

Enda Brophy

Italian Operaismo Face to Face A Report on the 'Operaismo a Convegno' Conference 1–2 June 2002 – Rialto Occupato, Rome, Italy

The 'Operaismo a Convegno' conference took place in Rome last summer during what was a transitional moment in several respects.¹ The 'movement of movements' seemed to be pausing, with its Italian contingent caught between digesting the lessons of Genoa and the need to consider objectives and strategy in view of the European Social Forum which was due to be held in Florence at the beginning of November. In the meantime, the escalation of global violence and rapid geopolitical swerves demanded at the very least a rethinking of the theoretical and practical categories that had seemed to suffice until September 11. Adding to the sense of timeliness was 'autonomist' Marxism's strong resonance outside of Italy, due to the success of Michael Hardt and Toni Negri's *Empire* and the ability with which other

¹ My thanks go to Francesca Pozzi, Gigi Roggero, and Guido Borio for making available transcripts of the conference and other materials, as well as for the time they shared this summer discussing their intriguing series of projects with me in Rome and Bologna. I would also like to thank Steve Wright for not only encouraging me to write this report, but providing invaluable advice on a rough draft of it. I am also indebted to Mariarosa Dalla Costa, who offered helpful suggestions along the way. Errors, inconsistencies, incorrect translations and problems in style remain my responsibility rather than theirs.

practitioners of the perspective (in North America and elsewhere) have documented and translated its explanatory power.² Considering this, it was fitting that the legacies and contemporary directions of the diverse and dynamic political tradition be rediscussed in its country of origin.

As Mariarosa Dalla Costa suggested later, the conference was an exceptionally rare and special moment if only due to the presence of so many of the tradition's better-known figures in one space. Another of the participants, Marco Berlinguer, echoed her thoughts on the second day, pointing out how the moment was an 'unprecedented' and 'previously unthinkable' one. Indeed, the bitterest of political defeats, the insult of occasionally lengthy prison terms, and the twenty-plus years that have passed since that tremendously forceful and creative cycle of struggle that shook Italy between 1968 and 1977 all contributed to force material wedges between many of those in the tradition.

Operaismo has its roots as a theoretical body in post-war Italian history, becoming a broadly social force towards the end of the 1960s and gaining momentum until the end of the following decade. Central to its trajectory was the growing estrangement of large swathes of the working class from the institutions, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the major trade unions, which had been up until that time the traditional reference points for the Left. Negri, the tradition's best-known theorist, suggests that *operaismo* emerged 'as an attempt to respond to the crisis of the labour movement during the 1950s'.³ As the decade of social upheaval wore on, the Italian revolutionary Left grew in numbers and strength, becoming a social force to be reckoned with. While, as some of the key figures of the period suggest, it is 'literally impossible to construct a unitary history of these movements',⁴ by the mid-1970s, the extraparliamentary Left was able to mobilise groups of 20,000–30,000 on short notice in Milan, and had a strong presence in most Italian cities.⁵ Yet, towards the end of the decade, the movement collapsed due to a series of factors. The first was state repression, eagerly participated in by the PCI and 'legitimated' by part of the movement's poorly thought-out adoption of the 'theory of the offensive'. The latter came about as an expression of the inability of this part of the movement to adapt to a rapidly shifting political

² Particularly important in this respect is the work done by Cleaver 2000, Ryan 1982, Dyer-Witheford 1999, and Wright 2002. I have maintained Cleaver's use of the term 'autonomist' to refer to the tradition, but sometimes will call it by the more literal translation – 'workerist' – of the Italian term 'operaista'.

³ Cited in Wright 2002, p. 6.

⁴ Castellano et al. 1996.

⁵ Ginsborg 1990, p. 360.