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Revue de Civilisation Contemporaine de l'Université de Bretagne Occidentale
EUROPES / AMÉRIQUES
<http://www.univ-brest.fr/amnis/>

Italian feminism, workerism and autonomy in the 1970s : The struggle against unpaid reproductive labour and violence¹

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*We spit on Hegel.
. The master-slave dialectic is a settling of accounts among male collectivities :
It does not consider the liberation of woman, the great oppressed of patriarchal civilization.
. The class struggle as a revolutionary theory developed from the master-slave dialect, also excludes woman.
We question socialism and the dictatorship of the proletariat.
Carla Lonzi²*

One of the foremost practitioners of autonomy has been the women's movement, the meeting of whose needs had historically been postponed by « the revolutionary party » until after the conquest of State power and the establishment of socialism, the issue of gender being firmly subordinated to that of class. Feminist movements in particular have tended to be autonomous, given that women as a social category have been oppressed by patriarchy in all its social relations, including within left political parties, trade unions, social movements and by revolutionaries. They were among the first in Italy and elsewhere, after the profoundly important but ultimately ambiguous experience of the movements of 1968, to develop a fundamental critique of the political forms and practices of the « New Left », which in practice, if not in theory, minimized the needs and differences of women, subordinating them to the demands of the class struggle, in a similar way to the organizations of the older, Institutional Left. This critique caused many women to leave the New Left (NL) parties and groups in the early Seventies to form the first self-managed feminist organizations, so provoking,

¹ Acknowledgments: I wish to thank Laura Corradi, Alisa Del Re and the women of the Milanese autonomist movement who agreed to be interviewed.

² From *Sputiamo su Hegel*. Lonzi was an activist in *Rivolta Femminile* [Female Revolt], a separatist group. She was the main exponent of the feminism of difference in Italy. She died in Rome in 1982. [All translations from Italian or Spanish to English are mine unless otherwise indicated.]

along with the question of participation in « armed struggle »³, its crisis. This led to its dissolution and the creation, from its fragmented remains, of *Autonomia*, a radically anti-capitalist social movement, influenced by the feminist organizational critique, but in which relatively few feminists participated.

Operaismo (workerism), originally a tendency within trade unionism and the parties of the Institutional Left, also deeply influenced the Italian feminist movement, especially through the theoretical and political work of Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Leopoldina Fortunati and other women of *Lotta Femminista* (LF/Feminist Struggle). This organization campaigned for a salary for housework, given its strategic importance to the capitalist economy through the reproduction of the next generation of workers and the care of the current generation with no direct cost to the State or the market. Or as the authors of the pamphlet, « New Feminist Movement» put it :

[...] and all this work that the woman does, an average of 99.6 hours weekly, without the possibility of strikes, nor absenteeism, nor to make any demands, is done for free.⁴

This campaign, which quickly spread throughout Europe and North America, resulted in the founding of one of the first transnational social movements, Wages for Housework (WfH)⁵, and prompted a critique of the Welfare State as the protector and guarantor of the sexual division of labour and the reproduction of the labour force. This resulted in the creation, along with other feminist groups — then in the process of demobilization after a cycle of huge public protests and demonstrations in the mid-1970s for the right to divorce and abortion — of alternative social services, particularly in the fields of health, birth control, abortion and the prevention of intrafamilial violence. Since the crisis of such movements in the Eighties, feminists have conducted much research and theoretical analysis, often as academics, on women's social status and their struggles within post-Keynesian capitalism, making comparative analyses with the conditions and forms of struggle of contemporary indigenous, environmentalist and anti-war movements.

The relative lack of a « female memory » on *Autonomia* as a social movement reflects an historical tendency in all societies for that voice to be silenced or ignored, alienated from or conflated (along social class lines) with male discourse, including within the autonomous, libertarian Left. Feminist methodologies generally criticise the myth of « academic disengagement », presenting social research instead as a dialogical process which the researcher's past experiences necessarily both motivate and affect, as do those of the researched.⁶ Accepting these methodological considerations and in outlining the historical development of Italian feminism during the 1970s, this essay will identify and discuss some of the main differences between Italian workerist feminism and liberal, socialist and separatist feminisms, on the questions of reproductive labour and the role of paid work outside the home in promoting (or not) the economic independence and social emancipation of women. First, it will outline the emergence of the two main workerist feminist organizations, *Lotta Femminista* and Wages for Housework around the issues of unpaid reproductive and domestic labour and of the capitalist use of physical and sexual violence against women. Second, some of the problems linked to relations between feminism and the *Autonomia* social movement will be explored. The article concludes by examining the continuity of workerist-influenced feminism, compared to other Italian feminisms.

