

'The Long '68'. Italy's View of the Protest Movement of 40 Years ago

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In Italy, different people remember the movement of '68 differently. While some call it a 'myth' or 'a kind of holy relic', others see it as the 'sessantotto lungo', the 'long '68'. And although the '68ers figure everywhere in the lives of the Italians there has as yet been no controversial debate among the country's historians. It is a well-known fact that Prime Minister Berlusconi is in the habit of reviling the '68ers, but his attitude jars against the mildness with which Italy's right-wing camp now views the movement of 40 years ago. Although the phenomenon has not been thoroughly analysed as yet, there is a wealth of literature on the subject which this article attempts to introduce. A presentation of established approaches is followed by chapters describing the specifically Italian background of 1968, the question of its legacy, and selected research results.

L. Sinibaldi mentions three major lines of interpretation in Italy. The first regards the movement as an aimless rebellion by bourgeois students against the first signs of globalization. The second identifies it as a comprehensive socio-cultural transformation which, however, did not entail any political consequences. Within that second camp, there are directional differences relating mainly to motivation: one group says that the rebellion was founded on political reasons, while another cites socio-cultural aspects. A third camp favours breaking down the complex into groups and/or cultures: declining to consider the phenomenon holistically, it views the '60s as a chapter in the history of Catholic dissension or, alternatively, as a split within the Marxist party. There are various groups which prefer the last-named line as it is less of an interpretation scheme like the first and second and more of a method.

To begin with, it pays to look at the political background. The Democrazia Cristiana (DC) which had been ruling in Rome since 1948 was confronted by the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI) which, following the logic of the Cold War, was deliberately kept away from power. The 'centro-sinistra' coalition that was formed in 1962/63, the first government to include the socialists, was intended to isolate the communists, yet it raised hopes in the left camp that were to sustain the '68 movement later on, thus strengthening the communists in the long run. A symbolic step in the course of this development was the 'historical compromise' offered by Mr Berlinguer in 1973 which aimed to form an alliance between Catholics and communists to establish a *politica popolare*. Many authors believe that the failure of the 'centro-sinistra' provided a major impulse to the '68 movement in Italy.

There is no dispute about the evaluation of the economic prerequisites of the movement. One of the causes named is the rapid transformation from an agrarian to an industrial state after the war together with its consequences, namely labour migration, anonymity in the growing suburbs, the loss of cultural roots for many people, the malaise (*malessere*) of the poorer population strata, and unemployment which was rife especially in southern and central Italy. Furthermore, infant mortality was declining, the population was growing, and mass consumption was spreading. At Italy's schools and universities, there were more and more pupils and students from a peasant background who qualified for academic jobs which were thin on the ground. A growing number of people saw themselves as 'proletarians of a different kind without any social platform'. From all this, F. Pituzzi draws the conclusion that 1968 arrived neither spontaneously nor without warning.

Finally, cultural life changed in a way that did much to help the movement take shape. While the DC was content to hold power in the state, the left assumed power in culture. Antifascism became a new mode of life that was popularized in thousands of TV programmes. Influences that came from abroad contributed their bit, such as the protest against the Vietnam war, the ideas of Mao, and the popularity of Latin American liberation theories and figures like Che Guevara. Even Mr Feltrinelli, made famous by the publication of his photograph of Che Guevara and his friendship with Fidel Castro, became one of the figureheads of the new philosophy of the left and an icon of its culture.

Today, various dates are being named for the start of '68 in Italy: the demystification of Stalin initiated by Khrushchev, the protest against a meeting of neo-fascists in Genoa in mid-1960, and the strikes in Milan and Turin in 1962. Other items mentioned include the occupation of a faculty at Trento University in 1966 and at other major universities in northern and central Italy in the autumn of 1967. Mr De Bernardi and Mr Madera believe that the 'sessantotto' started in 1967, for what began in the autumn of 1968 had been 'a different story' as it was then that the 'politicized avant-garde left the academic sphere to encounter the belligerent core of the factory proletariat'.

