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The Ambiguity of Violence in the Decade after 1968: A Memoir of “Gli anni di piombo”

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In the second half of the 1970s, Italy experienced yet another crisis of faith in its state institutions, in part due to the government's inability to provide solutions to the high unemployment rate, particularly among youth. Mass education, the conquered right of the student movement of 1968, appeared to have merely prolonged the time before young men and women began hunting for a job, rather than resolve the issue of unemployment. Those few students who were actually physically attending mass universities in the 1970s (among the many more thousands enrolled) became more and more aware of their problematic future and challenged education from within. The occupation of major universities sites took place in 1977 with the interruption of lectures and seminars and the physical expulsion of professors.

1977 was my first year in Rome as a sociology student. Sociology was not necessarily the only discipline at the vanguard of protests. Historically, the Facoltà of Architecture, among others, had also produced the main leaders of the student movement. But since the original founders of the Red Brigades were sociology students at the University of Trento, sociology's radicalism was an accepted fact in the public imagination, and sociology students did not wish to disclaim this belief. Thus, in the winter of 1977, the Facoltà di Magistero in Rome, where sociology was housed, closed down and *Autonomia Operaia* organized assemblies and protests. The most famous Italian sociologist at the time, Franco Ferrarotti, was intimidated and somewhat beaten up, others were threatened, etc. Festivals of “*Indiani Metropolitani*,” the so-called creative wing of the student movement led by *Autonomia*, replaced scholarly lectures in the halls of the Facoltà and, with dances and songs, presented another side of youth protest: political and social demands needed to

be complemented by an attention to people's expressive needs and the paramount issue of the quality of life.

It is my point that a broader conception of change, as in part suggested by the Indiani Metropolitanì's protest style, is fundamental to understand the pervasive acceptance and/or tolerance of violence during the "anni di piombo" among those Italians affiliated with the Left. For, as I am going to argue, a certain degree of sympathy for the general principles guiding the Red Brigades, if not necessarily their causes, generated a sort of ambivalence toward violence from those radicals who did not wish to subscribe to the orthodoxy of the Communist Party (PCI). Violence was not necessarily invoked or glorified, but was certainly accepted and tolerated almost as a necessary evil: many believed that violent means were needed in order to introduce long overdue changes to the democratic system. Personal connections and encounters, in addition to political engagement, favored one's involvement in the network of violence, making it possible for violence to permeate the social body. Thus, many Italians willy-nilly participated in the national tragedy—what turned out to be the bloody debate over Italy's present and future, its historical trajectory.

My recollections of the period, and my own life-history as embedded within the events of the late seventies, provide a sample among many of the intricate dynamics described above. They help to portray more vividly the evolving path of a society in crisis where violence was an everyday phenomenon which ran through the social fabric and contributed to the moral ambiguity of the country's political culture.

Italy had been experiencing political violence in the shape of opposing extremisms of left and right since the end of the 1960s in what was later defined as the "strategy of tension." The "strage" of Piazza Fontana in December 1969, where 18 people died and several others were wounded, epitomized this phase of political violence in Italy that lasted until the early 1980s. In the 1970s, however, a different expression of political violence, which escalated over time, emerged with the formation of the Red Brigades (BR), founded by Renato Curcio and Alberto Franceschini in the wake of the events at Piazza Fontana. Curcio had been a student in Sociology at the University of Trento, and incidentally, as one might guess, this affiliation in part contributed to the identification of sociology and radicalism with the Red Brigades. Even though the BR apparently did not plan to become a terrorist organization, and they always refused that appellation, violence turned out to be

at the heart of the movement, albeit amidst conflicting positions. In the first few years of its existence, the BR indeed mainly operated through direct actions against those they considered enemies of the workers. These actions, which targeted factory leaders and executives, included burning down cars and kidnaps that were soon resolved. They were not, in sum, bloody actions, and generally in the first few years the BR focused on a propaganda campaign aimed at diffusing their ideas and recruiting members for their struggle against the power of multinationals in Italy. In retrospective, Curcio has even claimed that the BR's first killing was not planned (two people were murdered in Padova in 1974 during an assault at the site of the Movimento Sociale Italiano or MSI party). However, in 1972, after a police raid in Milan that failed to catch some of its leading members, the BR decided to go into "clandestinità." Furthermore, they abandoned in part their early strategy of operating within factories, and, in contrast, oriented themselves toward the larger goal of fighting the state and political institutions. The BR gradually ascended to a central role in the Italian political scene, pushing the boundaries of what the public found acceptable or justifiable, while attempting to shake what many considered fossilized institutions and failed governmental interventions.

