



Fiat storage lot, Turin, Italy, 1974.
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A New Geometry JASON SMITH

ITALY'S AUTONOMIA MOVEMENT was less a group of people or an organization to which one belonged than a milieu or network of spaces through which elements of the Italian “extreme” Left moved. Though in many areas of the country *autonomia* had its base in the student and women’s movements, what distinguished it was its deep roots in certain segments of the working class, in particular those who had emigrated from the south of the country, outside the Communist Party and trade union culture that was so dominant in the northern industrial cities. Not a party, *autonomia* was a form of struggle (a set of practices, a theoretical orientation). Because it never assumed a recognizable political contour, just who or what *autonomia* was has remained difficult to nail down. A recent reissue of *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics*, Semiotext(e)’s 1980 special issue on *autonomia*—a typically unexpected turn for a journal that since its founding in 1974 had published issues on Georges Bataille and “schizo-culture”—provides a much-needed historical framework for understanding the disciplined dispersion of this movement and the contemporary work of writers, such as Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno, who were formed by it. Originally appearing just a year after the suppression of the movement by the Italian state—a campaign presided over, in large part, by the Italian Communist Party, and prompted by the Red Brigades’ kidnapping and execution of Prime Minister Aldo Moro—this extraordinary collection of polemics, denunciations, interviews, trial transcriptions, and compact theoretical reflections assembled by Sylvère Lotringer, a founding editor of Semiotext(e), and economist Christian Marazzi reanimates not only the history of *autonomia* but the intense social conflicts that gave rise to it.

Both Lotringer’s new preface in the form of a journal he kept during a trip to Italy in the summer of 1979 and Sergio Bologna’s “Tribe of Moles,” a long analysis of the new forms of antagonistic subjectivity emerging in the decade of struggles beginning in 1969, emphasize how *autonomia* developed as a response to a mutation in the political situation in 1970s Italy: the transition from the welfare state’s uneasy truce between capital and labor to the precarity of a post-Fordist production model and its corresponding “crisis state” (as Negri describes it in his “Domination and Sabotage,” included in the reissue), which governed not through stability and order but through disorder and “emergency” measures. The welfare state had pretended to manage class conflict by redistributing extorted surplus-value while maintaining the wage-form as the fundamental social tie. The transfer of this surplus back to those who produced it took the form of public expenditures and a network of social securities. But in the early ’70s Italy witnessed a sudden erosion of this figure of the state when public spending

(subsidies for housing, electricity, telephone service, and so on) was rolled back and when the state adopted a monetary policy artificially inducing inflation, thereby devaluing wages. This policy was widely seen as an attack on the foundations of the Fordist new deal that tied the stability of wages to levels of productivity. A form of direct action called “self-reduction” emerged in response. In the fall of 1974, after significant increases in fares by bus companies serving the Fiat factories in Turin, the workers’ union unilaterally decided to maintain the old prices and directly oversee the collection of these fares themselves, which were then turned over to the bus companies by the unions. This practice of collectively regulating the market through “political” pricing soon spread to other parts of the country and was applied as much in the sphere of production (general slowdowns, absenteeism, or “sabotage”) as it was in the sphere of consumption (rent strikes, occupation of housing, collective appropriation, looting). These actions sketched out a form of direct democracy that refused to allow collective decisions to be mediated by the mechanisms of political representation.

The practice of “self-reduction” was commonly identified with *autonomia*, but it was only one element within a much larger transformation of the relation between the movement and the state. It was, the Autonomists argued, an appropriate response to a state that was perceived as governing increasingly through the suspension of both legal and economic regulations rather than their application. Openly inducing instability, exacerbating social antagonisms rather than mediating them, and militarizing political conflict, government-by-crisis resulted in a social space in which law and illegality, rule and exception were converging. This crisis of legitimation was, however, symptomatic of a more profound disorder at the heart of the production process itself. In the transition to what is today called post-Fordism and its emphasis on flexible labor, nonhierarchical organization, and the priority of affects and knowledge in production, it was what Marx called the law of value itself—the idea that the exchange-value of commodities is keyed to the amount of “socially necessary” labor required for their production—that was entering into a period of illegitimacy and crisis. “The different forms of social production are no longer organically connected by the law of value,” declares Franco Piperno—former leader of *Potere Operaio*, who was at one point arrested and accused of being the head of the Red Brigades—in his “From Terrorism to Guerrilla Warfare,” and “the producer of wealth . . . is no longer perceived in terms of productive or unproductive work.” Increasingly incapable of “organically” mediating and subsuming the diversity of productive activity under its transcendental law, the measure of value had to be enforced by a state

that governed through violence and no longer by consensus. The law would be enforced at all costs, for without the regulated production of value, the very source of capital, the accumulation of surplus-value, would dry up. The logic of industrial production required this law and its power of abstraction—its power, that is, to reduce the diversity of human activity to measurable units of labor—as a necessary form of social mediation. In the '70s, however, it was this law and its pretense of measuring the value of human activity from without that was being spontaneously attacked by an entire range of social practices that could no longer be assimilated to the category of work. In its place emerged a form of human praxis that took exception to every law that would submit it to a standard of measure.