³ I prefer not to use the term « terrorism », which is a highly subjective and politicized, not to say demonized one, particularly after the events of 11th September 2001 and the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq by the USA and its allies.

⁴ Various authors, « Nuovo Movimento Femminista », May 1973. *Movimento Femminista : Documenti Autonomi* [website] : <http://www.nelvento.net/archivio/68/femm/nuovo.htm>; accessed January 9, 2009.

⁵ « Wages for Housework was the name that that part of *Lotta Femminista* adopted that wanted to launch initiatives specifically for wages for housework, a part that grew continuously and its first big demonstration was the one in Mestre on the 8th, 9th and 10th March 1974, although already in 1973 the Triveneto Committee of WfH began to act autonomously while LF was still alive.(See *Collettivo internazionale femminista* (ed. by), 8 Marzo 1974, Marsilio, Venice-Padua, 1975 » (Dalla Costa, Mariarosa, email message, 4 December 2008).

⁶ May, Tim, *Social Research, Issues, Methods and Process*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 1997.

Lotta Feminista and Wages for Housework : Struggles against Violence and Unpaid Reproductive Labour

Following the 1969 « Hot Autumn » wave of wild-cat strikes and generalized industrial and social conflict in which *Potere Operaio* [PO/Workers Power], the main workerist group, played a pivotal role, the factory-based autonomous workers' movement continued to organize its resistance to capitalist work, exploitation and restructuring through the autonomous assemblies in the factories of the North. Simultaneously, a wider form of autonomy and democratisation spread throughout the entire working class, including unwaged sectors such as homemakers, students, the unemployed and military conscripts, reaching as far as sectors of the middle and professional classes.⁷ The most significant development was the emergence of Italy's first mass-mobilised women's movement, which according to Mariarosa Dalla Costa :

*had two souls : one was self-awareness, the other was the operaista feminism of [LF] that eventually turned into the groups and committees of the wages for housework campaigns.*⁸

Della Porta claims that a significant characteristic of Italian feminism compared to other European countries was its organization of mass mobilization campaigns :

In 1974 10,000 women took part in the national conference at Pinarella di Cervia; between 1975 and 1977, a series of national initiatives — mostly on the theme of the legalization of abortion — saw the oscillating participation of between 30 and 50,000 women. [...] On 18th January 1975 there was the first large demonstration in Rome on the theme of abortion with 20,000 participants [...] In April 1976, the UDI (Unione donne italiane,⁹ linked to the PCI¹⁰) and the feminist organizations of other parties agreed to participate in a separatist demonstration which saw 50,000 participate.¹¹

Some ex-PO theorists, active in the feminist movement, concentrated on the category of unpaid reproductive labour, which was seen as vital for the reproduction of living labour and therefore capital, particularly Mariarosa Dalla Costa on women's unpaid housework,¹² while a completely separate workerist-influenced feminist position was represented by Alisa del Re's critique of the Welfare State.¹³ According to the former's theory, there is a hierarchical division between waged/productive labour (the industrial working class) and unwaged/reproductive labour (women, students, the unemployed). Thus, the different sectors of the working class seek autonomy from official working class organisations and from each other.

On the basis of the work of Mariarosa and Giovanna Franca Dalla Costa, Leopoldina Fortunati and others, *Lotta Feminista* began a campaign known internationally as Wages for Housework, linking up with Selma James' similar movement in Britain, while in the USA and Canada there

⁷ Cuninghame, Patrick, « For an Analysis of Autonomia : An Interview with Sergio Bologna », *Left History*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Fall 2001, pp. 89-102; « Autonomia in the Seventies : The Refusal of Work, the Party and Politics », *Cultural Studies Review* (Special Issue on Contemporary Italian Political Theory), Vol. 11, No. 2, September 2005, pp. 77-94.

