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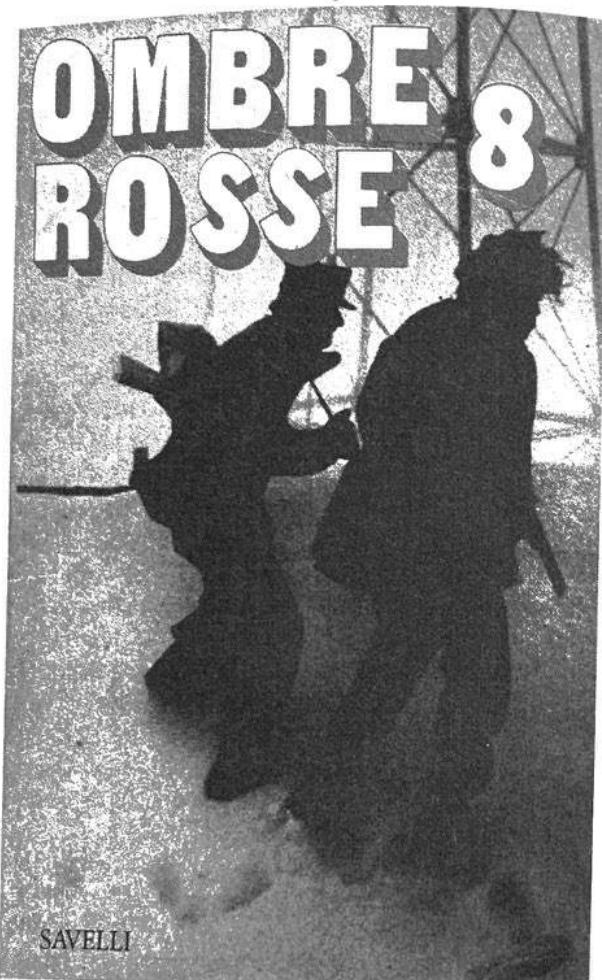
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LUCA FALCIOLA\*

REPRESENTING POLITICAL VIOLENCE  
IN THE UNDERGROUND PRESS:  
THE CASE OF THE MOVEMENT OF 1977

*Introduction*

The Movement of 1977 in Italy was a second cycle of leftist mass mobilization after 1968 and lasted for approximately one year, between the fall of 1976 and the winter of 1977-1978. While radical political engagement in the rest of the Western world had slowed down, in Italy a complex cluster of social and political dynamics re-ignited militancy. On the one hand, the political system appeared to many to be increasingly petrified and unable to meet the social demands for progressive change. Corruption, 'clientelism', no alternation in power and a lack of effective reforms further confirmed – in the eyes of the leftist activists – the breaking down of bourgeois democracy. On the other hand, youth and intellectual unemployment had reached an unprecedented level. While, after 1968 higher education had rapidly expanded and contributed to a larger skilled workforce, the economic recession following the 1973 crisis and the ensuing industrial reconversion downsized the job market. Labour-saving measures and precarious work conditions spread rapidly.

Traditionally a mediator of social movements' claims, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) was gradually shifting its stance towards a closer cooperation with the forces in power, notably the Christian Democratic Party (DC). To overcome the severe crisis in the country, the Communist Party leadership urged for a compromise and called for national solidarity. In June 1976, after obtaining its best electoral results ever in a national election but still unable to reach a majority in parliament, the PCI opted for abstention thus allowing the formation of a Christian Democratic government. Meanwhile, the New Left or-

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ganizations, whose electoral cartel performed poorly in the 1976 elections, appeared to be toothless and divided. Disgusted by institutional politics, angered by the crisis and disenchanted with conventional militancy, a revolutionary leftist coalition of students and casual workers found, in this context, new reasons to take to the streets.

From its onset, the Movement of 1977 had a controversial relationship with violence. Without a doubt, it was a breeding ground of creativity and pioneered original forms of nonviolent protest. Free radio broadcasting, street theater, body painting, graffiti, comics, poetry, music, «assembly-parties» and an alternative press all flourished within the movement becoming explicit vectors of protest. Irony and mockery set the tone of a protest that staunchly rejected the gravity and the self-imposed seriousness of much of the post-1968 militancy. The new wave of protest – its protagonists guaranteed – was a catharsis, a way to regain life after many years of ideological dogmatism and muscular confrontations. Unaffiliated young proletarians, students and feminists were the key to bringing a breath of fresh air into the leftist movement and drew attention to leisure, sexuality and existential concerns.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, the Movement of 1977 was truly embedded in violence, both symbolically and materially. For several months, shootings, beatings, brawls, acts of vandalism and arsons were the order of the day. According to estimates, between 1976 and 1977 the major episodes of violence against people or property that can be attributed to the revolutionary left – i.e. to the movement – more than tripled. These data do not include the violence of clandestine armed groups, which also increased more than twofold.<sup>2</sup> As a matter of fact, the movement also had an ambiguous relationship with clandestine armed organizations such as the Brigate Rosse and Prima Linea. The movement represented a radical milieu for these armed fringes, encouraging and supporting them in the use of violence, often unintentionally but always incisively. Clandestine groups found new recruits in the movement, especially during the last months of the protest cycle when disillusion with nonviolent strategies swept

<sup>1</sup> For a broader overview, see L. Falciola, *Il movimento del 1977 in Italia*. Roma: Carocci 2015.

<sup>2</sup> M. Galleni (ed.), *Rapporto sul terrorismo. Le stragi, gli agguati, i sequestri, le sigle 1969-1980*. Milano: Rizzoli 1981, pp. 232-237.

through the activists. Ultimately, the movement was also the object of both police and neofascist violence. As a result, it was caught up in a deadly spiral of violence and counter-violence.