What *autonomia* saw occurring in the Italy of the '70s was not only a suspension of the law of value but the crumbling of the entire set of categorical distinctions that depend on this law: the divisions between productive and non-productive labor, between free time and work time, between the spheres of circulation and production themselves. With the increasingly prominent role of abstract knowledge and communication as a direct force of production, the fundamental fracture organizing life under capital—the division between intellectual and manual labor—seemed increasingly obsolete. Productive activity began to “separate” or flee from capital and its network of social mediations rather than directly confronting it, forming pockets of worker “autonomy” in urban centers that remained at a distance from both the state and the union and Communist Party culture that was increasingly identified with it. The law of value was giving way to practices of “self-valorization,” in which living labor no longer had to separate itself from its own potentiality by taking the objective form of dead labor, and life no longer had to submit to a law whose other name is death. What was promised instead was a new immanence of law to life, a structure of legality inseparable from the flesh of existence: what in Virno's text *Jokes and Innovative Action* is referred to as a regularity located “this side” of the aporias of the law and its application.

The Semiotext(e) issue necessarily circles around a single fundamental question, whose reappearance today seems at once provocative and apropos: the role of illegality and violence in contemporary political struggle. The titles of the texts alone speak volumes: Lucio Castellano's “Living with Guerrilla Warfare,” Oreste Scalzone's “From Guaranteeism to Armed Politics,” Negri's aforementioned “Domination and Sabotage,” and Virno's “On Armed Struggle.” The figure of the Red Brigades understandably looms large. Today it is necessary to admit that there was a great deal of contact between the “terrorist” group and the wider *autonomia* movement. Unlike the tiny Red Army Faction in Germany, at its peak the Red Brigades numbered in the hundreds, with a support network in the many thousands. Those conducting actions moved easily between *autonomia* and the armed cells. This is due in large part to the openness of the movement's structure. But what is really at stake in this question is the form of struggle itself. Where *autonomia* and the Red Brigades differed was not over the use of violence—this is never in question—but over what type of actions would constitute a genuine escalation of violence, an intensification of struggle appropriate to the transformation of capitalism and the state in the Italy of the '70s. “The violence of the Red Brigades,” says Marazzi in the issue's original preface, cowritten in the form of a dialogue with Lotringer, “is to be radically criticized not because it's ‘violent,’ but because it's not violent enough!” Piperno's tellingly titled “From Terrorism to Guerrilla Warfare” was written not to condemn the terrorist actions as such, but to wonder whether the armed struggle might move “toward forms of real guerrilla action” and “consciously set down roots within the new spontaneity” of the wider movement. The militarization of the movement in the form of groups like the Red Brigades and *Prima Linea* (Front Line) is, in most of the texts, seen either as an inevitable if disastrous result of the state's own repressive line and its “strategy of tension,” or as a symptom of

contradictions and failures internal to the wider movement. The weakness of the Red Brigades (represented in the issue by several surprisingly convincing texts) is ascribed to the strategic error of reproducing the language of the state it claims to combat, miming its gestures point by point in a speculative spiral. This doubling produces a paranoia in its turn, with many suspecting the Red Brigades of being a product of the state itself, either figuratively (obeying its logic of confrontation) or literally (infiltrated by the secret services and fascists bent on provoking a repressive backlash). Beyond this vertiginous reversal of

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signs characteristic of revolutionary situations, the reissued collection of texts represents a series of at once ferocious and subtle reflections on the reasons behind the crystallization of a "terrorist" element within the larger sequence and system of struggles. The armed factions' drift toward a logic of civil war, their aspiration to be recognized as the state's legitimate enemy, seemed to belong to an already lapsed phase in the history of class warfare.

In his 1996 essay "Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus," Virno remarks that innovation in the sphere of contemporary politics requires the drawing up of a "new geometry of hostility." The experience of *autonomia* makes this clear. The transformations of capital and the state since the '70s have changed the contours of the conflictual. Classical schemes of the political insist upon the formal identification of an enemy, but the resulting polarized model of hostility relies on a set of assumptions shared by the opposed parties: a common front along which forces are arrayed, a common language of power, an agreement on the stakes of the struggle. The new geometry Virno speaks of would be able to graph a fundamental asymmetry between the forces involved, a curvature of space in which friend and enemy no longer belong to the same continuous surface and no longer square off along a single, indivisible line. From the moment the diversity of human activity withdraws from the tangle of mediations represented by the law of value and the political mechanisms that enforce it, capital is reduced to a purely parasitic shadow, holding on through naked force. Now true aggression follows a pattern of flight, separation, or "exodus," and to attack seems reactive and weak, a recoil or *ressentiment*. The enemy is no longer ranged before us, sizing us up. It drifts behind, losing ground: the paradoxical effect of an always prior secession. For Virno, flight is never from an enemy, and never toward an already articulated region of space. It generates the space of conflict as one of oblique engagement, where two forces no longer clash on one, selfsame terrain, but overlap completely without ever confronting each other directly. Violence, in this scheme, assumes a very specific role. Where classical revolutionary politics like those practiced by the Red Brigades identified violence with the power to found or to destroy (the state, the law), its exercise today can no longer be a source of innovation. It is what must be deployed in defense of already organized modes of existence—forms-of-life—whose protection, Virno insists, must be undertaken "at all costs." □



Maschinen (A Thousand Machines), is forthcoming from Turia + Kant next year. Here, Raunig introduces the work of Italian theorist Paolo Virno.

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