Introduction: Laboratory Italy

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In Marx's time revolutionary thought seemed to rely on three axes: German philosophy, English economics, and French politics. In our time the axes have shifted so that, if we remain within the same Euro-American framework, revolutionary thinking might be said to draw on French philosophy, U.S. economics, and Italian politics. This is not to say that Italian revolutionary movements have met only with great successes in recent decades; in fact, their defeats have been almost as spectacular as those suffered by the French proletariat in the nineteenth century. I take Italian revolutionary politics as model, rather, because it has constituted a kind of laboratory for experimentation in new forms of political thinking that help us conceive a revolutionary practice in our times.

This volume is not intended primarily, then, as a history of the recent political movements or an explanation of the current crises of the Italian political system. The primary focus is rather to present a contemporary Italian mode of thinking revolutionary politics. The difference of Italian thought, however, cannot be grasped without some understanding of the difference marked by the history of Italian social and political movements. The theorizing, in fact, has ridden the wave of the movements over the past thirty years and emerged as part of a collective practice. The writings have always had a real political immediacy, giving the impression of being composed in stolen moments late at night, interpreting one day's political

struggles and planning for the next. During extended periods many of these authors were theorists on the side and kept political activism as their day job. Althusser was fond of quoting Lenin as saying that without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary practice. These Italians insist more on the converse relation: revolutionary theory can effectively address only questions that are raised in the course of practical struggles, and in turn this theorizing can be articulated only through its creative implementation on the practical field. The relationship between theory and practice remains an open problematic, a kind of laboratory for testing the effects of new ideas, strategies, and organizations. Revolution can be nothing other than this continually open process of experimentation.

It will be necessary, then, in the course of this volume, to give some indications of the nature of the political movements in Italy over the past thirty years.[1] The practices in the 1960s and 1970s of the Italian extraparliamentary Left, independent of and more radical than the Italian Communist Party, did indeed constitute an anomaly with respect to other European countries and certainly with respect to the United States, in terms of its size, intensity, creativity, and long duration. Some like to say that whereas 1968 lasted only a few months in France, in Italy it extended over ten years, right up until the end of the 1970s. And the Italian experiences were no weak echo of Berkeley in the 1960s or May in Paris. The movements in fact went through a series of stages, each with its own experiments in democratic political organization and radical political theory.

A first long season of political struggles extended from the early 1960s to the early 1970s, in which factory workers constituted the epicenter of the social movements. The attention of revolutionary students and intellectuals was focused on the factories, and a significant portion of the militant workers saw the struggle for communism and workers' power as leading through independent political organizations, outside the control of and often opposed to the Communist Party and its trade unions. The most significant radical political theorizing of this period dealt with the emerging autonomy of the working class with respect to capital, that is, its power to generate and sustain social forms and structures of value independent of capitalist relations of production,[2] and similarly the potential autonomy of social forces from the domination of the State.[3] One of the primary slogans of the movements was "the refusal of work," which did not mean a refusal of creative or productive activity but rather a refusal of work within the established capitalist relations of production. The anticapitalism of the worker and student groups translated directly into a generalized opposition to the State, the traditional parties, and the institutional trade unions.

A second stage of the movements can be defined roughly by the period from 1973 to 1979. In general terms, the focus of radical struggles spread in this period out of the factory and into society, not diluted but intensified. Increasingly, the movements became a form of life. The antagonism between labor and capital that had developed in the closed spaces of the shop floor now invested all forms of social interaction. Students, workers, groups of the unemployed, and other social and cultural forces experimented together in new democratic forms of social organization and political action in horizontal, nonhierarchical networks.[4] The Italian feminist movement gained a significant role during this period, with its activities focused on the referenda on divorce and abortion. This is the period too when terrorist groups such as the Red Brigades emerged from this same social terrain. One should not, however, let the dramatic exploits of the terrorist groups, in particular the 1978 kidnapping and assassination of the prominent politician Aldo Moro, eclipse the radical social and political developments of a wide range of leftist movements. Across the social spectrum there were instances of political antagonism and diffuse forms of violence mixed with social and cultural experimentation. The political theory that emerged from these movements sought to formulate alternative, democratic notions of power and insisted on the autonomy of the social against the domination of the State and capital. Self-valorization was a principal concept that circulated in the movements, referring to social forms and structures of value that were relatively autonomous from and posed an effective alternative to capitalist circuits of valorization. Self-valorization was thought of as the building block for constructing a new form of sociality, a new society.

