dec. 12, 1969— at the culmination of the Workers' struggle began in the 'troubled autumn.' The bombs were placed (the deed was discovered and denounced by democratic forces, by groups on the extreme left, and by a large number of militant groups engaged in counter-intelligence) by a group of fascists connected to the Secret Service and protected by powerful Christian Democrats. But anarchists were accused of the bombing, and the revolutionary movement came under. The workers had learned only too well to fend for themselves, and they began organizing autonomously. At the same time, the first armed cells began to be formed inside the factories (first in Milano and then in Torino and Genoa). They organized sabotage against machinery, disciplined foremen and guards, besieged the rotten bosses — in short, they brought into being embryonic stages of a workers' counter-power.

All of Italian society was affected by this extremely vast network of counter-insurgency. After it had broken owner's control, in the 'troubled autumn' of 1968, and assaulted the rule of low wages and intensive exploitation, it began to deal...
directly with political problems — problems of power. But it is also true that the problem of power remained an indissoluble knot in Italy, on the theoretical even more than on the political level.

What the struggles during all those years actually amounted to was a rejection of the wage-earning system, and a rejection of that exploitation which transforms human life into a working death on credit, forcing people to sell their own lives in exchange for their wages. And this rejection which entered into the social thinking of a culturally advanced proletariat continually better educated and endowed with an ever increasing technical and scientific expertise — evolved into the very real issues of power and liberation.

Labor’s rejection of work expressed itself in many ways: the reduction of the work week to 40 hours; the right to rest periods and control over production time; the imposition of a counter-power inside factories; the rejection of the ideology of production; and criticism of the methodology of exploitation. But a more pressing need exerted itself within the struggle; that of transforming those objections into a program for the liberation of existing energies, into a program of self-organization of the production process and of the entire social cycle of production and consumption. In this lay the possibility for a liberation of repressed workers.

During those years the utopia of workers’ liberation was a massive driving force, a power for organization and for calls to action. But the ideological baggage of traditional Marxism continues to be borne not only by the official Workers’ Movement (primarily that of the PCI) but by the newer groups of the revolutionary left as well. As an ideology based on socialism — and thus on a form of organized social exploitation that is all the more rigid in its domination of working life — traditional Marxism could not contain the forceful energy and, above all, the radicalism which the movement displayed.

At this point, the groups on the revolutionary left itself entered a critical period of their own, and their forms of organization, from the bottom up, began to diversify themselves of their own trapping. As a new radioactivity expressed itself among the proletariat, especially among the young, those groups began an inexorable process of bureaucratization by which they became the small appendages of the old modes of organization of Marxist (FIAT) which took place in March and April of 1973. It is undeniable that the only ones to take cognizance of the course of this transformation on both the theoretical and political levels, were the militants of Workers’ Power. In fact, the PCI, in May of ‘73, to dissolve, diffusing itself throughout the committees, collectives and base structures which constitute the extensive network of Autonomy.

THE HISTORICAL COMPROMISE

II. It was in 1973 that the PCI, guided by the lessons of the Chilean experience, worked out its so-called policy of Historical Compromise. The policy was based on the hypothesis that Italy cannot be governed except by an institutionalized political accord between Communists and Christian Democrats. This political “about-face” was already implied at every point along the Italian road to socialism and represented less a radical break with the tradition of Togliatti’s PCI than a logical development of it. Yet the consequence of the “about-face” was the further exacerbation of the rupture between the official Workers’ Movement (PCI and Union) and the new groups in the factories and large cities, who were organizing at the ground level, consolidating themselves and working together for the social and political realization of Autonomy.

The disputes between the PCI and the Movement toward Autonomy became increasingly more violent during the following years, and in 1975 particularly, when Autonomy emerged as a true mass movement which united young workers, the unemployed, students, and others living on the margins of society. In Spring of 1975, Autonomy was put to its first test as committee members took on fascists and police in a confrontation in Rome. The conflict spread to Milan, where, in mid-April, a young fascist was killed, as well as a member of the “carabinieri.”

Thousands of young workers, mainly from small factories, joined with students and unemployed youth and put the inner city under siege, demonstrating and rioting. Other organized demonstrations occurred in Bologna, Florence (where a man was killed by police), Turin, (where a worker at FIAT was killed by an armed guard), and in Naples. These were heated days, in which Autonomy had its first experiences among the masses.

The State recognized, at that point, its principal enemy; Autonomy represented a new level of social organization which no longer accepted the union as a mediation agent, no longer accepted the line of the PCI and its strategy of compromise and acquiescence.

The State replied to Autonomy’s efforts during that week in the severest manner: repression, the legalization of police violence, and the systematic use of arms in public confrontations. In May of 1975, the Christian Democrats and their allies in the government passed a Parliamentary act called the Raising Law (Legge Rialzo). Its terms provide that police can shoot any time public order is felt to be threatened. Furthermore, jail sentences would be more severe for anyone found in possession of defensive weapons, such as bottles, molotov cocktails or handkerchiefs, ski masks and helmets that could mask faces in demonstrations. The law was explicitly directed against the youthful proletariat who were organizing within the ranks of Autonomy. And it was supported by every party, with the exception of the PCI, which feebly abstained from voting. But the Communists would not oppose the law and thereby endanger their intended accord with the Christian Democrats.