As a matter of fact, the magnitude of violence in 1977 reached the highest levels of the decade – a particularly violent one in Italy. This circumstance obviously attracted the attention of the mainstream media who combined alarmed reporting with sensational and morbid coverage. Pictures of gunmen and hooligans became iconic and further confused the observers' perception.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the movement's relationship with violence became even more controversial and today it continues to be the object of fierce debate. Indeed, the public memory of these events still struggles to explain the coexistence of peaceful and violent forms of protest.<sup>4</sup>

The present chapter addresses this historical puzzle by focusing on two preliminary questions that are crucial to unpacking the problem. First, to what extent was political violence openly and collectively discussed? Second, how did the movement conceptualize, contextualize and describe violence? In other words, was violence mostly accepted, rejected, criticized, overlooked or idealized? To answer these questions, this chapter explores the representation of political violence in the periodical press created by the movement, on both a verbal and visual level. In so doing, this research also makes a methodological point and demonstrates the heuristic value of the underground press in the study of violence. With this aim in mind, the chapter adopts a minimal definition of political violence, namely the deliberate infliction of damage to property or individuals for political purposes.<sup>5</sup>

The study of the representation of political violence during the 1970s in Italy has grown as a specific sub-field. In recent years, many scholars have examined a wide range of retrospective representations, including cinema, fiction, mass media and memoirs of victims

<sup>3</sup> S. Bianchi (ed.), *Storia di una foto. Milano, via De Amicis, 14 maggio 1977. La ricostruzione dell'immagine-icona degli «anni di piombo»*. Contesti e retroscena. Roma: DeriveApprodi 2011.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, E. Assante, *1977: gioia e rivoluzione*. Roma: Arcana 2017.

<sup>5</sup> D. della Porta, "Violence and the New Left", in W. Heitmeyer, J. Hagan (eds.), *International Handbook of Violence Research*. Dordrecht-Boston: Kluwer 2003, vol. I, pp. 383-398.

and perpetrators.<sup>6</sup> However, to date, few studies have focused on the coeval representation of violence by the militants themselves.<sup>7</sup> Despite offering valuable insights, these investigations have never provided a systematic analysis of the protest cycle of 1977. For its part, research on the underground press has generally avoided the question of the representation of violence, while turning its attention to the richness of cultural genealogies or to the prolific intersections between art and politics.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Underground press as a key source*

Sources are a recurring problem when dealing with the history of violence, not least because the meaning of violence is inherently elusive. Biases are ubiquitous in official documents and press coverage, while personal narratives involving violent traumas are, by definition,

6 See, for example, C. Uva (ed.), *Schermi di piombo: il terrorismo nel cinema italiano*. Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino 2007; D. Paolin, *Una tragedia negata: il racconto degli anni di piombo nella narrativa italiana*. Nuoro: Il maestrale 2008; L. Falciola, "Il racconto degli anni di piombo sulla stampa quotidiana nazionale (1996-2010)", in «*Rivista di Politica*», vol. 4, n. 1, 2013, pp. 105-115.

7 S. Casilio, "Pagherete caro, pagherete tutto! La violenza politica nelle riviste della sinistra extraparlamentare", in S. Neri Serneri (ed.), *Verso la lotta armata. La politica della violenza nella sinistra radicale degli anni Settanta*. Bologna: il Mulino 2012, pp. 207-229; B. Armani, "La retorica della violenza nella stampa della sinistra radicale (1967-77)", in *Ivi*, pp. 231-281; L. Gerusa, "A (Conceptual) History of Violence: The Case of the Italian Extreme Left in the 1970s", in P. Antonello, A. O'Leary (eds.), *Imagining Terrorism: The Rhetoric and Representation of Political Violence in Italy 1969-2009*. London: Legenda 2009, pp. 128-138; A. Ventrone, "Vogliamo tutto'. Perché due generazioni hanno creduto nella rivoluzione 1960-1988". Roma-Bari: Laterza 2012.

8 P. Echaurren, C. Salaris, *Controcultura in Italia 1967-1977. Viaggio nell'underground*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri 1999; F. Ciaponi, *Underground. Ascesa e declino di un'altra editoria*. Milano: Costa & Nolan 2007; I. M. Gallino (ed.), *1965-1985 Venti anni di controcultura. Frammenti storici dell'underground italiana*. Milano: Ignazio Maria Gallino Editore 2016.

emotionally charged and full of omissions.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, police records tend to cherry-pick illegal actions and emphasize pro-violence statements. Similarly, the mainstream press is naturally prone to sensationalize outrageous events and selectively amplify them. As a matter of fact, Todd Gitlin's observations on the media coverage of the New Left in the U.S. also apply to Italy. In both cases, the specter of violence sometimes hovered over media representations before it became popular within the movement itself. Thus, the media were not simply «prophetic» but, in some cases, their images were also «self-fulfilling».<sup>10</sup> Testimonies by both the perpetrators of violence and their sympathizers are geared towards denying or minimizing the violent dimension of protest. By contrast, victims and their relatives are inclined to over-emphasize the extent of violence and its viciousness.<sup>11</sup>

All this considered, the movement press, albeit not immune from biases and rhetorical inflation, can be a valuable additional source. This is particularly true with regards to 1977. Magazines were a typical means of expression during this cycle of mobilization. In the absence of many leading organized groups, magazines also became crucial hubs for building action. Between 1976 and 1977, approximately 70 new independent leftist magazines were published in Italy, with a total estimated circulation of 300,000 copies. All of these magazines discussed the renewed conception of politics, militancy and revolution that characterized the movement. Contrary to the press of the New Left organizations of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the magazines of 1977 did not usually express top-down political agendas. They did not primarily deliver propaganda or educational messages, nor did they showcase theoretical discussions for tiny intellectual élites. Most of these magazines were collective endeavors that spontaneously aired militants' world-views, grievances and cul-

9 See K. Hodgkin, S. Radstone (eds.), *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*. London-New York: Routledge 2003.