Beginning at the end of the 1970s, the Italian State conducted an enormous wave of repression. The magistrates sought to group together and prosecute the terrorist groups along with the entire range of alternative social movements. Thousands of militants were arrested under extraordinary statutes that allowed for extensive preventive detention without any charges being made against those arrested and without bringing them to trial for extended periods. The courts were given wide powers to obtain convictions merely on the basis of the association of the accused with political groups charged with certain crimes. Large numbers of political activists went into hiding and then into exile, and thus by the early 1980s the political organization of the social movements was all but destroyed. Most of the contributors to this volume, in fact, lived this period either in prison or in exile. At the same time, Italian capital embarked on a project of restructuring that would finally destroy the power of the industrial working class. The symbolic defeat took place in 1980 at the Fiat auto plant in Turin, which had for decades been a central site of workers'

power. Fiat management succeeded in shrinking the workforce, laying off tens of thousands of workers, through the computerization of the production plants.[5] These were the years of winter for the social movements, and the radical political theorizing too lived a kind of exile, as if it had gone underground to weather the bleak period. The Italian economy experienced another boom in the 1980s, largely powered by new forms of diffuse and flexible production, such as that characterized by Benetton. But the social terrain was typified by a new conformism, nurtured by opportunism and cynicism. Marx might say that his beloved mole had gone underground, moving with the times through subterranean passages, waiting for the right moment to resurface.

All three of these periods — the intense worker militancy of the 1960s, the social and cultural experimentation of the 1970s, and the repression of the 1980s — made Italy exceptional with respect to the other European countries and the United States. Radicals outside of Italy might have admired the audacity and creativity of the social movements and mourned their brutal defeats, but the conditions of Italian revolutionary practice and thought seemed so distant that their lessons could not be applied and adapted to other national situations. I believe, however, that in the 1990s, despite sometimes dramatic and sometimes ludicrous headlines that make Italian politics seem increasingly eccentric, Italian exceptionalism has in fact come to an end, so that now Italian revolutionary thought (as well as reactionary developments) can be recognized as relevant to an increasingly wide portion of the globe in a new and important way. The experiments of laboratory Italy are now experiments on the political conditions of an increasing large part of the world.

This new convergence of situations might be linked to two general processes. It is due partly, no doubt, to the capitalist project of globalization, in which in certain sectors throughout the world, capital is moving away from dependence on large-scale industries toward new forms of production that involve more immaterial and cybernetic forms of labor, flexible and precarious networks of employment, and commodities increasingly defined in terms of culture and media. In Italy as elsewhere, capital is undergoing the postmodernization of production. At the same time, on an equally global scale, neoliberal policies (imposed when necessary by the IMF and the World Bank) are forcing the privitization of economic sectors that had been controlled by the State and the dismantling of the structures of social welfare policies. The Reagan and Thatcher governments may have led the way, but the rest of the world is fast catching up.

In political and cultural terms, too, the Italian condition is moving toward a convergence with other countries, sometimes in rapid, dramatic leaps.