The day the law was passed marked the beginning of the most violent and bloody phase of the class struggle in Italy. Demonstrators, or the marginal and disaffected elements in general, began to be wounded or killed by police firearms. Citizens who did not come to a halt at police blockades, chance passersby who found themselves in a demonstration—they too met their deaths by virtue of a law “for the public order.”

The revolutionary left and Autonomy had to pay the price for the increased violence of the State and of the police. The casualty list within the Movement is endless. It is enough to mention here Pietro Bruno (18 years old, militant member
of "Lotta Continua", who died in the spring of '75; Giannino Zibecchi (antifascist committee, killed in May 1975); Mario Balzi (worker for Autonomy, 21 years old, killed at San Basilio, Rome, during a housing occupation in October 1976); Francesco Lorusso (23, "Lotta Continua", killed at Bologna, March 11, 1977); Giorgiana Masi (killed in Rome, May 12, 1977, a feminist linked to "Lotta Continua"). But these are only the most notable. It is estimated that the victims of the "Legge Reale" numbered 150 in the period between May '75 and December '76.

If we wish to understand the rise of "terrorism", the formation of militant organizations, the choice of clandestine armed warfare by an ever growing number of proletarian youth, then we cannot forget the role played by the "Legge Reale". Nor can we forget the role of that aggravated and general violence perpetuated by the State from the moment Autonomy appeared in the factories and streets of the country, as a socially diffuse and politically organized movement.

We also need to remember the other side, the policy of the official Workers' Movement (chiefly, the PCI: a policy that was first of all dependent on the decisions of the Christian Democrats, and subordinate to the movement of repression. In addition, this policy sought to isolate the youthful elements of Autonomy, causing a division within the working class and the proletarian movement. The PCI became a sort of political police made up of enforcers, spies and stooges.

In the following years, rather than being resolved through the accord between the Communists and the Christian Democrats, the institutional crisis in Italy assumed an increasingly dramatic character. The impossibility of governing the country was highlighted. The basic reason for the crisis was the growing distance between the representative political institutions (parties, the Parliament, and other structures of participation) and a population of hopeless young people. Autonomy was at once a symptom and a cause of this distance.

In the political elections of 1976 the PCI considerably increased its voting strength, posing a threat to Christian Democratic power. The DC was no longer guarantied a parliamentary majority with its traditional allies (centrist parties) without either the agreement or the neutrality of the Communists. On the other hand, Christian-Democratic rule could not be substantially by a Leftist majority either, because the Left simply did not have the strength. Convinced that it needed to quicken the pace of an alliance with the DC, the PCI began in 1976, to press for a "Institutional Compromise". It supported the Christian-Democratic government without, however, entering into that government. The situation, then, was paradoxical: while the masses had supported the PCI, believing this was the best way to promote a policy of radical change, the policy of the Historical Compromise ended up bolstering the tottering forces of the DC.

In terms of Italian society at large, this meant that workers had to pay for the economic crisis (which continued to grow worse between 1973 and 1976, as a result of the oil crisis). The PCI and the unions explicitly assumed the task of forcing the working class to accept a policy of sacrifice, consumer restrictions, and reduced public spending. In the autumn of 1976, a few months after the elections, the Andreotti government instigated an economic offensive against workers' salaries, increasing the prices of the most essential goods—gasoline, bread, pasta, and services. The PCI and the unions were used in order to deliver this blow. Workers in the large industrial centers of the North reacted in a wave of furious protests, launched autonomously and against the will and intentions of the unions; at Alfa-Romeo, at FIAT, at ITALISIDER, and elsewhere, they waged independent strikes. But the "crunch" passed; living conditions worsened notably for workers whose faith in the unions collapsed. And from that time, rejection of the forms and directions of union organization increased. What is more, the policy of "sacrifice" which cut consumption and public spending and promoted worker layoffs, rebounded back on those who were employed. It produced a constantly growing unemployment rate, which at the beginning of 1977 reached an unprecedented figure (1,700,000 officially; in reality more than 2 million).
tion of capitalism, according to which, as technological and scientific capacities increase, intellectual and creative energies are wasted, while the possibilities for innovations in production are suppressed so that the existing labor organization and the organization of knowledge crucial to labor's functioning are not disturb-
ed. Cultural transformation, mass creativity, and refusal of work are the dominant themes of the Movement of '77. But only with difficulty could the Movement suc-
cess in organizing all that potential constituted by the intellectual energy, tec-
nical-scientific expertise and innovative energy that the young-proletarian strata possess. The enormous richness that the Movement of '77 expresses could not suc-
cess in finding a formal program and positive organization. This is because of capitalist repression, but also because of the inability of the revolu-
tionary movement to adjust with rapidity its interpretative categories and its prac-
tices to the reality of a mature, post-socialist proletariat.