⁸ Dalla Costa, Mariarosa, « The Door to the Garden », paper given at the « *Operaismo a Convegno* » Conference, June 1-2, 2002, Rome. Published in Spanish in *Noesis*, Universidad Autonoma de Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, Vol. 15, No. 28, 2005, pp. 79-100. [Available on line in English and Spanish].

⁹ Union of Italian Women.

¹⁰ Partito Comunista Italiana / Italian Communist Party.

¹¹ Della Porta, Donatella, *Movimenti Collettivi e Sistema Politico in Italia 1960-1995*, Rome, Editori Laterza, 1996, p. 71.

¹² Dalla Costa, Mariarosa, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (with *A Woman's Place* by Selma James), London, Falling Wall Press 1974 [1972].

¹³ Semi-structured in-depth interview in Italian with Alisa Del Re, Padua, 2 June 1999, in Gun Cuninghame, Patrick, *Autonomia, Movement of Refusals — Social Movements and Conflict in Italy in the 1970s*, unpublished PhD thesis, London, Middlesex University, 2002.

were also WfH groups, with Silvia Federici in New York and Judith Ramirez in Toronto. The same network was present also in Germany, and in Switzerland. Mariarosa Dalla Costa describes LF's political principles and strategy in the following terms :

*We wanted money for housework primarily in response to the serious problem of women's lack of money, but also as a lever of power with respect to services [...]. This claim was combined with another for a drastic reduction in external work for all women and men (demanding a working week of 20 hours) so that the time necessary for reproduction could be freed up without always having to look for solutions (very partial anyway) in additional layers of work, as is also happening today through the great migrations. On the other hand, there was the typical emancipationist position that aimed only at working outside [of the home] and called for a strengthening of social services. This was the position of the institutional left but also of other feminist strands.*¹⁴

However, the demand for wages for housework from the State opened a sharp polemic with other parts of the feminist movement, who saw such a demand as a « renunciation of the objective of the socialization of domestic labour ».¹⁵

In June 1974 *Rosso*,¹⁶ as part of a debate between those demanding wages for housework and those who saw this as its « ratification », published a report by the Paduan Committee for Wages for Housework on three days of discussion with the feminist movement in Mestre. A large number of homemakers, teachers, shop assistants and secretaries had gathered to denounce their triple exploitation by their employers, their partners and the State, rejecting the misery and appalling conditions of work that all imposed :

*Our struggle is against factories, [...] offices, against having to sit at a check-out counter all day [...]. We are not fighting for such an organisation of work, but against it.*¹⁷

They rejected the view of the political parties and extra-parliamentary groups that women's emancipation lay in employment, instead demanding that the State, the organizer of capitalist society whose most basic cellular structure was the nuclear family, pay them wages for their unpaid housework since they were « reproducing » its citizens and workers. Also denounced was the inadequacy of the few social services provided, the lack of crèches and nurseries for housewives as well as for employed women, and the abuse of women's bodies by the « masculinist » health system. They called on women to reclaim their bodies and take control of their lives :

*We women must reject the conditions of pure survival that the State wants to impose on us, we must always demand more [...], reappropriate the wealth removed from our hands everyday to have more money, more power, more free time to be with others, women, old people, children, not as appendages but as social individuals.*¹⁸

Women were also especially active on the issue of the overcrowded and underfunded State education system, as they were on virtually all social issues in the mid 1970s, the peak of the mass mobilisation phase of the women's movement, marching on schools, organising pickets, occupying class rooms, setting up road blocks, all with the demand for better schools and day-care facilities.¹⁹ These mobilisations were self-organized with the participation of *Autonomia*, the New Left groups,

¹⁴ Dalla Costa, Mariarosa, email message, 22 September 2005.

¹⁵ De Luca, Stefano. « Il Movimento Femminista : Dall'emancipazione all'enfasi per la "diversità" ». *Storia*, No. 24 , May 2007 : <http://www.instoria.it/home/femminismo.htm>; accessed January 9, 2009.

¹⁶ A newspaper linked to *Autonomia Operaia Organizzata* (Organized Workers Autonomy) in Milan, a neo-Leninist tendency within *Autonomia* which sought leadership over the movement and clashed with the feminist movement in Rome in 1975.