Certainly the cynicism, fear, and opportunism that have recently characterized the culture of the institutional Left in Italy are factors that we in the United States have come to know well. One might say that the conditions of Italian politics have become Americanized. Certainly, the meteoric rise of the media magnate Silvio Berlusconi as a major political figure in the mid-1990s, emerging from outside and in opposition to traditional political structures, cannot but seem strangely familiar from the perspective of the United States. In a way, Berlusconi combines the political entrepreneurship of a Ross Perot with the media entrepreneurship of a Ted Turner. In any case, it is a small step in the developing form of rule, call it mediocracy or teleocracy, from a bad actor as president to a media tycoon. Furthermore, the Italian political condition has approached what Fredric Jameson has identified as a defining aspect of U.S. Left culture in recent years, that is, the condition of theorizing without movements. This does not mean that radical theorizing might now take place without reference to political practice—of course, revolution can be theorized only through interpretation and extension of really existent forces immanent to the social field. It means, rather, that radical theory is deprived of the coherent movements and the firmly consolidated collective social subjects that once animated the terrain of revolutionary practice. Theorists must now interpret the prerequisites of emergent conditions and the nascent forces of political subjectivities and communities coming to be. In such conditions, political theorizing in general might be forced to take on a more highly philosophical or abstract character to grasp these potentialities. To a certain degree, then, postmodernization of the economic realm and Americanization of social and cultural fields are the two faces of a general convergence. This is why the experiments conducted in laboratory Italy are now experiments of our own future.

The convergence of social conditions, reducing the gap of Italian exceptionalism, has brought Italy close to us and thus made the essays in this volume relevant for us in a way Italian theorizing could not be before. There remain, however, important differences marked by the kind of political thought presented here, perhaps as the accumulated wealth of its exceptional past. First of all, there is a communist theorizing bent on the abolition of the State and the refusal of political representation that we seldom find elsewhere. The refusal of the State also brings with it an attack on hierarchical organizations in party structures, trade unions, and all forms of social organization. Antagonism to the State is the centerpiece of a generalized insubordination. The abolition of the State, however, does not mean anarchy. Outside the constituted power of the State and its mechanisms of representation is a radical and participatory form of democracy, a free association of

constitutive social forces, a constituent power. Self-valorization is one way of understanding the circuits that constitute an alternative sociality, autonomous from the control of the State or capital. Some of the contributors to this volume outline a project, for example, whereby the social structures of the Welfare State might be transformed so that the same functions are supported no longer from above but now from below, as a direct expression of the community. The effort to constitute a community that is democratic and autonomous, outside of political representation and hierarchy, is a continual project of these theorists.

Combined with the radical critique of the State is a sustained focus on the power of labor. Marx agreed with the capitalist economists that labor is the source of all wealth in society, but it is also the source of sociality itself, the material of which all our social relations are woven. Throughout these essays there are attempts to understand the way that laboring practices have changed in recent years and how these new forms of labor might carry new and greater potentials. New concepts such as "immaterial labor," "mass intellectuality," and "general intellect" all try to capture the new forms of cooperation and creativity involved in contemporary social production—a collective production defined by cybernetic, intellectual, and affective social networks. The affirmation of the powers of labor found in the work of these theorists, however, should not be confused with any simple call that we go to work or enjoy our jobs. On the contrary, any affirmation of labor is conditioned first by the "refusal of work" inherited from the workers' movements of the 1960s. Radical workers (in Italy as elsewhere) have always tried to get out of work, to subtract themselves from exploitation and the capitalist relation. The social movements translated this into a form of life in the realm of nonwork, outside the relations of waged labor. In the contemporary essays in this volume, this tendency is theorized in a more general way as a mass defection or exodus, a line of flight from the institutions of the capitalist State and the relations of waged labor. The authors' affirmation of labor, then, refers not simply to what we do at work for wages but rather generally to the entire creative potential of our practical capacities. These creative practices across the range of terrains—material production, immaterial production, desiring production, affective production, and so forth—are the labor that produces and reproduces society. The seeds of a communist society already exist in the virtual paths that potentially link together this labor in new collective articulations.