All during 1976, new forms of organizations—connected with Autonomy, but related to all aspects of collective life and cultural identity—were being establish-
ed. The rejection of the family and of individualism had found a form of organiza-
tion in the experience of proletarian youth associations. These associations were
communes set up by squatters in certain neighborhoods of big cities; young pro-
letarians thus organized territorially and experimented with forms of collective
life-in-transformation.

The storm that the feminist movement provoked in male-female relations and the subsequent explosion of homosexual collectives thus found a territory in which to
consolidate, in which to transform the customs of living, sleeping, eating, smoking.
In the same period, the movement for free radio spread widely. In every city, neigh-
borhood and village the young proletarians, together with students and commu-
nications workers, used the occasion of a legislative vacuum (the result of
which was that the State monopoly on information lapsed and was not replaced by
any other sort of regulation) to give life to a network of small "wildcat" sta-
tions. The radio stations were operated with luck and very little money, but they
could cover a territorial space adequate for the organizational forms and commu-
nication needs of the emerging proletarian strata. This was a truly revolu-
tionary fact: with free radio it was possible to communicate rapidly the decisions and appointments of revolutionary organizations or base organizations. Through
this channel circulated an uninterrupted flood of music and words, a flood of
transformations on the symbolic, perceptive and imaginative planes. This flood
entered every house, and anyone could intervene in the flow, telephone, inter-
rupting, adding, correcting. The desire, the dream of the artistic avant-garde—to
bridge the separation between artistic communication and revolutionary transfor-
mation or subversive practice—became in this experience a reality. The brief, hap-
py experience of Radio Alice—which from February 1976 to March 1977 transmitted from Bologna—remains today the symbol of this period, of that unforgettable year of experimentation and accumulation of intellectual, organizational, political, and creative energies.

The year 1976 is also the year of the great concert-festivals of proletarian youth: a
last wave of pop music, which arrived in Italy five or six years later than in the
U.S. or Great Britain, but which found here an extremely fertile cultural terrain.
The sweet sound of pop immediately combined with a certain dimension of mass
cultural transformation. It became the constituent element in a vision of the
soft" cultural and social revolution.

The harshness of organizational life in the Workers' Autonomy was united and
merged with the sweet experiences of cultural transformation and the easy flow
of information. Lambro Park, 1976. In Milano: 18,000 proletarian youths performed
a gigantic sun dance, the likes of which had never been seen before—then fought
with police for several hours.

The autumn of 1976 saw an explosion in the movement toward "autonomous
price-setting" (autoreduzione). Tens of thousands of young people, organized in
associations of proletarian youth, came in from the suburbs of Milano, Rome and
Bologna, laid siege to the city centers, confiscated merchandise from luxury
shops, "autonomously reduced" the prices of movies, theaters and restaurants
(that is, they paid what their politics required—a third or a fourth of the usual
price). But the final test of the movement toward "autonomous price-setting" was
a violent clash, a forerunner of the violentus that would explode in 1977: the battle
of La Scala, on December 7, 1976.

La Scala is the bourgeois theater of Milano. December 7 marks the inauguration
of the new season, the "opening night" gala. But young Milanese proletarians
said that they would not permit the Milan bourgeois to stage this yearly provoca-
tion with its pomp, finery and 80,000-lire tickets. They declared war on the Milan
bourgeois and their festival. The government accepted the challenge, and
thousands of police in battle formation defended La Scala. Hours and hours of
conflict, 500 imprisoned, dozens arrested, 7 gravely wounded. The youth move-
ment reflected for a month on this battle and on its catastrophic outcome. But
only in order to be better prepared the next time.

The next time was in February of 1977.

The struggles that exploded in 1977 were completely out of proportion to what oc-
casioned them: they began with a small university campaign against a Christian-
Democratic "reform". On February 3, the fascists wounded a student in Rome, and
the university was subsequently occupied. First in Rome, Palermo, and
Naples, then in Florence and Torino, finally in Bologna. The occupation of the
universities was a pretext: the academic institutions were occupied not only by
students, but by young workers who worked in small factories, and had no other
possibility for organization and concerted action. Then there were the
unemployed, those who lived in the city outskirts, the juvenile delinquents, the
disfranchised... University communities became general quarters for a wave of
social struggle that had as a fundamental theme the refusal of the capitalist
organization of work, the rejection of that system which generates exploitation
and unemployment as the two poles of socialized work. "All work for less [time]
became the watchword for this wave of struggle of young proletarians—a group
heterogeneous from the point of view of productivity, but homogeneous from
the point of view of culture. "All work for less" is a watchword which has nothing to
do with questions such as "the right to a job", or the right to a full-time position.
Work is necessary evil—or at least remains so for a historical period that we wish
eventually to surpass and extinguish with collective force. What we want is to ap-
ply, totally and coherently, the energies and the potential that exist for a socializ-
ed intelligence, for a general intellect. We want to make possible a general reduc-
tion in working time and we want to transform the organization of work in such a
to that an autonomous organization of sectors of productive experimental
organization may become possible. These sectors would give rise to experimental
forms of production in which the object of worker cooperation would not be profit,
but the reduction of necessary work, the intelligent application of technical and
scientific knowledge, and innovation.