¹⁷ Various authors, « Lavoro domestico e salario », *Rosso*, No. 11, (1st ed.), June, 1974, p. 34.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

particularly *Lotta Continua* (LC/Unceasing Struggle)²⁰ in the South, as well as some of the unions, but were otherwise characterised by their autonomy from and hostility towards political parties.

Similar struggles took place over the community control of reproductive needs (housing, rent, bills, shopping) and later of leisure needs (eating out, cinema and rock concerts). These conflicts were allied to the demands of the emerging women's movement for control of their own bodies and lives through the defeat of the 1974 referendum to abolish the 1970 divorce law and the concession after many years of hard struggle of the legalisation of abortion through Law 194 in 1978, as well as the democratisation and feminisation of medical and social services.²¹ Thus, a new conception of autonomy was required to mirror the transition from the industrial factory to the social factory, from traditional working class struggles to those of the new social movements.

Nevertheless, the intensity of the activism of the women's movement in the early 1970s took a heavy toll on the health and private lives of those involved, despite their previous criticism of the New Left's obsessive militancy and sacrifice of any kind of private life to political struggle, as Mariarosa Dalla Costa recounts :

[...] we had national and international organizational groups but what was striking was the level of extreme poverty of the means with which all this activity was carried out. The means of communication were mainly the leaflet and the paper, called « Le operaie della casa » (the houseworkers).²² Such an exasperated and totalizing militancy, that left no room for anything else in our lives, was surely derived from the experience of [PO], but I think that at the time in other groups the situation was similar to ours. This was obviously even harder for those of us who had a leading role. And here it would be important to underline something else... Towards the end of the decade we were exhausted by that kind of life and activism. All our margins of reproduction had been eroded, notoriously narrower than those men, comrades included, enjoyed.²³

However, the women of *Lotta Femminista* and Wages for Housework made some primordial contributions to international feminist theory, particularly concerning the role of male physical and sexual violence against women within the family as a disciplining force, similar to the physical and psychological violence used to discipline workers in the factory. Of particular importance on this question were the works of Leopoldina Fortunati²⁴ and Giovanna F. Dalla Costa, the latter of whom argues that :

Since its origins, the Feminist Movement has charged that the relation between men and women in capitalist society is one based on violence. In fact, this was the first issue around which the movement developed both a wide-ranging debate and a high level of organized struggle [...] Male violence against women was certainly not born with capitalism, but rather has a long history behind it. But even if some aspects of this form of violence remain basically unchanged (women were beaten, raped, killed, genitally mutilated, forced to abort pregnancies or bear children, long before capitalism), under capitalism male violence against women has been re-established and endowed with a function [...] entirely internal to the work which women are destined to perform : housework. Such work is the work of the production and reproduction of labour power, its fundamental site of performance is the home and the

²⁰ Name of the largest and nationally most extensive New Left organisation and its national daily newspaper. Founded in 1969, it was particularly strong among FIAT car workers in Turin, and a rival organization to *Potere Operaio* and *Autonomia Operaia* [AO]. LC dissolved itself in 1976 at its annual conference in Rimini following the decision by its women members to leave *en masse* in protest at the leadership's failure to condemn an attack on a women's march in Rome by *Lotta Continua* and AO militants the previous year (see footnote 41).

²¹ See also Dalla Costa, Mariarosa, « Di chi è il corpo di questa donna? », *Foedus*, no. 19, 2007.

²² First appeared in 1976, edited by the CWfH (Committee for Wages for Housework) of Padua. The editors defined it as a « newspaper-collage » formed by words, drawings and photographs. It spread news on struggles by women in their homes, factories and schools against the work and exploitation they were forced to assume. See Moroni, P. & Balestrini, N. *La horda de oro 1968-1977. La gran ola revolucionaria y creativa, política y existencial*. Madrid: traficantes de sueños, 2006 [1988]. Translated from Italian to Spanish by M.Bogazzi, H.Arbide, P.Iglesias, J.Bonet i Martí, D.Gámez, J.Gual, R.Sánchez Cedillo and A.Méndez. [Available online].