No doubt, the BR's early "mild" direction helped gather sympathizers to their cause. Whatever the reasons, however, and one could spend hours and pages enumerating them, what appears certain is that an attraction or sympathy for the BR made an inroad in the radical left, the so-called extra-parliamentary movements that did not subscribe to the Communist Party's views or who were, in different degrees, skeptical about the Communists' ultimate direction. In general, reliance on violence was part and parcel of the confrontational style of the young left, especially in its recurrent skirmishes with the fascist right. Yet, what I would like to emphasize is that violence was in a sense part of the BR package. Sympathy for the BR was an expression of demands that, even if not at all central to the BR's outlook or project, were somewhat dependent on many people's desire to upset a social and political situation that was strongly felt as inadequate and seemingly irremediable. From this point of view, one was not necessarily supporting violence, but rather condoning it: violence was useful in the short term, even if one did not share the ultimate goal of the proletarian revolution as envisaged by the BR.

For state institutions were clearly failing youth and did not provide any safeguard for their future, as it is still evident in today's Italy.

Traditional political actors also failed to recognize the harder to define quest for quality of life on the part of many people who were coming of age at the time. In one of my seminars at the University of Rome, for example, more specifically the class on Sociology of Work, many of us were involved in research that had to do with the topic of happiness and work: what would determine satisfaction on the job? That was our main question. The issue for us, in sum, was not evidently just how to get a job, although that was a priority in a situation of high unemployment. What appeared crucial to us were shorter work days, commuting distance, environment, etc., in other words, factors that turned work into a pleasure and not an unwanted toil. This was nothing new if one had read Marx, but it certainly constituted a different interpretation of Marx than the orthodox one, and focused on what has come to be known as the “theory of needs.” Indeed, the so-called Movimento 77 was different from the Movimento Studentesco of 1968 for two reasons in particular, besides involving proletarians and workers and not just students. First, the movement was generally anti-parties and definitely rejected an alignment with the Communist Party. The famous event that defined the future of the movement in Rome, for example, was the booing and expulsion of the leader of the union CGIL, Luciano Lama, from La Sapienza on February 17. Second, with its creative and non-violent wing, the Indiani Metropolitani, the movement also spurred a cultural critique that on the basis of the theory of needs attacked central mores and habits and engaged in social issues on a daily basis. Squatting, but also fighting against drugs, was among the activities carried out within the quartieri. Incidentally, this is also time of “radio libere,” most important among them Radio Alice in Bologna and Radio Onda Rossa and Radio Città Futura in Rome.

The BR did not, of course, talk in terms of needs. Yet, their idea of hitting at the heart of the state, “il cuore dello stato,” implied the overhaul of the status quo—a status quo that was paradoxically becoming more punitive and repressive, and did not pick up any clues from the youth culture about their social needs. In 1975 the Legge Reale authorized the police to use force against demonstrators and shoot them, if the agents deemed it necessary. In 1977, the police used and abused this authorization. In February of that year, the student Francesco Lorusso was killed by the police during a demonstration at the University of Bologna. In response to the students’ protest after the event, the then Minister for Internal Affairs Francesco Cossiga sent tanks to invade the

streets of Bologna, sparking the beginning of the most violent phase of the confrontation between the Movimento del 1977 and the state. A “Manifesto contro la repressione” was launched supported by French intellectuals such as Deleuze and Guattari. Eventually, insisting with this repressive trend and furthering the suppression of constitutional liberties, gatherings of large groups were also forbidden. In this way, daily life was targeted. For us students, who used to go out with friends in large groups, these new rules meant an infringement on our personal freedom. These were not rules that only applied to “troublemakers,” or exceptional situations, and we were all well aware of their weight on our lives and habits.

It was at a rally that the controversial Radical Party had organized on the anniversary of the referendum on divorce—a rally that had not been authorized—that this whole repressive trend exploded in the face of the state and of the whole country too. A young student, Giorgiana Masi, was killed by undercover police in the aftermath of the demonstration, even if the police denied responsibility at the time. After these events, *Autonomia Operaia*, which had joined the rally to protest repression, prevailed in setting the agenda for the direction of the protest movement in the following months. The creative wing of the movement, the *Indiani metropolitani*, lost out. Confrontation and “*lotta dura*” became the winning passwords. This is the beginning of “*lotta armata*” for *Autonomia*. These are the years of the P38, now an icon of the era—the *anni di piombo*.