This program actually existed among the young proletarian social strata that in
February 1977 filled the cities with their demonstrations.

The cultural transformation and the rejection of prevailing values that the cultural
experience of '76 (radio stations, associations, journals, "grass roots poetry") had
accumulated, exploded with a wave of anti-institutional creativity. The critique of
power is the critique of the language of power. On the 17th of February, the criti-
que of power, the critique of representative institutions, and the critique of institu-
tional language were united in a unique action. 7000 young proletarians who (a
fact without precedent in the Movement's history in Italy) expelled, with uncon-
trollable rage and fury, the most important figure among Italian labor leaders, Lu-
ciano Lama, secretary of CGIL and exponent of PCI, from a lecture hall at the
University of Rome, where he was delivering a policy statement. The PCI accused
the young proletarians of being "enemies of the working class" and tried to divide
them from factory workers. But this move did not succeed; no factory supported
the great union leader. Instead, the young workers of the Northern factories ex-
pressed sympathy for the young proletarians of Rome who had expelled Lama.
The split between the PCI and the Movement reached its apex at this period, and
will likely never be repaired. On the 17th of February a mass sector of the Italian
proletariat was liberated with violence from socialist traditions, both Stalinist and
reformist. The autonomy of the movement had been assured, in the conscious-
sessness and in the organization of ever-growing strata. And the stage was be-
ing set for the Insurrection of March.

March of 1977 was the moment of greatest intensity in the explosion of the strug-
gle for autonomy. The social strata that were mobilized in this month were the
young unemployed intellectuals, together with "off-the-books labor and seasonal
workers"—that is, all sectors of irregular or marginal workers. At the same time,
March was the moment of the greatest tension and distance between the new
movement for autonomy and the Communist Party. The act of expelling Lama
from the University of Rome established a precedent from which the people at the
University of Bologna proceeded in the days of March. The occupation of the en-
tire university zone by huge numbers of young proletarians coming from every
area was transformed into a true Insurrection when on March 2, a youth was killed
by police. But Bologna is also the city in which the PCI has always been strong;
the PCI government is a leftist coalition and bosses and organizations of the
Workers' Movement collaborate to ensure social peace. The exploitation of young
workers in Bologna is controlled by a network of little bosses and bureaucrats,
often linked with the Communist Party. In brief: Bologna is the city of the realized
Historical Compromise. And for that reason (as well as for the reasons of the
Movements' extraordinary creative vitality) the Bologna experience marked a mo-
ment of absolutely central political importance.

The extraordinary violence of the days in March, the mass following attracted by
the Movement, and the radical nature of its objectives created a crisis for the
city's Historical Compromise by offering evidence of the government's inability to
function as an instrument of control over vast proletarian sectors.

For ten days, two large cities (Bologna and Rome) were in the hands of the Move-
ment—in very violent conflict in Rome on March 7; on the 2nd and the 12th of
March in Bologna. On the 12th, Rome was the theater for a six-hour battle in
which tens of thousands of youths were engaged, while 100,000 filled by in-
demonstrations. And then in the following days at Bologna the Movement invaded
the city. The Italian bourgeoisie recognized at this time the serious danger that its
design for institutional order faced, and saw that the PCI's ability to guarantee

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the mass demonstrations continued. The summer began with a violent polemic—inspired by an appeal launched by French intellectuals against
the repression—on the repressive nature of the Historical Compromise as an insti-
tutional design for the elimination of all dissent.

Also at that time, there began in Italy (and here the Movement was behind the
times) a critical analysis of socialism of the Stalinist type (of which, in the last
analysis, the PCI is only a variant). On the strength of theoretical reflections
developed in France by those such as Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari (a more
critical and doubtful reception was given to the Nouveaux Philosophes, who were
too removed from any concrete experience with the critique of institutions and
with class struggle), and a new front was opened in the struggle against the
State. Thus new forms of totalitarianism were seen developing as the historical
left was assimilated by the apparatus of power. And so the critique of the institu-
tionalized Workers' Movement acquired a new connotation, according to the PCI,
all the years after '68 had been marked by gains for social democratic and refor-
mist causes. But now one began to discover that social democracy, even though
introducing new elements into the communist worker movement tradition of the
Third International, was not necessarily in contradiction with totalitarian, violent
and Stalinist trends. In fact, the two aspects were mixed in the PCI, which had
become a component of bourgeois democracy by abandoning every type of
violence against the existing order and at the same time a violent force of
totalitarianism against the revolutionary movement.