What is perhaps most attractive about these Italian theorists and the movements they grow out of is their joyful character. All too often, leftist cultures have identified a revolutionary life with a narrow path of asceticism, denial,

and even resentment. Here, however, the collective pursuit of pleasures is always in the forefront—revolution is a desiring-machine. Perhaps this is why, although these authors follow many aspects of Marx's work, they seldom develop either the critique of the commodity or the critique of ideology as a major theme. Although certainly important projects, both of these analyses run the risk of falling into a kind of asceticism that would predicate revolutionary struggle on a denial of the pleasures offered by capitalist society. The path we find here, in contrast, involves no such denial, but rather the adoption and appropriation of the pleasures of capitalist society as our own, intensifying them as a shared collective wealth. This is far from a vision of communism as equally shared poverty, and much less a reference back to precapitalist communal forms. Communism, rather, will emerge out of the heart of capitalism as a social form that not only answers the basic human needs of all but also heightens and intensifies our desires. Corresponding to this focus on joy, there is also permeating the work of these authors a distinctive kind of optimism, which might appear naive to some at first sight. At various points in the 1970s, for example, their writings made it sound as if revolution was possible and even imminent. Even during the bleak periods of defeat and political repression, there is still an optimistic reading. In the final essay of this volume, for example, Paolo Virno interprets the counterrevolution of recent years as an inversion and redeployment of revolutionary energies, as if it were the photonegative of a potential revolution. These authors are continually proposing the impossible as if it were the only reasonable option. But this really has nothing to do with simple optimism or pessimism; it is rather a theoretical choice, or a position on the vocation of political theory. In other words, here the tasks of political theory do indeed involve the analyses of the forms of domination and exploitation that plague us, but the first and primary tasks are to identify, affirm, and further the existing instances of social power that allude to a new alternative society, a coming community. The potential revolution is always already immanent in the contemporary social field. Just as these writings are refreshingly free of asceticism, then, so too are they free of defeatism and claims of victimization. It is our task to translate this revolutionary potential, to make the impossible real in our own contexts.

The Essays

The essays in this collection are organized into four groups that function more or less as one continuous narrative.[6] Part I constitutes an attempt to cure ourselves of the poisonous culture of the 1980s, what some might call the culture of postmodernism, which certainly has remained dominant thus far through the 1990s. The essays

by Paolo Virno and Massimo De Carolis take stock of and critique the emotional and political climate of the culture that is dominated affectively by fear and resignation and politically by cynicism and opportunism. The point is not simply to lament the poverty of our contemporary political culture, but rather to find in it positive elements that can lead to a new cultural transformation. We can learn to redirect some of the powers that drive cynicism and opportunism, and learn in the process how to combat fear. Adelino Zanini then gives a brief overview and critique of "weak thought," identifying it squarely with an Italian version of postmodern ideology that emerged from the tragic social condition of the 1980s. Finally, Rossana Rossanda, who belongs to a somewhat different tradition from the other authors in this volume, reconsiders the Marxist and communist tradition after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The defeats of the Left in the late twentieth century are not a result of "too much" Marxism or communism, she argues, but, on the contrary, of a failure to redeploy creatively the resources of these traditions.

The essays in Part II analyze the economic and social conditions of contemporary capitalist production. Carlo Vercellone and Alisa Del Re discuss the consequences of the crisis and dismantling of the Welfare State in Italy. Vercellone traces the history particular to the Italian case, focusing on the alternative forms of welfare that have been generated by different social movements, and Del Re insists on the special position women hold in relation to welfare policies. Both analysts seek to identify social forms of welfare that could constitute a new alternative network, independent of State control. The remaining essays in Part II trace the recent migration of capitalist production out of the factory and toward more diffuse social forms. Marco Revelli takes stock of the anthropolitical and sociological consequences of the mass layoffs of workers following the restructuring of production at the large factories, in particular the enormous Fiat auto plant in Turin. Franco Piperno and Maurizio Lazzarato follow this with analyses of the effects of the new technologies and the new, immaterial forms of labor that have come to play a dominant role generally in contemporary capitalist production.

The essays in Part III propose new concepts for political theorizing today, adequate to our social conditions. Giorgio Agamben offers a philosophical investigation of the "form-of-life" that might animate our coming political community, outside of any Statist notion of politics. He proposes the figure of the refugee as the paradigmatic political subjectivity of our era. Augusto Illuminati discusses the potential and pitfalls of a nonrepresentative form of democracy, along with its implications for our modern conceptions of citizenship and community. Paolo Virno attempts to discern the outline of new revolution in our contemporary

political conditions that appears as a kind of engaged exodus or constructive withdrawal from the structures of wage labor and State control. Finally, Antonio Negri complements this proposal with the notion of a constituent republic, which would mark an alternative to the State and give form to the continuously open expression of the revolutionary energies of the multitude.