10 T. Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making & Unmaking of the New Left*. Berkeley: University of California Press 2003, pp. 183-186.

11 On a general note, see B. Armani, "La produzione storiografica, giornalistica e memoriale sugli anni di piombo", in M. Lazar, M.-A. Matard-Bonucci (eds.), *Il libro degli anni di piombo. Storia e memoria del terrorismo italiano*. Milano: Rizzoli 2010, pp. 207-223.

tural sensibilities. They were spaces of self-representation, language experimentation and subversive communication, in the context of a movement that was heterogeneous, leaderless and polycentric.

In some cases – mirroring a growing need to merge ‘personal’ and ‘political’ dimensions – magazines looked like private diaries or collections of readers’ letters, giving vent to emotions such as despair, sorrow or excitement. Typos, corrections of mistakes, blanks and handwriting were purposely left on the pages to signal the spontaneous nature of the texts, which were elaborated without the mediation of editorial boards and proofreaders. The layout itself was often chaotic and literally subverted to underscore the rejection of «the order of the discourse» and to acknowledge the loss of a political compass.<sup>12</sup> Well-organized groups still published their own official magazines to dictate their political line, but these were few in number and increasingly lost appeal. Censorship and security filters, especially with regards to violence, were also in place. However, they were limited and can be used for analytical purposes.

Some of these magazines published only a few issues, while others were single-issue. Almost all of them were self-funded. The editorial staff varied and editors-in-chief, if mentioned, were often bogus. It is generally recognized that the journalist Marcello Baraghini, founder of the publishing house Stampa Alternativa, freely provided his name to legalise a large number of printing initiatives. Offset photocomposition was quite common as it made self-production much easier and allowed for the inclusion of newspaper clippings, images and drawings, which were simply cut out and glued on. These magazines were usually printed in local shops and were distributed through a network of independent leftist bookstores and so-called information centers (e.g., L’Uscita in Rome, Il Picchio in Bologna, ISAT in Genoa and Calusca in Milan), with only a few major national suppliers, such as Cooperativa Puntirossi (150 bookstores).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> This kind of anti-logic was modeled on Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of rhizome, which denotes an irregular, desire-driven pace. See G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Rizoma*. Ferrara: La Gran Bevuta 1977. See also M. Foucault, *L’ordine del discorso*. Torino: Einaudi 1972.

<sup>13</sup> See, in particular, C. Salaris, *Il movimento del Settantasette. Linguaggi e scritture dell’ala creativa*. Bertiolo: AAA Edizioni 1997. See also P. Moroni, B. Miorelli, “Dieci anni all’inferno. Storia dell’altra editoria”,

This research draws on a selection of 70 leftist magazines published between the fall of 1976 and early 1978, with the addition of three others, namely, «Re Nudo», «Rosso» and «A/traverso», which began publishing before 1976 but were largely representative and receptive of the movement’s identities.<sup>14</sup> From this sample, 91 articles and their related visual markers that explicitly address the topic of political violence were identified. The selected materials, drawn from 33 different magazines, were used in a textual and visual analysis in order to detect narratives, framings, stylistic tropes and iconographic references. As recent scholarship on social movements convincingly suggests, visual markers are «repositories of shared – and sometimes contested – activist identities and cultures». They highlight positions in political conflicts, signal affiliations and illustrate ideological backgrounds. Therefore, focusing on both visual and textual language makes it easier to bridge cultural and political analysis.<sup>15</sup>

#### *The representation of political violence*

First, it is important to note that political violence is not a major topic in the movement press, either visually or in terms of contents. It is a relevant subject, but compared to other subjects such as desire, class or work, it is not a major one. Furthermore, the discourse on violence is condensed within a limited number of magazines and only about half of the selected magazines explicitly discuss or visually represent it. In addition, very few have more than one or two articles on violence during the period under scrutiny.

in P. Alferi, G. Mazzone (eds.), *I fiori di Gutemberg. Analisi e prospettive dell’editoria alternativa, marginale, pirata in Italia e Europa*. Roma: Arcana Editrice 1979, pp. 39-52.

<sup>14</sup> See, respectively, A. Bertante, *Re nudo: underground e rivoluzione nelle pagine di una rivista*. Rimini: NdA press 2005; L. Chiurchiù, *La rivoluzione è finita abbiamo vinto. Storia della rivista A/traverso*. Roma: DeriveApprodi 2017; T. De Lorenzis, V. Guizzardi, M. Mita (eds.), *Avete pagato caro, non avete pagato tutto: la rivista Rosso (1973-1979)*. Roma: DeriveApprodi 2008.

<sup>15</sup> N. Doerr, A. Mattoni, S. Teune (eds.), *Advances in the Visual Analysis of Social Movements*. Bingley: Emerald 2013, pp. xiii-xxi.

