

ITALY: “WE DEMAND THE IMPOSSIBLE”

Giuseppe Carlo Marino

The student protest movement of 1968 in Italy was a long-lasting phenomenon. After its explosive reawakening in 1977, it gradually degenerated, tragically, into terrorist forms. This “extended” 1968 movement came to an end in the early 1980s, fading out amidst a social phase of “retreat” marked by the return to the reassuring world of “private” interest.

The later, more reality-oriented generations were more susceptible to market-driven needs and eschewed the ideas of their parents, who had cried “We demand the impossible!” The end result was that they compliantly adapted to the objective conditions of triumphant capitalism, which appeared to promise widespread prosperity and assured the most ambitious in society a certain social status (it was the era of Bettino Craxi, the long-serving socialist prime minister of Italy).

In a sense, the 1968 movement developed into its opposite. The rise of many of its activists to positions of power—in realms from politics to economics, from the academic world to public administration—is striking. Only a few years before, the “68ers” had hoisted the flag against the “system,” that is, against capitalism, which they denounced as an oppressive and perverse form of power.

Did the 1968 movement fail?

Might it not be fair to say that the Italian movement of the 1960s plotted against itself? That its fate, paradoxically, was to convert the revolutionary momentum of its golden yet fatal year, 1968, into a counterrevolution? Can we say that, generally speaking, it failed? Although there is some truth to this argument, it is, on the whole, flawed because 1968 brought lasting changes to Italy. It permanently transformed old rural Italy and its urban counterpart, where great strides towards industrialization had been made (the so-called economic miracle). It brought about decisive and irreversible changes not unlike the great social revolutions in history.

Fight against the “bourgeois” model

Students played the leading role in this movement, though in Italy, it was the youth of working-class or even peasant background—who

had been denied access to higher education for centuries—that drove the protest. Now they burst through traditional class barriers, making use of the very same channels of modernization that so-called neo-capitalism had opened. What was taking place was a shift from elitist university education, in which the “keepers of knowledge” enjoyed unlimited power, to higher education for the masses. The student forces took up the fight against the old bourgeois model, challenging the authoritarianism of the academic “establishment.” Along the way, the whole “system” came under attack.

Through the conflict-laden dynamic of “father-son” relationships, the movement spread from campuses to the whole of society, reinforced by the utopian vision of collective freedom from all oppression. In this, Italy was no different from the rest of the world. Yet the Italian situation did highlight some specific kinds of “oppression” that the youth felt could be traced to “unfinished” democracy, the dominance of the clergy, and the “betrayal” of the anti-fascist values of the Italian resistance movement of World War II.

Criticism of present and past

The student movement in Italy was actually ahead of its time. It arose in 1964, at about the same time as movements in the United States and prior—if only by a few years—to the “French May” of 1968. Along with the students, young professors, lecturers (often with temporary positions), and assistants played a decisive role.

At the same time, a consciousness for equality of the sexes was developing. With access to higher education, women effectively reinvented feminism by abstracting it from a historical tradition that, in Italy, had been an elitist, middle- and upper-middle-class privilege. In lively exchanges with the older generation, the younger generation radically called every aspect of society into question with public trials and extreme revisionism. Young people pounded every facet of life with a wave of delegitimization; they directed fierce criticism at the present (the detested “system”) and the past (the hypocritical certainties and assurances that the “bearers of consensus” had prescribed and dispensed).

Protests from left-wing and right-wing camps

The protests were guided by both left- and right-wing factions. On the left, the attack on the “system” did not spare the Italian Communist Party (PCI), which was accused of Stalinism and blind

obedience to the Soviet Union. This gave rise to anti-Soviet movements that looked “beyond the PCI” and turned admiringly to the experiences of the Cultural Revolution in China and to Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, who came to be regarded as legends. On the right, an anarchic youth movement accused the official neo-fascist party, the Italian Social Movement (MSI), of adopting a pro-American and “anti-national” line. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that violent clashes in universities, schools, and on the streets also ensued between the young leftists and anti-fascists, on the one hand, and between the right-wing and fascist forces, on the other.

Thus, it was really two different youth movements that participated in the protests. The left-wing activists (who had broken away from the PCI and the Italian Socialist Party (PSI)) far outnumbered those on the right and thus dominated at universities. They comprised a variety of groups such as Potere operaio [Power to the Workers], Manifesto, Servire il popolo [Serve the People], Cristiani per il socialismo [Christians for Socialism] and Lotta continua [Ongoing Struggle], which is to say they were Maoists, Trotskyists, Guevarists, “Third Worldists,” and so on.

Part of a global youth movement

One peculiarity of the '68 movement in Italy was its infiltration by undemocratic forces directed by shady members of the intelligence services. Seeking to destabilize Italy, these forces schemed within the anonymous seats of hidden power (which were arranged parallel to, and often overlapping, the official power centers of the republic), preparing the ground for “coups d'état” in the fashion of the Greek colonels of the junta (1967–1974) with the goal of averting a communist takeover. But, of course, the student protesters were unaware of this. As in the rest

Student protest in Rome, May 1968.



of Europe, they were busy constructing a new collective mentality based in the values of authentic and natural living that they set against the authoritarianism, philistinism, hypocrisy, bigotry, and the “betrayal” of their elders and mentors.

The protesters, in effect, had joined into a sort of “youth globalization” that spread from Berkeley, California, and the civil rights movement of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X to the protests in Paris in May 1968. In the spirit of the Beat Generation, they had developed new styles and new languages of their own. They had become actors in a collective campaign of “cultural revolution,” and it was on this terrain that they achieved success, securing certain civil rights (divorce, abortion, equal opportunities, sexual freedom, and so on) that impacted all of Italian society.

Failure of the anti-capitalist revolution

They failed completely, however, on the terrain of the anti-capitalist political revolution. Conditions at the time were not favorable to this cause. The working class itself was already feeling the effects of the epochal transformation sweeping through Western society, moving it towards “postmodernism” and deindustrialization. While the radicals of the youth movements in Italy were pressing for an anti-capitalist rebirth, the workers themselves—as Max Horkheimer noted with regard to Germany—sought merely to gain higher wages and access to the “opulent society” of consumerism. Among succeeding generations, the progress of postmodernism—spurred by the “electronic-information revolution” that had already arrived, interrupting the centuries-old course of the “industrial revolution”—precipitated a drastic break with the past.

The few radical activists, on the left and on the right, were not aware of all this. They were entrenched in the utopia of the “revolution” (communist) or the “revolt” (fascist), falling onto the tragic path of terrorism—one group against the other—with both sides being manipulated in various ways.

Unusable material from an old world

“Real” history left little room for utopias, however. Soon, the “68ers” had no “values” they could convey to the next generation with any credibility. Overwhelmed by the myth of the “new” and of the “future,” subsequent generations tended to regard the past in general, and even the history that had produced their ideologies,

as unusable material from an old world that could be discarded without regret.

Even the traditional passage of values from the older to the younger generation was interrupted as the youth became increasingly reluctant to accept the values of their elders. Gradually, the tendency to criticize or question those values diminished as well. Elders simply ceased to be important! Rather than rising up against them, the young generation preferred to ignore them. From then on, they sought “values” as commodities in the virtual marketplace of the future.

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