



Lotta Continua and the Italian housing movement in the 1970s: Ancient history or present challenges?

Monica Quirico

Historian

Monica Quirico is a free-standing historian; her main research field is the history of the Swedish and the Italian labour movements as well as anti-capitalist struggles and theories. On these issues she has published several books and articles (forthcoming: *Frontier Socialism. Self-Organization and Anti-Capitalism*, together with G. Ragona, Palgrave 2021). She has been appointed as Honorary Research Fellow at the Institute of Contemporary History, Södertörn University (Stockholm).

Contact:
monica.quirico@sh.se

Abstract

The revolutionary group Lotta Continua (LC, Continuous Struggle) was founded in Turin in 1969, following the encounter between student protests and a labour movement fuelled by massive northward migration from southern Italy. One year later LC was growing into a nationwide movement and launched a programme aimed at unifying the proletariat, and the lumpenproletariat, whose protagonists were recent southern Italian immigrants who could hardly find accommodation worthy of the name. In contrast to left-wing organisations that prioritised factory-based struggle, LC made housing occupation the linchpin of its strategy between 1970 and 1971. Housing occupation was tied to the establishment of kindergartens, clinics and “red” markets; these were not intended to provide social services, however, but rather as sites of schooling for the proletariat. By investigating the main housing occupations between 1970 and 1975 through archival materials and the memories of former housing occupation movement tenants and activists, this article focuses on the link between projects of anti-capitalist transformation and concrete practices of solidarity and struggle, as well as how these struggles were repressed. It also reflects on the relationship between past and present housing struggles.

Keywords

Housing occupation, social movements; Italian history; anti-capitalism

Introduction

Similar to much of southern Europe, Italy has long seen itself as "a country of [home] owners", with individual home ownership serving as a crucial measure of social protection for owners and their heirs in the absence of universal welfare. This idea has been used by the state to justify a substantial lack of interest in the housing issue. Since the Second World War,

in fact, housing policy has been aimed primarily at facilitating access to property ownership. Government programmes have focused on expanding the state-supported private market while offering tax credits and financing assistance. From 1903 onwards, public housing was entrusted to the *Istituto Autonomo Case Popolari* (IACP), an agency that was often embroiled in public scandals due to its financial instability and clientelist management approach. Due in part to the insufficient quantity and quality of public housing, the overall result was a rental market characterised by limited supply and high rents (Adorni et al., 2017).

Industrialised Italian cities had been suffering housing crises since the country's formation as a unified state due to waves of emigration from the countryside. However, the situation became even more critical in the aftermath of World War II, as bombing damaged or destroyed countless buildings. Housing policies absorbed 26% of public spending in the 1950s, but only a fraction was allocated to public housing even though "only" 40% of Italians were home owners in 1951 (today they account for 80% of the population) (Novaro, 2020).

In cities such as Rome and Naples, the housing crisis was exacerbated by the presence of thousands of "baraccati" or urban slum-dwellers. These residents moved to cities from the countryside and—in the case of Rome—from other regions. Naming Rome the country's capital in 1871 triggered a permanent housing crisis, especially considering that all the elements feeding the emergency were already in place: unceasing population growth, lobbying pressure from builders and owners, corruption and persistent difficulties in establishing consistent housing policy at local and national levels alike (Ficacci, 2014; see also Insolera, 1962). As early as the 1950s, housing struggles made people aware that if they wanted to change anything, they would need to take action themselves. The idea of starting from the people involved was the legacy passed on to subsequent waves of mobilisation. This realisation marked a turning point in that common people learned to rely on themselves, the community and solidarity (Progetto San Basilio, 2018).