A quarter of the articles in the sample openly advocate violence as a revolutionary means. Various arguments are used to legitimize violence, but these can be reduced to four, clearly interrelated approaches. First, violence is desirable, without a specific rationale beyond its power.<sup>16</sup> For example, a commentary in the workerist magazine «Senza tregua» argues that «the resort to illegality, violence and armed struggle» does not need «any quote from sacred texts» nor faces «any basic objection». It is simply obvious.<sup>17</sup> Second, violence is fatally imposed by the established order and it is inherent in any class-divided society. As the Marxist-Leninist canon suggests, violence is the midwife of history. «Whoever believes that the capital's dominion can be eliminated without violent revolutions, without insurrections and civil wars, with their long aftermath of deaths and sorrow», reads an article in the old-styled paper «Il leninista», «is out of Marxism and, willing or not, is a protector of capitalist classes».<sup>18</sup> Third, violence is an act of vitality, an expression of radical needs and a proof of the proletarians' eagerness to fight.<sup>19</sup> Along with this reasoning, «Rosso» endorses the «primitive» violence that emerged during the demonstration of March 12, 1977, in Rome – one of the most violent days in the whole decade in Italy.<sup>20</sup> Fourth, violence is desirable because, in contrast, nonviolence is misleading and self-defeating. A nonviolent practice, explain some Turin feminists in «La talpa metropolitana», would lead to further «ghettoiza-

tion» and, ultimately, envisions a movement that is subordinate to the system.<sup>21</sup>

It is interesting to note that, in these cases, writings and images tend to be quite realistic. They immediately and plainly describe violence. By contrast, metaphors are unusual. Violence is made explicit through a verbal and visual language that does not care about the conventionally execrated aspects of it. Importantly, these articles mostly appear in magazines that represent the groups (e.g., «Senza tregua» and «Rosso») which also created parallel military structures that carried out violent actions. This is hardly surprising, yet the scarcity of moral and security filters – besides the frequent absence of the authors' names – is noteworthy. Arguably, this shows both a sense of impunity and a confidence in the movement's openness to such hardline messages.

These magazines are also the most old-fashioned and the least experimental, with a typographic style reminiscent of Soviet graphics. They usually combine black and white press photos, showing urban guerrilla actions or violent demonstrations, and are printed in either black or two-tone (black and red). The famous cover of the March 1977 issue of «Rosso» – displaying in a single picture a gun, a Molotov cocktail, a wrench and various bludgeons, all in the hands of a group of proud, disguised militants – epitomizes this explicit endorsement of violence.<sup>22</sup> Drawings of weapons also appear alongside many texts.<sup>23</sup> «Senza tregua», in particular, makes frequent use of comic strips, including *Lo Sconosciuto* by Roberto Raviola (aka Magnus), which is the story of a mysterious mercenary who encounters, throughout an endless bloody journey, killers, terrorists and spies, without losing his integrity. Presumably, this choice can be viewed as a way to reaffirm that heroism is never

<sup>16</sup> "Autonomia operaia è il comunismo del proletariato multinazionale", in «Rosso», n. 17-18, March 1977, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> "La questione della forza", in «Senza tregua», n. d. but Fall 1976, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> "Terrorismo e lotta di classe", in «Il leninista», n. o, n. d. but January-March 1978, pp. 14-15; See also "La questione della forza", in «Senza tregua», n. d. but Fall 1976, p. 2; "Lettera dal carcere speciale di Fos-sombrone per il convegno di Bologna", in «Senza tregua», September 1977, pp. 1-3.

<sup>19</sup> "Progetto di comunicazione – Parte seconda. Compagni il capitale è dentro di voi, decapitalizzatevi!!", in «Fuoco. Mensile di controinformazione e di agitazione rivoluzionaria», n. 10, January-February 1977, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> "Roma: giorni che valgono anni", in «Rosso», n. 17-18, March 1977, pp. 4-5.

<sup>21</sup> "Le streghe hanno il coltello", in «La talpa metropolitana: giornale torinese per il coordinamento proletario», n. o, May 1977, p. 5. See also "Operai armati in Val Grande", in «Autonomia operaia, organizzazione per il potere operaio, per il comunismo», 16 May 1977, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> «Rosso», n. 17-18, March 1977.

<sup>23</sup> See the pictures in «Senza tregua», n. d. but Fall 1976, pp. 10 and 16; «Comunismo. Giornale degli operai e dei proletari del sud», n. 4, July 1977, pp. 1 and 4; «Sussurri e grida d'amore e di rabbia», October 1977, pp. 2 and 10.

immaculate, but always implies a certain degree of cruelty. Revolution, in other words, is not «a dinner party», and the working class is definitely aggressive.<sup>24</sup>

More than a third of the articles, i.e., the majority of the sample, express a selective critique of violence. These writings do not reject violence *per se*. Instead, they propose accepting violence under specific conditions. Some of them suggest calibrating violence, others recommend moderating violence, yet others prefer to make a distinction between irresponsible terrorist violence and more acceptable typologies of violence. Justifications vary, but can be reduced to four. First, violence needs to be efficient and «militarily intelligent», avoiding too hurried confrontation or too little organization. This classic argument is usually coupled with the idea that violence has to be «mass violence» and not the affair of a tiny militarized avant-garde.<sup>25</sup> Clandestine organizations, «Rosso» argues, attempt to exploit and lead the movement rather than allowing the «proletarian army» to grow.<sup>26</sup> Second, reckless violence is counterproductive because it fosters repression and justifies criminalization. For example, Andrea Bellini, leader of the Casoretto Collective, a leftist violent gang operating in Milan and its surroundings, adopts this argument to lay blame for the shooting of a policeman during a demonstration in Milan on May 14, 1977. The people who shot the policeman, maintains Bellini, «get into the spiral created by the State, fall into the trap. [...] Crazies, they contributed to repression».<sup>27</sup> Third, an excess of violence may overwhelm creativity and jeopardize personal transformation.