Confronted with the wave of repression that followed the events of March, and
mindful of the discussion that had developed on the nature of the State after the
Historical Compromise, the Bologna movement set forth a proposal for a Conven-
tion to be held at the end of September. At the Convention, all components of the
Movement in Italy could come together, along with all the European Intellectuals
or political groups that were interested in the Italian revolution as a forerunner of
things to come. The September Convention was the great opportunity—missed,
however—for the Movement to overcome its purely negative, destructive connota-
tions, and formulate a programmatic position for the autonomous organization of

order had been undermined. Consequently, the PCI lost credibility both as the
governing party, and because it had let control of so vast a movement slip away
from it. The State was forced to resort to brutal repression; hundreds of arrests in
Bologna, and then the unleashing of a campaign of repression all over Italy that
struck most heavily at groups that worked on the cultural level: radios, journals,
publishing houses, and bookstores were closed and searched.

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a real society against the State, an autonomous organization of social, intellectual, and productive energies that might make possible a progressive liberation of lives from salaried work. Unfortunately, the Convention turned into a reunion against repression, and this greatly reduced the theoretical importance and the possibilities of this period. Nonetheless, 70,000 people were present at the convention and the attention of the whole Italian proletariat (as well as that of vast numbers of intellectuals all over Europe) was directed toward the Convention. But the gathering concluded without producing any direction for the future, any new program, and without advancing the Movement, instead it was satisfied with hearing tales of repression and then defining, in negative terms, its reaction. A long phase of crisis had begun for the Movement, a crisis that involved dispersion, disorderization and above all, the lack of prospects.

IV. Up to this point, we have completely ignored the problem — absolutely central to the analysis of class struggle in Italy — of terrorism. Armed struggle was a form of agitation that grew ever larger after a certain point, and finally became preponderant in September 1977. The problem of terrorism probably cannot be reduced to a necessary means for the defense of organizational levels (living in the streets, occupying buildings, picketing), but it has always refused to lose the military organization as an autonomous political body, or as an "armed party." The strength of the Red Brigades is thus directly proportional to the weakness of the Movement. And so, as the repression of the regime weighs more heavily on the Movement, the power of the armed organization increases. On the other hand, we must also recognize that, beginning in the Spring of '77, when the strength of the mass movement brought about a crisis for institutional equilibrium and the Historical Compromises, the State undertook to reconstruct its stability and institutional equilibrium on the basis of the opposition to terrorism. The policy of "national unity" — amounting to a reinforcement of the Christian-Democratic government (always a fragile majority) — with uncontrolled support from the PCI — was adopted as an emergency measure in the face of the Red Brigades' assault. And on the same day that Moro was kidnapped the PCI decided to support a DC government that was completely unacceptable. For this strategy the PCI paid, with its electoral losses in June, 1979. But this is of little interest. What is interesting is that terrorism created a situation of crisis for the revolutionary movement, or rather inserted itself into a pre-existing crisis of the Movement. And thus inserting itself, it accentuated and consolidated the crisis, reinforcing the repression from the one side and, on the other side, restricting the revolutionary process to a pathway without egress, without alternative routes.

This said, then, we have to recognize that the extension of the armed struggle and the great impact of armed terrorist action (to be differentiated from a practice of mass violence justified by the needs of the proletariat) are directly linked to the political and social context (the factories) comes from the "hard" Stalinist base of the Communist Party. The social contexts of the Brigades — even more than their selection of a clandestine modus operandi — set them apart from others as early as 1974; by 1977, the differences between the evolving Movement for Autonomy and the Brigades had become even greater.

The highest point in the career of the Red Brigades was the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro, President of the DC. These events took place at a time when the Movement found itself in a state of crisis and immobilization, largely because of the "failure" of the September Convention. It was precisely the immobilization induced by the Convention that led ever larger sectors of the Movement, especially those harassed by repressive measures, to choose a clandestine life. Many other fighting organizations smaller than the Red Brigades were formed. These smaller organizations had objectives that were closely linked to social struggles (acts of sabotage, burning of employment offices), while the actions of the Red Brigades had an effect almost exclusively political, directed as they were at the DC or at the headquarters of the majority party.

The question of the "armed struggle" gave birth in these years to a number of dubious theses, whether within the Movement, in the press, or in propaganda emitted by the forces of the regime. Terrorism came to be considered a direct expression of the forms of struggle of the Movement. The Movement has certainly expressed and practiced forms of violent struggle, when violence represented a necessary means for the defense of organizational levels existing in the streets, occupying buildings, picketing, but it has always refused to lose the military organization as an autonomous political body, or as an "armed party." The strength of the Red Brigades is thus directly proportional to the weakness of the Movement. And so, as the repression of the regime weighs more heavily on the Movement, the power of the armed organization increases. On the other hand, we must also recognize that, beginning in the Spring of '77, when the strength of the mass movement brought about a crisis for institutional equilibrium and the Historical Compromises, the State undertook to reconstruct its stability and institutional equilibrium on the basis of the opposition to terrorism. The policy of "national unity" — amounting to a reinforcement of the Christian-Democratic government (always a fragile majority) — with uncontrolled support from the PCI — was adopted as an emergency measure in the face of the Red Brigades' assault. And on the same day that Moro was kidnapped the PCI decided to support a DC government that was completely unacceptable. For this strategy the PCI paid, with its electoral losses in June, 1979. But this is of little interest. What is interesting is that terrorism created a situation of crisis for the revolutionary movement, or rather inserted itself into a pre-existing crisis of the Movement. And thus inserting itself, it accentuated and consolidated the crisis, reinforcing the repression from the one side and, on the other side, restricting the revolutionary process to a pathway without egress, without alternative routes.