²³ Dalla Costa, Mariarosa, 2002, *op.cit.*

²⁴ Particularly in her classic text, *The Arcane of Reproduction : Housework, Prostitution, Labour and Capital*, New York, Autonomedia, 1995 [1978].

primary unit in which it is performed is the family.²⁵ [...] The extreme violence in the relationship between capital and women is reflected in the violence of the man-woman relationship : a relationship which is necessarily violent on the part of men against women.²⁶

The same author also criticizes the failure of the workers movement, including the *operaismo* that influenced herself and her sister and other members of *Lotta Femminista* and *Wages for Housework*, to listen to and comprehend the novelty of their theory, without conflating the « house worker » with the factory worker :

[L]ike all women we tangibly feel in our bones [...] : we are « house workers »,²⁷ « every woman in the home is an unpaid worker! » Since we began to define ourselves in this way, those on the Left who wished to charge us with « old workerism » raised their voices,²⁸ demonstrating that they confused an absolutely new criteria such as « house worker » with « worker », and were equally ready to attribute to us political theories which we had never formulated. [...] This tone-deafness on the male front doesn't surprise us : to men who can't see or hear women, nothing exists except « preaching to the converted ».²⁹

Such a closed attitude by the male Left contrasted with the seriousness of the debate within the entire feminist movement over unpaid domestic labour :

The recognition of women as unpaid house workers has [...] become a common legacy. Even the sections of the feminist movement that don't agree with the strategy of « wages for housework », define the condition of women in substantially similar terms [...] the comparison between the condition of the house worker and that of the slave can, within our analysis, be of particular importance in enabling us to better define this discourse; one needed more than ever due to the wave of political mobilization that the feminist movement has built in opposition to violence against women [...] the rise of this violence is evidently linked to the ever growing rebellion of women today, and to the ever increasing willingness of the State and of those in power to impede it.³⁰

Relations between feminism and Autonomia

While the activism of feminist militants was increasingly demanding on their health and private lives, the situation for those women who chose to keep one foot in the feminist movement and another in the New Left organizations and social movements through an exasperated « double militancy » made its own demands. Meanwhile, relations between the feminist movement (including the groups rooted in *Potere Operaio* and *operaismo*) and *Autonomia* were as tense as they had been with the NL groups. Autonomous women's collectives were critical of Workers' Autonomy's continuance of some discredited forms of political practice inherited from the NL groups, particularly a macho predisposition for the use of (sometimes armed) violence, although

²⁵ The discourse on the home as a site of production and reproduction of labour power, on the family as the primary unit in which such work is performed, on housework as the specific form of the work of reproduction, and on woman as the subject of this work was first defined by Mariarosa Dalla Costa, *op. cit.* 1974.

²⁶ Dalla Costa, Giovanna F., *Un Lavoro d'Amore, La Violenza Fisica Componente Essenziale del « Trattamento » Maschile nei confronti delle Donne*, Rome, Edizioni delle donne, 1978. My translation. Subsequently translated by Enda Brophy, with a new introduction by Mariarosa Dalla Costa, and published in 2008 by Autonomedia, New York, as *The Work of Love. Unpaid Housework, Poverty and Sexual Violence at the Dawn of the 21st Century*.

²⁷ This definition appeared for the first time in Italy in *Collettivo Internazionale Femminista* (eds.) *Le operaie della casa*, Padova-Venezia, Marsilio, 1974. This has been the title of a bi-monthly new-journal of feminist autonomy since no.0 of 1 May, 1975 (Note by Mariarosa Dalla Costa, 2006).

²⁸ See also: di Paola, Furio, « Per un Dibattito su Militanza e Organizzazione Proletaria in Bisogni, Crisi della Militanza, Organizzazione Proletaria », *Quaderni di Ombre Rosse*, No.1, Savelli, Rome 1977, p. 98. (Note by Mariarosa Dalla Costa, 2006).

²⁹ Dalla Costa, Giovanna F., *op. cit.*, p. 9. We have recuperated this definition from the women activists of [LF] who first used it in 1972. See « L'Offensiva », *Quaderni di Lotta Femminista*, No.1, Turin, Musolini, 1974 [1972], p. 21. (Note by Mariarosa Dalla Costa, 2006).

³⁰ *Ibid.*

feminism itself was by no means synonymous with pacifism.³¹ Moreover, *operaista* and autonomist women were accused of being old-style Marxist revolutionaries by « consciousness-raising » feminism and often found themselves isolated from the rest of the women's movement.