<sup>24</sup> «Senza tregua», n. d. but March 1978, pp. 4, 7, 8, 11 and 12. See also F. Gadducci (ed.), *Magnus: Lo sconosciuto. Edizione integrale*. Milano: Rizzoli 2009.

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, "Appunti militari", in «La Rivoluzione», 19 March 1977, p. 4; "Quale antifascismo", in «Zero... e dintorni», n. 3, 20 January 1978, p. 1; "Cacciavite interrompe brillante carriera", in «Rosso», n. 17-18, March 1977, p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> "Autonomia operaia: dalla lotta della classe il processo di organizzazione proletaria sul terreno della guerra civile", in «Rosso», special issue, September 1977, pp. 2-3.

<sup>27</sup> A. Bellini, "continuiamo", in «Il rosso vince sull'esperto», n. 1, May 1977, p. 5. On the same note: "La repressione", in *ivi*, p. 3; "Fascismo elettronico made in Germany", in «Re Nudo», n. 55, July 1977, pp. 14-15.

Feminists, in particular, stress that masculine violence in demonstrations «favored the political over the personal», to the point of removing the latter.<sup>28</sup> Finally, to use Guy Debord's words, terrorist violence is pure spectacle. While concealing a void of political consciousness and «a fury as much obtuse as vain», this kind of violence turns into a farce and plays into the hands of power.<sup>29</sup>

This range of positions is transversal and emerges from very different publications, expressing multiple orientations. Consistently, at a visual level, realism alternates with abstraction. For example, in its May 1977 issue, which was largely devoted to the above-mentioned shooting in Milan, «Il rosso vince sull'esperto» features a number of pictures of the crime scene, via De Amicis, including the iconic photo of a young shooter holding his gun and aiming it at the policemen. Space measurements, numbered objects and maps of the city clearly resemble forensic evidence and are provided to disprove the media reconstruction of the events, notably the supposed premeditated nature of the attack by leftist militants.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, while discussing the dangers of the spectacularization of violence, «Senza famiglia», a creative fanzine printed in Brescia, proposes a refined *détournement* of a drawing depicting the gunman of via De Amicis, whose head turns out to be that of Karl Marx.<sup>31</sup> Possible interpretations are many, including the idea that adventurist violence tarnishes Marxist ideals through the simplistic associations operated by the media.

Another quarter of the articles avoid talking about revolutionary violence and turn their attention to the violence suffered by leftist militants and, more generally, to systemic violence. First, violence overlaps with state repression and, particularly, with the functions of the police, the judges and the prisons. From this perspective, the law

<sup>28</sup> "La nostra violenza", in «Siamo isteriche», single issue, 1976, p. 4. See also the untitled article, in «Zizzania», n. d. but 1977, pp. 7-8; "Or' che buoni siamo stati possiam parlar coi sindacati?", in «Re Nudo», n. 52, April 1977, pp. 6-7.

<sup>29</sup> D. Fabbroni, "La vita contro la morte", in «Zombie international», n. 1, October-November 1977, pp. 12-14. See also "dariofinisceintv...", in «Senza famiglia», n. d. but 1977, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> «Il rosso vince sull'esperto», n. 1, May 1977, p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> «Senza famiglia», n. d. but 1977, p. 4.

enforcement apparatus is labeled as «terrorist» in many instances.<sup>32</sup> The association between violence and repression is almost ubiquitous and echoes the broader public debate on «the repression by the historical compromise», namely the subjugation of internal dissent that the coalition between the Christian Democratic Party and the Communist Party supposedly masterminded. Therefore, these articles tend to point to the PCI itself and to the Communist trade unions – portrayed as copycats of the Soviet regime, if not incarnations of Nazism – as the primary sources of violence. More or less explicitly, this reasoning justifies revolutionary violence as a legitimate reaction to repression – a form of «counter-violence» and «self-defense».<sup>33</sup> Visually, pictures of law enforcement agents in anti-riot uniform, typically shooting at protesters or savagely clubbing them, are common topoi, together with images of jailed or beaten militants.<sup>34</sup> Second, in this section of the sample, violence is also described as an obvious byproduct of the «relations of production» imposed by capitalism.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the semantic cluster of violence broadens indefinitely, while its political characterization is diluted. Violence is the mother who beats a daughter, the man who verbally harasses a woman, the police who fire at demonstrators, the depression that creeps into the bodies of the people or the exploitation of illegal labor.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> For example: «Contraddizioni e forza dell'apparato e del blocco sociale nemico», in «Senza tregua», n. d. but March 1977, p. 16; «(l'altare della) patria in fiamme», in «Parole e cose. Giornale di movimento della Valcamonica», n. d. but 1977, pp. 1-2; «Beria e Scelba finalmente ricomposti!», in «Rosso», n. 19-20, June 1977, p. 8.

<sup>33</sup> See, among others, «Malfattiunasega», in «Schizzo: foglio irregolar», n. 0, 1977, p. 2; «Lotta, attacco, organizzazione. Costruiamo la milizia operaia e proletaria per il potere comunista», in «Senza tregua», n. d. but March 1977, pp. 1-15; «CRIMINALIZZANGHERIZAZIONE», in «A/traverso», March-April 1977, p. 4; «Lo stato 'democratico e riformato' va in scena», in «Comunismo. Giornale degli operai e dei proletari del sud», n. 4, July 1977, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> See, for instance, «Come in Germania», April 1977, p. 1, «Comunismo. Giornale degli operai e dei proletari del sud», n. 4, July 1977, p. 11; «Rosso», February 1977, n. 15-16, pp. 13 and 16.