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realize all this. And here our study must become more complex, if we wish to comprehend the most recent period of Italian history, that is, the events of April 7, 1979.

In '77 the positions taken by the Movement on the armed struggle were imprecise. The entire Movement had rightly refused to condemn (as the bourgeois regime and its parties requested) mass violence. The March insurrection had been a virtual explosion involving tens of thousands of proletarians and young people, and that level of violence was an inevitable stage which gave to the Movement the maneuvering room always denied it by the Institutions. But on the subject of terrorist action the debate was always more confused. All the components of the Movement recognized the proletarian and revolutionary origins of the fighting formations (a few lots even everyone knows that the March insurrection had not the aims of a mass initiative capable of setting up the conditions for a resumption of the class struggle. To pacify obviously meant to remove the obstacle constituted by the more than one thousand detainees, along with amnesty, elimination of the camps, and dismissal of Dalla Chiesa. All these are objectives of pacification originating within the Movement, objectives that the political planners of Autonomy want to make into the aims of a mass initiative capable of setting up the conditions for a resumption of the class struggle in a strategically autonomous form, no longer determined by the difficult straits of a civil war.

But suddenly, just when the possibility of superseding terrorism began to be perceived and began to mature, State repression intervened with all the power that it could put into the field. We have reached the events of April 7.

THE SEVENTH OF APRIL ARRESTS

The desire of the State to eliminate every attempt at superseding terrorism became yet clearer when the editors of Metropoli were arrested and the publication suppressed. Metropoli in fact is a journal devoted specifically to the goal of superseding terrorism and reconstructing autonomous conditions for the class struggle.

For quite some time to come, the revolutionary movement will have to deal with the actions taken by the State on April 7. Even beyond the question of liberating the comrades who were arrested, some fundamental doubts have been raised, and the possibility of making a transition to a new epoch in the process of liberation from capitalist domination has been jeopardized in a dramatic way.

To divest oneself of these last ten years and at the same time to uncover the continuity inherent in the process of liberation—these are two apparently contradictory moves, but moves which must be effected simultaneously. This is the problem facing us at the moment. But the actions of the government were aimed at rendering any transition impossible.

In the campaign which the power structure has launched against Autonomy, everything is false: not this or that detail, not this or that assertion, but everything—the evidence, the proof, the circumstances. Everything is false, and the power structure knows it, even declares it. It is of no importance to the power structures whether something is true or not. This is the spirit behind the government operation. The deterrent power of the operation lies in its capacity to unleash a violent campaign of immense proportions, a campaign based on SIMULATION. The real operatives of the offensive are not the judges, but the press, the TV, and the Performance. Thus the offensive is beyond politics, freed finally from any remaining link to truth, liberated from any correspondence with actuality. Simulate an infinite number of war scenarios and project them on the screen of the mass imagination—this is the strategy. For in truth it is in that territory of the imagination that the real war is being fought. On one side of the battle is Dissuasion (the infinite power of the State, the all-seeing eye, the all-knowing brain, the all-imposing mind), on the other is Liberation of the creative energies of a proletariat whose intellectual potential is immense, but whose conditions of material existence are cramped and miserable. This is the real contradiction, the real war.

So; the Performance of April 7 has shown that the power structure can win the war today by invading the realm of the imagination. And, having conquered the realm of the imagination, the power structures now run rampant, demonstrating a violence that has no precedents, and arrogance that is totalitarian.
How can one deny that the power structure "seems" to have won? Hasn't it, after all, with that stroke of simulation, arrogated to itself the right to put an entire decade on trial? It has set itself up as a trial judge. And so the decade of egalitarianism and solidarity, the decade of collectivization and rejection of work are now on trial! What better introduction, what better premise to a "backlash" that promises a return to normal production, to the usual, day-to-day violence that occurs in the family and on the job?

Meanwhile, as the power structure prepares to try our entire decade as criminal, subversive and paranoid—well, here we see the formula that represent the existing Movement unable to understand the meaning of this Operation Simulation launched by the power structure, unable to understand anything in fact, and unable to react in any way.

So it goes for Organized Autonomy. Its paralysis is complete. As of April 7 it has been shunted into the Wax Museum of politics. In the face of the power structure, in the face of that game of mirrors which is Simulation, the good little bad boys of Autonomy have replied with the conviction that their party (with all its holy eternal principles such as "active abstention", ...) can match the State regiment for regiment. But the State operates on a hundred battlefields, while the party of Autonomy cannot even operate on that single field it has chosen for itself—the streets are off limits, and for those incapable of thinking in any terms but street campaigns, the streets themselves have become unusable. Those who want to respond to the simulation-filled power structures with the power (but does it exist?) of truth and of counter-information will find their words turning to dust in their mouths.