These women contributed to the debates on violence and subjectivity both within feminism and *Autonomia*, from the position that « violence [understood as aggressive self-assertion as an antidote to patriarchal representations of female passivity and subordination] can be a basis for subjectivity ».³² The principal areas of intervention for *Lotta Continua's* Women's Collective were the factory and the practice of the refusal of work, along with the problems of discrimination in the workplace, deregulated labour (*lavoro nero*), prisons, sexual violence and *machismo* within the « Movement » in general, and struggles around the body and health. Action was taken in hospitals, over the unequal doctor-patient relationship and the denunciation of those medical centres that refused to carry out abortions, and of the health service in general which victimised women and did not meet their particular health needs. Another area of intervention was international « solidarism rather than solidarity », based on the feminist practice of « starting from yourself ». They were also in touch with radical separatist feminists, who used psychoanalysis for « consciousness-raising » and were close to the Radical Party,³³ although relations with the broader feminist movement with its emphasis on the private sphere, consciousness-raising and non-violence, were conflictual. A rare joint action to denounce the Catholic Church's negative impact on women's control over their own bodies and lives was the occupation in 1975 of the *Duomo*, the city's main cathedral and symbol of its official identity. Other actions were taken to contest the stereotyping of women in patriarchal capitalist society as passive consumerist sex objects, including against wedding dress shops and dating agencies. They also participated in Lea Melandri's³⁴ « Free University of Women », where housewives and intellectuals carried out an interclassist work on the representation of women in capitalist society. The crossover between *Rosso* and radical feminism produced two magazines itself, *Malafemmina* and *Noi Testarde*, making the « politics of the personal » and the questioning of gender roles part of *Autonomia's* collective identity, although conflict with Organized Workers Autonomy's « workers' centrality » position was permanent.³⁵

Del Re, a feminist and former *Potere Operaio* member, whose theoretical and political practice led her to disagree with Mariarosa Dalla Costa and the Wages for Housework movement despite their common roots in *operaismo*, did not join *Autonomia* but accepts that her autonomous activism led her to a converging position. Here, she tackles the thorny question of « double militancy » by considering the strongly contradictory position of feminists within the PCI :

[It] is a difficult issue because it splits belonging : for instance, I met women active in extra-parliamentary political groups who were also feminist and faced with dramatic decisions, because feminism forced women to make dramatic personal choices. The enemy was often in the home : if a woman was to gain a kind of personal autonomy and have relationships with lovers, friends, husbands, fathers and men who were on the Left and thus shared many of the ideas of changing society, she would feel great discomfort. [...] So it was a very complex issue linked to a very personal identity and to a life choice : one could not always let the husband off because some of their positions were

³¹ Among the approximately 200 armed groups which proliferated during the « second wave » of armed conflict in the late 1970s, there were also several feminist organisations which carried out acts of violence against sweatshops where mainly women workers were being exploited and against those doctors who, claiming to be « conscientious objectors », refused to carry out abortions in the public sector while performing them in their own private clinics. See Ruggiero, Vincenzo, « Sentenced to Normality, The Italian Political Refugees in Paris », *Crime, Law and Social Change*, No. 19, 1993, pp. 33-50.

³² Semi-structured in-depth interview with Laura Corradi. Durban, South Africa, 27th July 2006.

³³ A libertarian split from the Italian Liberal Party and one of the few parliamentary parties opposed to the emergency laws, mass arrests and drastic increase in the abuse of human rights between 1979 and 1983. A woman member, Giogiana Masi, was shot dead in Rome in May 1977 by police disguised as *Autonomia* militants during a peaceful protest against the government's decision to ban all marches for three months.

³⁴ One of the most important feminist intellectuals, co-founder in the 1960s of the counter-cultural magazine *L'Erba Voglio* [the grass I want] and author of *L'infamia originaria*.