<sup>35</sup> O. Scalzone, «Non presentarsi: perché?», in «Il rosso vince sull'esperto», n. 1, May 1977, p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> For instance: «Un articolo serio pieno di citazioni...», in «Limenetjena», n. 4, December 1977, pp. 9-12; «Compagni», in «Rosso», n. 17-18,

Does anyone reject violence openly and without distinction? Yes, but only a few voices do so: roughly one-sixth of the articles. It is worth noting that, in these cases, arguments against violence are based on a weak set of explanations. The most vehement condemnations stress that violent means are conducive to «self-destruction» or represent negative «ways of being». «Viola», a fanzine of the Milanese proletarian youth circles, laconically defines the frontline clash with the State as «a paranoid seduction».<sup>37</sup> Compared with the repressive power of the State, the infamous P38 handgun, as well as the Brigate Rosse's assault rifles, are «water guns», argues a «Re Nudo» commentary. Weapons – explains the same article, which stands out as one of the few thorough reflections of that period – transform those who use them no less than those who are targeted by them. In other words, «whoever fights against the monsters has to be careful not to become a monster himself». «We have a propensity to believe that revolutionary violence does not exist», summarizes the article.<sup>38</sup>

Overall, this kind of texts avoids dealing with the disturbing materiality of violence and rarely exhibits descriptive images. In contrast, de-contextualization, abstraction and aestheticization of all references to violence are common. Drawings, excerpts from comics, and collages outnumber press photos. As a result, visual references to violence are sometimes surreal, sometimes nonsensical and sometimes sarcastic. In these cases, a re-elaboration of the artistic avant-garde style is rather frequent, especially through the use of photomontage and *détournement*. For example, «Re Nudo» displays images of armed Vikings at the margins of a discussion on violence within the movement, while «Désir», a creative magazine printed in Calabria, approaches the same topic by combining a collage of a machine gun-armed Cupid with a surreal poem, read by Lenin, suggesting that the movement acts in a different, desire-driven dimension.<sup>39</sup>

March 1977, p. 3; «Produzione di morte a mezzo di merci», in «Rosso», n. 21-22, November 1977, p. 16.

<sup>37</sup> «Cos'è una guerra civile?», in «Viola», n. 3, May 1977, p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> «Due o tre cose che sappiamo sulla violenza», in «Re Nudo», n. 54, June 1977, pp. 3-4. See also «La speranza sotto il tavolo», in «Re Nudo», n. 59, November 1977, pp. 13-14.

<sup>39</sup> «Re Nudo», n. 54, June 1977, pp. 14-15; «Désir», May 1977, p. 2.

On a similar note, «Wow», the Dada-like evolution of «Viola», reduces any constructed reasoning and expresses its criticism of violent zealots by means of irony, especially through visual representations. The underlying assumption is that any rational discourse replicates the political order and incarcerates the revolution. Thus, in the first issue of the magazine, a picture of Buster Keaton embracing a bunch of rifles adorns a delirious editorial.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, in the third issue, a fake advertisement for a six-barrel rifle pairs another surreal commentary. Two pages after, a similar bogus advertisement for a «gun-slingshot» – useful «in case of a gun jam» – and a collection of ammunition samples surround the pseudo-account of a demonstration during which the author encounters his ridiculously militarized comrades. At the bottom of the same page, a retouched image of Pope Paul VI playing with a gun has the caption «P38. Così fan tutti» (P38. Thus Do They All). The whole page clearly mocks the widespread diffusion of firearms but also points to the media hysteria about the leftist armed struggle.<sup>41</sup>

### Conclusion

Overall, the research demonstrates that the underground press is a rich source for grasping the movement's relationship with violence. In particular, it brings to light the wide array of conceptions, framings and representations of violence that coexisted within the movement, which was by no means limited to a binary division between pro-violent and nonviolent standpoints.<sup>42</sup> These perspectives were numerous, reflecting the heterogeneity of the movement. Yet they shared a common feature that deserves special attention: the large majority of the articles and their visual counterparts did not reject political violence. They supported it, selectively criticized it or avoided discussing it.

<sup>40</sup> «Wow», n. 1, March 1977, p. 1

<sup>41</sup> «Wow», n. 3, April 1977, pp. 1, 3.

<sup>42</sup> On the subject, see M. Grispigni, *Il Settantasette. Un manuale per capire. Un saggio per riflettere*. Milano: il Saggiatore 1997, pp. 107-110; A. Gagliardi, *Il 77 tra storia e memoria*, Castel San Pietro Romano: manifestolibri 2017, pp. 36-43.

This conclusion suggests that the period between 1976 and 1978 was a transitional one in the history of leftist violence. The legitimization of revolutionary violence on the exclusive basis of ideological arguments drawn from Marxism-Leninism, Maoism or Focoism was mostly outdated. The idea of resuming and achieving the 'betrayed' resistance was no longer particularly appealing. However, a serious critique of violence was just beginning; it fully developed only later, around 1978-1979. In 1977, the bulk of leftist revolutionary militants interpreted violence as a conventional means for bringing about and defending political change. Violence characterized the social climate, provided a language and defined identities. Therefore, militants did not intend – or were not ready – to come to terms with the profound implications of violence.