Let us also examine those whose business it is to be concerned about guarantees of freedom. The intellectuals—yes, even they seek to reaffirm their role by seeking out the "truth". Take a look at what Umberto Eco has to say in the April 22 edition of La Repubblica. After having sought the "truth" for half a page, using methods worthy of a detective novel, he announces that the boundary between legality and illegality can shift depending on the moment, on the circumstances. Hence, there is no "legality" or "illegality". Of course, it's true: legality is determined by a new power relationship that obtains between old and new, between the liberation of the possible and the dictatorship of the present. The greater the strength of that Movement which strives to liberate the possibilities compressed within the present, the farther the boundaries of legality will be pushed. Because legality is only the sanctioning (by structures, by judges, by the police) of the present state of affairs, of the present's right to suppress the energies, the creativity and the inventive powers of the proletarian segment of society. Good thinking, Eco. Except that the people who set those boundaries of legality are people like Eco who write for La Repubblica. And the people who decide where the boundaries should be shifted are the truth-seekers of Eco's ilk—as if it were possible to continue with that attitude of the entomologist which he shows, the attitude of someone examining historical processes, struggles, programs, passions and defeats as though they were natural phenomena, as though within them were not the pulsation of a subjectivity intense and the possibility for a disruption and overthrow of the entire scenario. Today, after the events of April 7, it is the power structure which simulates the scenario in which power relationships are determined. The truth determines nothing.

Or take the case of Luigi Barzini, who on April 10, on the front page of the Corriere della Sera, defines the comrades arrested on April 7 as Messianic visionaries who provide an irrational movement with a program that constantly feeds the utopian impulses of the masses of young people, who would otherwise be scattered, desperate or resigned. Well that's true enough. But that obstinate anger with which revolutionary thinking in Italy has nourished the desires and wants of the masses of proletarians and youth has nothing irrational about it. It is the reality of the social contradictions in urban areas, the dramatic reality of the contradiction between man and nature, which is the radical element—not our wants. It is reality which sets before us the choice between utopia and barbarism, between a breakdown of the present system and the permanent threat of destruction, ecocatastrophe and psychocatastrophe. And the choice will have to be made very soon, very quickly. The acceleration of pace in urban areas, the mad humanitv of relationships between people, the hallucinatory quality of every form of expression and every form of existence, and the increase in militarization—all these developments combine to set an urgent choice before revolutionaries: breakdown or barbarism. And even if the possibilities for a breakdown were very limited, even if everything were tending in a direction opposed to the possibility of liberating humanity's technical, scientific, creative and inventive energies from the destructive domination of capitalism and ecocatastrophe, even if the idea of liberating these potentials were a utopian one—well, even so, the only realistic choice would be revolution. If we are interested in life, then only revolution is a realistic alternative.

The situation in Italy provides a social laboratory of exceptional interest, both from the point of view of capitalist domination and from the revolutionary point of view. The most important fact for understanding the present situation is that centralized and coherent forms of control over the social sector have come to an end, and thus the society and the forces which circulate in the social sector are no longer governable by politics.

The real mystery of the Italian situation is how an apparatus of domination over social beings can be maintained by a functioning which must deal with and organize the most varied and contradictory types of behavior imaginable. The real problem is how the functioning of domination and the capitalist system's assigning-of-value can be established by means of unfocused conflict. There is a thread of functioning which runs through discontinuity, fragmentation and conflict. The question is how can the labor market continue to function, when an enormous quantity of surplus-value is produced by a segment of the labor force which is politically and culturally insubordinate, extremely flexible in terms of its mobility, unwilling to accept the fixed arrangement of salaried output, and obliged to accept a relatively high rate of confiscation of the surplus value produced. The marriage of insubordination and productivity, of conflict and functioning, is the point of departure for a new alliance between capitalist development and the proletarian liberation movement. This alliance provides the only possible means of resolving the present crisis, the only way in which conditions for a productive autonomy, rather than an ossified subordination, can be established.