One thing all schools of interpretation consider important is the 1968 'battle of Valle Giulia' at which demonstrators clashed with the police. In 1969, there was more student unrest, and the factories experienced a 'hot autumn'. In November, the first few people died in Milan, followed in December by terrorist attacks in several cities. By the end of the year, terrorism was overshadowing increasingly the original students' and workers' movement. In the 'leaden years' between 1970 and 1980, about 14,000 attacks were logged in Italy, one of which claimed the lives of 85 people at the central railway station of Bologna in August 1980.

In 1972, a powerful trade union federation was founded. In 1978, the 'brigate rosse' kidnapped the chairman of the Democrazia Cristiana, Aldo Moro, killing him a short while later. The apologists of the revolt of '68 are anxious to keep these excesses of violence separate from the ideas of the movement itself. They argue that there were hardly any links between the students' and workers' movement and terrorism. There is a court case that is of some importance in this debate: in 1994, Mr Sofri, then leader of the violent 'lotta continua' movement, was sentenced to a long term in jail for being concerned in the murder of a policeman – which made him an even greater hero to the representatives of the left camp. It is safe to say that there is no other west European country which harboured a terrorist movement rooted in the events of 1968 that grew as rampantly as in Italy.

What did 1968 leave behind? For one thing, there is the 'statuto dei lavoratori' of 1970 – an achievement that favours the workers, regulating dismissals, the right to strike, and industrial democracy. Further items of social relevance include the legalization of divorce and the liberalization of the abortion law. Besides, there is the fact that pacifism, the environment, feminism, and other items appeared on the political agenda for the first time. A curious aspect is the way in which the political intermingles with the private sphere: politics became a show, merging with the world of feature films and entertainment. One case in point is that of Mr Berlusconi, a media tycoon and politician whom the illuminati regard as an 'illegitimate son' of the '68ers.

There are many parallels being drawn between the situation of the country as it was and as it is. People say that then as now, the country was incapable of reform, and the party system was in a gridlock. Then, the DC had intended to isolate the communists; in 2008, the extreme left failed to make the jump into parliament and the senate. It is feared that the losers of the day might give vent to their frustration 'in the piazza', as they did then. It should be remembered, however, that most of those who today compare the past and the present are the same as those who were protagonists in 1968.

Another protagonist and heir named in the dialogue about the revolt of '68 is the Catholic camp. Some even say that the revolt began in St Peter's Square. And there was much to stimulate it: the recently-ended Vatican Council with its emphasis on lay involvement; the 'political theology' of Jean B. Metz; the encyclicals *Mater et Magistra*, *Pacem in Terris* and *Populorum Progressio*. The only encyclical to trigger any protest was *Humanae Vitae* which condemned the pill and contraception. In political terms, Catholic organizations felt encouraged by the centro-sinistra experiment, struggling as they were for renewal and modernization. The 'priest of Barbiana', Don Lorenzo Milani, demanded reforming the schools and abandoning authoritarian education in his *Lettera a una professoressa*. Don Torres, a Colombian priest who took up

arms, was as popular as Fidel Castro and Che Guevara in the Italy of the time.

And there is yet another – albeit somewhat oddball – minority that counts among the heirs of the '68ers. There are the post- and neo-fascists who sought to leave their mark on the revolt by supporting it. Then there is a number of thinkers who addressed the phenomenon in their own personal way, one of them being Mr Guareschi whose *Don Camillo* found a following among the readers of Germany.

Four decades after the events of that time, one thing emerges clearly: 1968 is a myth in Italy, a symbolic year whose significance for the present has faded. Now that Mr Napolitano, a former communist, has been elected president of the Italian state, many say that the epoch epitomized by 1968 has come to an end. People like Mr De Bernardi and Mr Madera are still struggling to keep 1968 from becoming a myth, fearing that the political and cultural values of the movement might lose their relevance. Yet the date is already becoming a positive topos. At all events, it appears likely that both the left and the right will soon come to regard the phenomenon of 1968 as a soil on which a creative merger of contradictions may thrive.

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