Even within the most libertarian and tolerant sectors of the movement, a resolved and extensive critique of violence was yet to come. Many tormented debates among young leftists, duly reported in the magazines, confirm a persistent ambiguity.<sup>43</sup> For instance, in November 1977, «Re Nudo» – the Italian countercultural magazine *par excellence*, which placed great emphasis on the criticism of violence – published some excerpts from the memoirs of German terrorist Michael Baumann. Interestingly, Baumann unashamedly condemned his own experience of «absolute violence», claiming that «it does not open any alternative». Yet, he also equivocally declared that «even the worst experiences were right in the moment they were lived, as they were the only chance to express ourselves».<sup>44</sup>

How could such apparent duplicity be explained? Three complementary answers can help to elucidate this question. A first answer has to do with chronology. Until the fall of 1977, the rapid increase of the magnitude of violence may have been unclear. Some of the most repulsive attacks against people – those that elicited anxious debates within the whole left – were yet to come. For example, the death of Roberto Crescenzi, a young bystander burnt alive as a result of a

<sup>43</sup> See the untitled article, in «Re Nudo», n. 53, May 1977, p. 16; «Scusa, tu che calibro usi?», in «Re Nudo», n. 54, June 1977, pp. 10-17; «della vita e della morte», in «Tarantula... in movimento per il Settantotto», n. 0, January-February 1978, pp. 8-11.

<sup>44</sup> «Un terrorista di buon cuore», in «Re Nudo», n. 59, November 1977, pp. 27-30.

leftist raid in a bar, or the Brigate Rosse's shooting of journalist Carlo Casalegno – former anti-fascist resistant and father of a leftist local leader, but guilty of expressing his concerns on public order – took place in October and November 1977 respectively. In retrospect, it seems obvious that militants should have taken a stance against the brutalization of political combat from the beginning of the protest cycle. However, at the time, for many of those who had never committed any material act of violence, the escalation was probably not as worrisome as it later appeared. The violence that the movement suffered still seemed to overwhelm the violence it exercised.

A second possible reason lies in the dynamics of law enforcement. Police forces responded quite harshly, but not effectively, to leftist political violence. An unselective, poorly trained and disorganized law enforcement apparatus was unable to neutralize armed groups. However, the police could easily be blamed as a source of violence, having killed and wounded several demonstrators. In particular, the assassination of the activist Pier Francesco Lorusso by a *carabiniere* in Bologna, together with the (publicly denied) presence of undercover agents in the streets of Rome on the day that Giorgiana Masi, a young student, was killed, inflamed the movement and nurtured a deep sense of injustice.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, the official discourse on public order was often incendiary, while the law and order agenda of the government was strongly supported by the Communist Party, which embodied one the leftists' primary targets. In this context, the movement's fight against «state repression» and its solidarity with «the misguided comrades», namely those who perpetrated acts of anti-personnel violence, still overcame any other consideration. Writing in *«comemai»*, a movement magazine published in Turin, an anonymous militant conceded, «If there is something that I hate and actually hurts me, it is violence. Any kind of violence against anyone, even against someone I consider a dangerous opponent». However, as the same person made explicit, solidarity with violent comrades prevailed:

I have always defended, as far as I could, comrades' militant actions. [...] I believe that in the present situation either we stay on one side or on the other, either we stay with [the Minister of Interior] Cossiga or with

45 See, for instance, E. Palandri, et al., *Bologna, marzo 1977... fatti nostri....* Verona: Bertani 1977.

the comrades, be they violent or not. But why do I accept violence? Because, I think, I feel a collective responsibility. As far as I am concerned, I can try to tolerate the class enemy's violent aggression in order to protect a superior value (nonviolence, indeed). But I cannot make such a choice in the name of others, I cannot contribute to the non-defense of my comrades. [...] I give up a value in the name of another one.<sup>46</sup>

This attitude also explains the statements of open solidarity with the Brigate Rosse, the German Red Army Faction and other clandestine armed groups that can be found here and there in the magazines of 1977, including *«A/traverso»*, a fervid laboratory of literary and artistic practices.<sup>47</sup>

A third and final possible explanation for the persistent ambiguity about violence concerns the creative and countercultural components of the movement. Theoretically the best equipped to criticize violence, they were unable to tackle it. On the one hand, these militants claimed the right to not take the political reality seriously and to make fun of everything, including themselves. As previously mentioned, their subversive practice implied playing with cultural tools and embracing nonsense. They preached non-involvement and even escapism. Alongside many loosely involved sympathizers, they simply left the movement scene as soon as violence appeared to be too suffocating. On the other hand, they despised nonviolence, themselves being soaked in a culture that praised violence, albeit in abstract terms. Their favorite sources of inspiration were indeed the artistic avant-gardes of the early 20th century.<sup>48</sup> Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism and Situationism (which operated later, but reintroduced earlier references) lionized violence, vandalism and crime, and viewed them as expressive forces that lead to the opening of the self and to

46 "Interventi sulla violenza", in *«comemai»*, n. 2, May 1977, p. 3. For a similar standpoint, see "Quando il silenzio è d'oro", in *«Re Nudo»*, n. 56-57, August-September 1977, pp. 48-49.

47 For example, see "Comunicato della brigata Bruno Valli", in *«A/traverso»*, October 1976, p. 3 and *«A/traverso»*, February 1977, p. 1.

48 Such a genealogy was first analyzed systematically in M. Calvesi, *Avanguardia di massa*. Feltrinelli: Milano 1978. For a recent critical assessment, see D. Mariscalco, *Dai laboratori alle masse. Pratiche artistiche e comunicazione nel movimento del '77*. Verona: Ombre corte 2014.

the radical transformation of the world.<sup>49</sup> Surrealists, in particular, rehabilitated notorious criminals, understood the acts of murderers to be forms of historical agency and aestheticized violent behavior.<sup>50</sup> Following the example of the avant-gardes, the creative protagonists of the movement – especially by means of their magazines – operated at the intersection between artistic performance and political action. Therefore, these militants felt free to play with the idea of violence, but as a matter of fact overlooked its effects on people.