³⁵ The information in this paragraph is based on a semi-structured in-depth interview in Italian with three women informants involved in *Autonomia*, Milan, August 1998, and an article from *Rosso* (14 February 1976, p. 9).

right, even if some marriages failed. The decisions were so drastic and violent that I can understand why some were hidden feminists and public comrades. With the [PCI] things get more complicated because some women always thought of [it] as a kind of benevolent father who somehow would have accepted their little babies' demands, yet there was not one party in Italy that took up the issues of the feminist groups, at least in the '70s. Militancy in the [PCI] was largely a question of family tradition; I met many families (mothers, grandmothers and daughters) who were members of the PCI, and this was lacerating, because it was an historical affection and one that was difficult to change. The UDI was ferociously hostile to the feminist movement and the movement for divorce. The UDI disassociated itself from the Communist Party when in 1976 the PCI refused to let its members protest in the streets in favour of abortion rights after the facts of Seveso (the case of dioxin and pregnant women who wanted an abortion for fear of giving birth to monsters). At the time of the separation of the UDI from the PCI, many militants left the party and joined the feminist movement.³⁶

A different perspective on women's activism is given by an informant from Milan who was a member of *Lotta Continua* before joining *Autonomia* in the late 1970s, only becoming a feminist in the 1980s. She recounts how she suffered violence first from her father, opposed to her political activism and later from her partner, also a member of LC, and felt pressurized into denial by the attitude of another woman militant :

I joined [LC] when I was 14 because they seemed to be the liveliest New Left group [...] my father was violent and beat me regularly, to « protect » me from what he considered « dangerous political activity », so I had to run away from home when I was 16. [...] I was also beaten up several times by my boyfriend, who was also in [LC], in the « servizio d'ordine »,³⁷ doing something dangerous. Later he beat up another woman and had to go into therapy [...] He was protected by the other women I knew, including my best friend, a woman who had been involved in armed struggle in Argentina and who told me when I asked for help after being beaten : « Well, you fell down the stairs didn't you? ». All of us protected him from the police by saying I had had a car crash after the beatings to prevent him from getting into trouble [...] Not all of the men in the armed struggle were heroes, some were very small people [...] At that point [despite the attack on the women's march in Rome in 1975] I didn't want women to break the organization [...] some of us sprayed on the wall « Uomo donna uniti nella lotta »³⁸ [...] Women in LC in general were saying that LC shouldn't fall apart for feminist reasons.³⁹

On the specific identity of the women who chose to be in *Autonomia* rather than militate in the feminist movement, the same informant spoke of the case of the autonomist women activists in Bergamo, northern Italy in the 1970s:

[T]he movement in every city was different and had its own peculiar identity [...] in Bergamo they had a strong anti-State characterization [...] they never accepted State funding for the self-managed clinics [...] these still exist today thanks to the women of Autonomia [...] they were self-financed [...] the leadership is still the same people [...] they were characterized by their concern for women's health and a strong antagonism against the State [...] in other cities they were more concerned in shutting down pornographic film theatres [...] They came from the struggle against rape [and] organized self-defence courses against rape [...] then they became an armed vanguard against pornography and pimping [...] they didn't practice armed struggle as such, but they used violent direct action against pornography cinemas, smashing windows etc. [...] other groups used more violent methods of struggle, above all those who struggled against lavoro nero [...] they burnt down the covi di lavoro nero,⁴⁰ but they were not armed [...] these actions were carried out exclusively by women alone, no men were present.⁴¹

On the question of relations between the women of *Autonomia* and the rest of the feminist movement, the same informant stated :

³⁶ Interview with Alisa Del Re – 26th July 2000, *Hwiki Political* [web site]: <http://hwi.ath.cx/twiki/bin/view/Political/ALISADELRE26LUGLIO2000>.

³⁷ Internal self-defence organization, responsible for protecting marches from police and neo-fascist attacks, but sometimes also from rival New Left groups.

³⁸ Man woman united in the struggle.

³⁹ Semi-structured interview with informant from Milan.

⁴⁰ The sweatshops characteristic of the postfordist decentralized network mode of production which became increasingly widespread in Italy from the mid Seventies onwards, employing mainly non-unionised young adults.

⁴¹ Semi-structured interview with informant from Milan.