The present situation—in which a totalizing functioning exists without the totalitarity, in which power exists without a government—has in fact seen power present itself as mere tactics, as "day-by-day politics", capable of functioning only
under that guise. The functioning of this type of politics is not guided by any coherent strategic planning, but by a game of internal self-regulation. To oppose this mechanism of self-regulation (in which the official declarations and the announced strategies are only simulations of tactical scenarios that cannot actually control the forces they summon up)—to oppose this mechanism of self-regulation by offering a coherent alternative strategy—as Organized Autonomy has sought to do—only amounts to remaining ensnared in a game, the rules of which none of the players can make operative. So: there is no strategy, no criterion of truth in tactics. But there is a point of contact—at least on the tactical level—between the proletariat’s imperative desire for liberation from the slavery of work and capitalism’s interests in increasing the relative rate of surplus-value and increasing social productivity. It is at this point of contact that one can occasionally break the power of that Domination which wishes to submit to individuals. Thus we stand before the paradox of a domination which prevails, but which is not yet in a functional design aimed at reproducing the form of Capital. It is calculated plan tends to polarize society by making people erect complex systems which Cacciari belonged) has nothing at all to do with the version which arose after 1968. (Cacciari, in an interview granted to Repubblica, 10/4/79). Or this: ‘I had my last political discussion with Negri more than ten years ago... Since that time I haven’t seen him...’ (Asor Rosa, in La Repubblica 24/4/79). You know the saying—‘People betray themselves’! And this is the mechanism which the forces of ‘justice’ want to set in motion: individuals must autonomously come to feel a need to exculpate themselves, or a need to separate themselves from the accused in order to favor the ‘pleasure of having survived’—to borrow a phrase from Canetti. The law’s lack of foundations becomes strikingly apparent when the ‘law’ lives in a state of ‘emergency’, when it becomes a ‘judicial emergency measure’. But emergency means a cut-off of rationality; thus the hype must show itself as hype—it can only be effective if it is lived as hype. The ‘law’ feels the need to make itself indeterminate in order to be able to prosecute all those beings who are determined by society, in order to control every determination. The indeterminacy of the ‘law’ in fact amounts to the indeterminacy of social types: what, after all, is the typical revolutionary of today? This indeterminate ‘law’, in spite of appearances and in spite of the price that has been paid by the vanguard movements, is not intent on hounding these movements if it were, then the ‘law’ would be a quite determinate thing, would have foundations—this is the position of the PCI, but rather directs its attentions toward indeterminate elements. An American researcher wrote in a recent analysis of the phenomenon of terrorism that ‘the moral sensibility’ of the normal citizen is not very different from that of the terrorist’ (Jan Schrøber), since, in a complex system in which ‘mediation’ as a structure has failed, every group, down to the level of the individual, tends to define itself autonomously, and not see itself in relation to ‘others’. In a similar vein, Brian Jenkins has defined terrorism as the ‘instrument for gaining political objectives that have been set autonomously.’ The indeterminancy of the ‘law’ serves as a means for pursuing social beings who autonomously define themselves to the extent that they are no longer identifiable by their social ‘status’. To ‘prosecute’ social beings thus means that the law must make itself ‘im-personal’ to such a degree that it becomes a symbolic representation, a performance or spectacle of accusation and trial. Rather than prosecute private citizens, it aims at prosecuting symbolic figures, products of a collective imagination; the Guilty Party is a product of everyone’s imagination. At this level of abstraction of beings, the law can no longer sustain itself and has need for abstractions promulgated by the mass media. Indeterminacy requires a relationship with the mass media—only then can the “theater of cruelty” be staged. The law turns into a combination of emergency and mass media, exists in the form of emergency as it becomes identified with the mass media, is the one in virtue of being the other. Court action operates in the realm of contingencies not only because it is a system of tactics which shifts the boundaries of legality according to individual circumstances—as Umberto Eco asserts—but also because today every boundary is outside the scope of classically codified law, because there is no longer any point in prosecuting ‘private’ beings. What matters is not so much the outcome of the court action, but rather the symbolic trial set in motion through the mass media. And the objective of court action is not so much the maintenance of order, but rather the immediate creation of a collective recognition of the ‘boundaries’—a recognition that can be created only when disorder prevails. There is no more ‘personal’ penalization, only symbolic penalization. The traditional trial in the courtroom has become irrelevant in the face of the imaginary trials (i.e., enacted by the imagination) staged by the mass media. What cannot be penalized in physical terms is instead penalized by means of a universal sacrificial rite, that is, the symbolic trials which the mass media stage in the imagination of the collectivity. It is the imagination which is actually on trial. The...
Debating the social implications of the transition from capitalism to communism, the text explores the role of power structures and the need for revolution. It discusses the concept of autonomy and the importance of controlling knowledge to achieve liberation. The text critiques the Leninist theory and presents an alternative perspective on the transition process, emphasizing the need for revolutionary politics.

The text highlights the importance of understanding the role of knowledge in society and the need to overthrow the power structures that control it. It argues that the traditional Leninist approach, which focused on the seizure of the state, is inadequate and requires a more nuanced understanding of the transition process. The text proposes an alternative framework that emphasizes the role of knowledge in shaping the social order.

The text concludes by asserting that revolutionary thinking must focus on the critical skill of problem-solving and the need to recognize the implications of capitalist and communist systems. It suggests that the transition process requires a radical reimagining of the social order and the need to incorporate knowledge in a way that empowers individuals and communities.
Autonomy involves liberation from work, and suppression of the general formal conditions of capitalist domination. The breakdown of this domination can thus be conceived (and put into effect) as a subjective mode (in the Movement toward Autonomy) of a process in which capital determines the material conditions for the reconstruction, without reproducing the formal conditions of the previous system. Separating the material organization of know-how from the form of value then becomes—not a natural tendency, but the strategic objective, the plan of operation of the revolutionary movement.

Translated by Jared Becker, Richard Reid & Andrew Rosenbaum