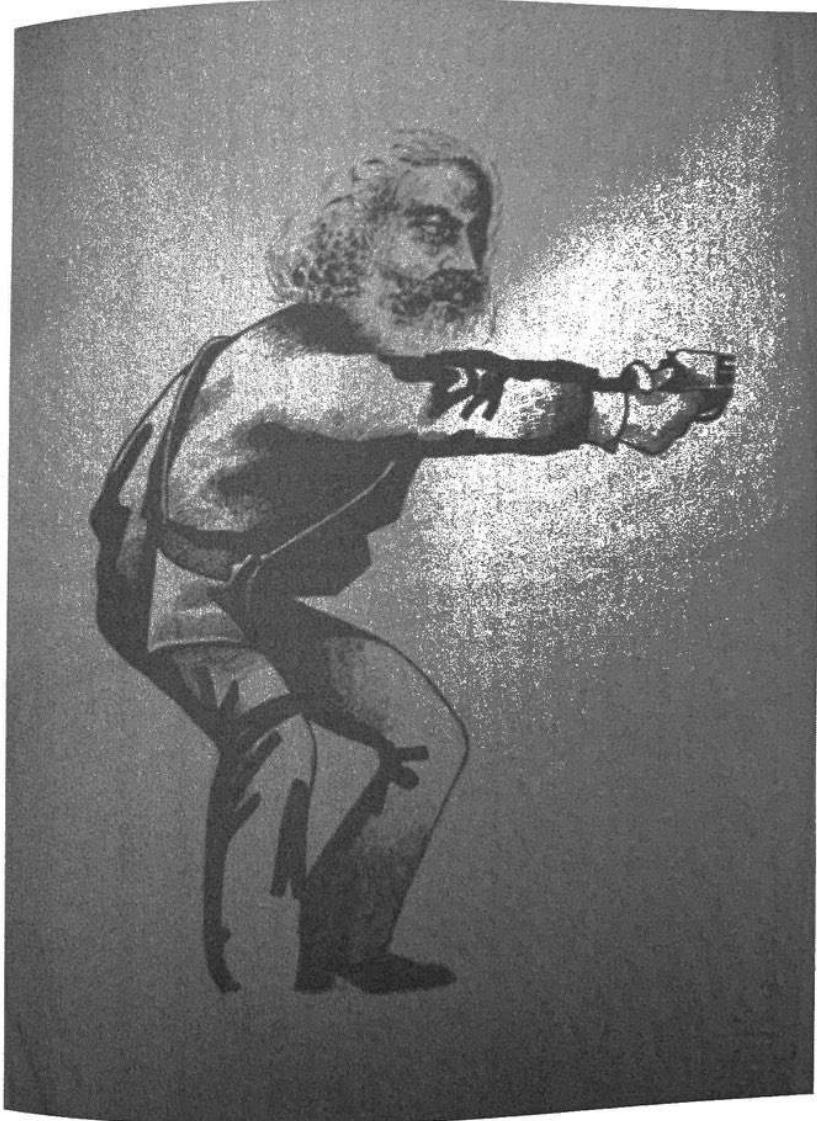
«Senza tregua» Copyright: Luca Falciola<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, the largely-diffused R. Vaneigem, *Trattato di sapere vivere ad uso delle giovani generazioni*. Firenze: Vallecchi 1973.

<sup>50</sup> Surrealists' approach to crime evolved and was the object of countless debates. See J. P. Eburne, *Surrealism and the Art of Crime*. Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press 2008.

<sup>51</sup> Fig. 1, «Senza tregua», Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, Milan.

<sup>52</sup> Fig. 2-3, «Senza famiglia», «Wow», Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.



«Senza famiglia» Copyright: Luca Falciola<sup>52</sup>



«Wow» Copyright: Luca Falciola

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NOTES ON THE ART OF FAKE NEWS:  
AVANT-GARDE DEVICES  
IN THE MOVEMENT OF 1977

The Italian Movement of 1977 produced magazines, leaflets, comics, photos, graffiti, radio broadcasts and live performances, drawing on the fundamental concepts of Marxism and French post-structuralism – particularly notions of 'general intellect' and 'desire' –, introducing an avant-garde approach (Dadaism, Surrealism, Russian and Italian Futurism, Situationism) to the class struggle, and using technologically advanced media.<sup>1</sup> These cultural practices corresponded to a new form of antagonistic subjectivity that emerged within the context of the crisis of Fordism and industrial capitalism: the young proletariat, composed of students, unemployed youth, precarious workers.<sup>2</sup> In the 1970s, hundreds of young proletarian circles and collectives appeared in Italy and organized precursor workshops on precarious work, parties and expropriations that were perceived as political situations and forms of re-appropriation of goods and subjective satisfaction of desires. The political demands of the young proletariat were represented by Autonomia Operaia, a radical organization that promoted the refusal of labor and the sabotage of capitalistic devices, and rejected the policy of sacrifices and the 'historic compromise' proposed by the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and Christian Democracy (DC).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See D. Mariscalco, *Dai laboratori alle masse. Pratiche artistiche e comunicazione nel movimento del '77*. Verona: Ombre Corte 2014.

<sup>2</sup> See D. Mariscalco, "Autonomia e abolizione dell'arte. Emergenze maodadaiste nel movimento del '77", in «Palinsesti», vol. 1, n. 4, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> See N. Balestrini and P. Moroni (eds.), *L'orda d'oro. 1968-1977. La grande ondata rivoluzionaria e creativa, politica ed esistenziale*. Milano: Feltrinelli 1997, pp. 469-471.