The moderate area [in the feminist movement] was prevalent [...] it was composed of a lot of different groups [...] they were not into the question of class [...] the more radical Movimento per la Liberazione della Donna was not separatist and they didn't take class into the picture at all [...] and it was a huge movement [...] they thought we [autonomist women] were very submissive and they were right, we were. We were very young. [...] I discovered feminism much later [...] I was going to the feminist demonstrations for contraception and against the exploitation of women in factories, but I didn't have a feminist consciousness until much later [...] I had a strong class consciousness at that time [...] I thought that the feminists were dividing the movement [...] this was why [LC] and Workers Autonomy attacked the women's march in Rome in December 1975⁴² because it was seen as a divisive force.⁴³

Conclusion

Italian feminism, workerism and autonomism combined briefly and problematically in the 1970s around the issues of unpaid reproductive labour and sexual and physical violence. Since 1990, ex-workerist and autonomist women have gone different ways: Mariarosa Dalla Costa continued her research in an ecofeminist perspective giving particular attention to the peasant and fishermen movements for food sovereignty, Giovanna F. Dalla Costa now researches on microcredit experiences in different countries, Leopoldina Fortunati has become a renowned expert in communication theory, Laura Corradi has become an academic and is involved in the ecofeminist global movement and Alisa del Re has been a local councillor for the Green Party in Padua. By placing the issue of unpaid domestic work at the heart of discussions within both the broader feminist movement and autonomous social movements since the 1970s, that current of Italian feminism that was strongly influenced by workerism, while always keeping its distance from notions such as « workers' centrality », identified and campaigned around an issue which remains unresolved today but which has led to important theoretical and political developments, such as the theory of affective labour⁴⁴ and the international « basic income network »⁴⁵ as a solution « from below » to the gradual disappearance of the Welfare State under neoliberal capitalism. An important recent advance for the WfH movement was the decision by the Veneto regional government in north-eastern Italy to pay care work done in the home, the first time such work has been formally recognized and paid for as a social service.⁴⁶

Finally, to summarize the differences between workerist-influenced feminism and the other forms of feminism present in the Italian women's movement of the 1970s, we can say that this differed from liberal feminism by rejecting demands for « equality » and « emancipation » as not only an obfuscation of women's difference from men, but above all a mystification of the class relation between paid men workers and unpaid women house workers. The main disagreement between workerist feminism and socialist feminism has been over the question of « outside » (non-domestic) employment as a pathway to female emancipation and economic independence. For *Lotta Femminista* and *Wages for Housework*, the exploitation of generally low-paid labour outside the home is no solution to the unpaid exploitation of women within the home. While the Italian network

⁴² « At a mass demonstration to demand the right to abortion, the first visible expression of a separatism that had already been a political practice for several years, on December 6, 1975, an exponent of the New Left received a slap for having attempted to force his way through the *servizio d'ordine* [see note 36] which prevented admission to men in the demonstration. This was the first symbolization in the media of an unresolved dispute within the New Left, and of the difficulties of the Left, old and new, to manage what could no longer be presented as just one more variable of the main contradiction between capital and labour » (Ballestrini & Moroni, *op.cit.*, p.499).

⁴³ Semi-structured interview with informant from Milan.

⁴⁴ The most typical form of affective labour would be housework or any caring work within the community, although the category includes, extrapolating from Fortunati (*op.cit.*), any form of labour involving an « exchange of immaterial use values », such as sex work. For an analysis of immaterial and affective labour, see Lazzarato, Maurizio, « Immaterial Labour », Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (eds.), *Radical Thought in Italy: a Potential Politics*, trans. Paul Colilli and Ed Emory, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996, pp. 133-147.

⁴⁵ See <http://www.nodo50.org/redrentabasca/english/index.htm>.

⁴⁶ Dalla Costa, Mariarosa, « Autonomia della donna e retribuzione del lavoro di cura delle nuove emergenze », *Foedus*, No. 19, 2007.

of WfH agreed with separatist feminism over the exclusion of men from feminist organizations and meetings (except as child carers), the English WfH network in which Selma James figured prominently, eventually permitted men to join as members of the Payday network, although by this time the two networks had split, the Italian network dissolved under the effects of the widespread repression of social movement activists between 1978 and 1983.⁴⁷ As to doubts over the continuing relevance of workerist feminism and the WfH campaign, since 2001 they have been among the organisers of the Global Women's Strike with its demand for « recognition and payment for all caring work, and the return of military spending to the community starting with women the main carers » as a response to male-dominated terrorism and war.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Payday is a network of men organising with the International Wages for Housework Campaign around the issues of domestic labour, welfare and childcare : <http://www.globalwomenstrike.net/English/menjoinwomen.htm>.

⁴⁸ See <http://www.globalwomenstrike.net>.