When Moro was kidnapped in 1978, the political tension had been brewing for some time, with the BR negatively dominating Italian politics. With the new leadership of Mario Moretti after the arrest of Curcio in 1976, the Red Brigades had turned more and more violent, with actions that attacked politicians, judges, and policemen. The Moro affair fell within this new strategic direction for them.

To many among the left the kidnapping was problematic, but ambiguously so. The political implications of the BR’s deeds were certainly a source of debates, but the daring nature of their actions was tantalizing in its symbolic weight. In the apartment I was sharing in Rome with a few people, the news of the event and of the whole ordeal in the next few weeks became the center of discussion. It also produced a few jokes from the part of friends we had, and here again I am trying to point out the issue of the ambiguity toward violence. One of the main jokes implicated me in the kidnap, as it had emerged that

one woman was part of the contingent that attacked and kidnapped Moro and his escort. Why me? After all, my roommates and I shared the characteristics that made us good candidates for participating in the kidnapping. We all were from the Marche region, from which the most prominent leaders of the BR also came, and even better we were from San Benedetto del Tronto, which was Patrizio Peci's home town. Patrizio Peci was the first "pentito" of the BR and one of its main leaders. In addition, the kidnap occurred on a street where a friend of ours lived. But, all other factors being equal, one characteristic distanced me from my roommates and qualified me as the one who fit the joke best. I was a sociologist. Now, beyond the funny details of the joke, which indicate the popular identification of sociology with radicalism and, worse, terrorism, what I want to emphasize is that we did not live the kidnap as a drama or condemn it tout court, although of course we had differences on how we evaluated the event. Like many others, we detached ourselves from the human tragedy, the emotional side of the story. We rather dealt with the strategic questions surrounding the event. What was the meaning of it? Who was gaining what? Which were the larger political implications? It is evident that a certain dose of cynicism was part of our reaction to the kidnap.

It is not that young people supported violence, those at least who were not militating in *Autonomia Operaia* or other similar formations, yet there was an ambiguous reaction to violence and no clear-cut demarcations between those who were actively involved in violence and those who were not. This was the case not only in moral or theoretical terms, but also in practice. Violence, in fact, was not confined to self-enclosed and isolated groups. Militants were present everywhere in the network of friends, colleagues, fellow students, etc. You probably knew somebody who was involved in terrorism or other unlawful activities, even if you did not necessarily realize it. For example, I had a friend in Turin, a non-political person, and certainly not a leftist. I was visiting her at the time and she invited some people over for lunch, including a very sweet guy who you would never have associated with violence. This guy and I ended up washing dishes together after lunch, and had a pleasant conversation. A few months later, I asked my friend how he was doing and she told me his friends believed he had entered *clandestinità*: he had joined *Prima Linea*. Another example: in my house in Rome, because of the San Benedetto link, we had some guys, friends of friends, who stayed overnight as our guests during that time. They were later arrested

as supporters of the BR. We were hoping the police would never know they stayed with us, of course.

You knew somebody who was involved in violence, you had friends, or friends of friends, you housed them, etc. They were not part of a different world. Although this might sound like too large a generalization, the tight-knit nature of Italian society in part explains the diffusion of violence and the ambiguous reactions to it, in addition to the general discomfort with the political system and the aspirations to some kind of change, at least for left-leaning people.

It is interesting that this ambiguity, or the benevolent neglect of violence present at the time, symbolically ended by invoking the worker, the icon, after all, of traditional left politics and class struggle. Already with regard to the killing of policemen, the issue had emerged for many of us about the class background of carabinieri and poliziotti: the problem was, how could one relate to their proletarian status while fighting the proletarian cause? After all, the police contributed to repress the cause. This issue of the proletarian status of police and carabinieri remained latent. However, in 1979, when Roberto Peci, the brother of the "pentito" leader of the BR, Patrizio Peci, was kidnapped and later executed by the BR, his father cried: "He was just a worker!" "Era solo un operaio!" Coincidentally, what ended the violent cycle of the BR, and any tacit support for them, was their assassination in 1979 of the union member Guido Rossa, "un operaio," another worker. The BR had gone too far. Political struggle's ends and means came to be questioned. Their price had become too high, and the public had reached its limit of ambiguous acceptance.