The two essays that make up the appendix are intended as a historical overview to situate and complement the theoretical essays in the rest of the volume. They fill the same role as the last part of volume 1 of *Capital*, on primitive accumulation: they detail the historical developments that in one country have laid the conditions for the preceding theoretical analysis of a general situation. In this sense, the appendix may be read profitably before the rest of the volume. "Do You Remember Revolution?" was written in 1983 by eleven authors who were then in prison, including Paolo Virno and Antonio Negri. The essay sketches the history of the social movements in Italy from the late 1960s up to the late 1970s and the time of the authors' arrest. Paolo Virno's "Do You Remember Counterrevolution?" provides the sequel, analyzing the political and social developments through the 1980s and into the 1990s that led to the collapse of the traditional party structure and the dissolution of the First Republic, which had defined Italian govenment since the end of World War II.

The reader will notice that several unfamiliar concepts, such as constituent power, general intellect, and exodus, reappear continually throughout the different essays, taken for granted, as if they were already common terms. In effect, these authors understand the invention and articulation of new concepts to be a collective project. When one author introduces a new term, the others take it up immediately, giving it their own interpretations and feeling no need to cite where it came from. Before long, the original source of the concept is forgotten and it is adopted as a common part of the vocabulary. For the convenience of the reader, we have added a glossary at the end of this collection that explains the most important of these newly invented concepts.

The essays in this volume, then, demonstrate not only the anomaly of recent Italian history, in terms of its material situation and political climate, but also the convergence it has experienced toward a common global economic and political condition. These Italian authors bring to this new world order a wealth of revolutionary experience and desire. *Laboratory Italy* refers no longer to a geographic location, but to a virtual space of hope and potential that may be actualized anywhere; better, it refers to a specific modality now available to all of us, of experimenting in revolution.

Notes

1. During this same period there developed an original and powerful tradition of feminist theory in Italy. In English, see the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp, eds., *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991). There are aspects that this feminist tradition shares with the tradition presented in this volume, in particular the focus on autonomy and the construct of alternative social structures, but in practice the movements seldom enjoyed much contact and were at times antagonistic toward one another.

2. The classic text is Mario Tronti, *Operai e capitale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1966, enlarged ed. 1971). Parts of this book have been published in English as "The Strategy of Refusal," in "Autonomia: Post-political Politics" (special issue), *Semiotext(e)* 3, no. 3 (1980): 28–34; "Social Capital," *Telos*, no. 17 (Fall 1973): 98–121; and "Workers and Capital," *Telos*, no. 14 (Winter 1972): 25–62.

3. See Antonio Negri's essay "Keynes and the Capitalist Theory of the State," which appears in English as chapter 2 of *Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of the State-Form* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 23–51.

4. See the excellent description of the movements by Franco Berardi (Bifo), "The Anatomy of Autonomy," in "Autonomia: Post-political Politics" (special issue), *Semiotext(e)* 3, no. 3 (1980): 148–71.

5. Marco Revelli has perhaps most thoroughly analyzed the restructuring of the Fiat plant and the defeat suffered by the workers in political and sociological terms. This volume includes his essay "Worker Identity in the Factory Desert." See in Italian his full-length study, *Lavorare in FIAT* (Milan: Garzanti, 1989), in particular 84–129.

6. Several important authors who are part of this tradition have not been included in this volume for reasons of space or other considerations. One of the most significant of these is Franco Berardi (Bifo), who has written recently on the new potentials of cyberspace and cybertime, both as a field for democractic social organization and as a weapon for new means of social control. Sergio Bologna's latest work investigates autonomous forms of labor that are organized and reproduced outside of directly capitalist control. Finally, Giuseppe Cocco has made valuable contributions on the relationships between social movements and the economic strategies of flexible production.