Between the late 1950s and late 1960s, housing difficulties were aggravated by enormous migration flows from southern Italy to the north of the country: more than one and a half million people relocated, in particular to Piedmont. The Fiat company's choice to concentrate its factories in the province of Turin in order to take advantage of a huge industrial reserve army set the stage for the fastest population growth in the city's history. Turin received 641,800 people in those years, increasing its population by 21% and turning it into a space characterised by multiple forms of tension. The city was not prepared for what was described as an "invasion" of people perceived and treated as foreigners, seen to be more similar to Africans than Italians due to their endemic poverty and outdated gender roles (Capussotti, 2010). This vision conditioned the way southerners were received in both the labour and housing markets, discrimination captured by the signs that appeared on many building's front doors in Turin and Milan: "not renting to southerners".

The housing struggles taking place in the 1950s and early 1960s were fragmented and sectoral, but the situation radically changed in 1968. At this point, the housing occupations underway in various cities and districts of the same city gradually joined together in a general struggle, and linked up with other social movements led by students, workers and women.

In fact, once young southern workers were hired by big northern factories, they introduced new forms of struggles into their workplaces (e.g. wildcat and checkerboard strikes, internal marches) and, even more noteworthy, extended class struggle to their neighbourhoods. These workers were encouraged by the student movement gaining public attention in 1967-1968: after occupations and battles on university and high school campuses, groups of students targeted the working class with their activism, regularly leafleting the factories (Georgakas, 1971; Tarrow, 1989). This was the beginning of what has been described as “the biggest, most prolonged strike wave in history” or “Italy’s ‘long May’”, “quite easily the most radical, interesting, and, in the end, violent of all the world’s ‘1968s’” (Foot, 2003, p. 8).

At first, the traditional working class, made up of specialised blue-collar workers, mostly northerners, opposed the student movement and the new (southern) workers. Thanks to strikes over wages, housing and police repression, however, this gap was at least in part gradually bridged. A turning point was “the battle of Corso Traiano”, named after the avenue in a working-class district where it took place. On 3 July 1969, after two months of massive strikes in the factories, a one-day strike for housing reform called by the trade unions confederations spilled over into furious rioting under the slogan “What do we want? Everything!” Local inhabitants defended workers and students from the nearby Fiat factory, Mirafiori, against brutal police assaults, setting up barricades and throwing anything at hand from their balconies down at the police (Giachetti, 1997).

This event was the prelude to the greatest mobilisation of workers in Italian history, primarily in the country’s industrialised north but eventually extending to other areas as well, including the severely underdeveloped south. Gaining worldwide attention, this period of mobilisation was dubbed Italy’s ‘Hot Autumn’ (Keach, 2019). Not incidentally, 1969 was also the year of the first of a series of bombings intended to kill common people (including children) in the streets and on trains (in Piazza Fontana, Milan). It marked the start of the “strategy of tension”, a campaign aimed at inculcating a climate of fear among the population so as to encourage it to appeal to the state for protection. The bombing campaign, culminating on 2 August 1980 in Bologna with a devastating railway station explosion that killed 85 people, was orchestrated by so-called intelligence agencies with the complicity of neo-fascist groups.

This article focuses on the role that housing struggles played in the overall strategy of the revolutionary group “Lotta Continua” (1969-1976), considering how concrete practices of solidarity and struggle were linked to an anti-capitalist project under the slogan “Let’s take over the city” and the difficulties that arose from this interplay, both theoretically and practically. After introducing the history of Lotta Continua, the article examines some of its main acts of occupation specifically in Turin and Rome, exploring how the group developed and responded to both police repression and fascist violence. I use archival materials and the memories of five former tenants and activists who participated the Turin housing occupation

movement, collected via semi-structured interviews conducted in May 2019.* The concluding remarks are intended to provide insights into points of continuity or breakdown between 1970s social struggles and the current housing movement.

Lotta Continua: from workerism to social struggles

The epicentre of Hot Autumn was Fiat's Mirafiori plant in Turin. While today it employs less than 5,000 workers, in 1969 it employed 50,000 workers, making it Europe's largest car factory in terms of workforce size (Niebler, 2018).

The joint student and worker movement at Mirafiori acknowledged that struggles should address not only the problems inside the factory, but also workers' miserable lives throughout the city. "Therefore—as a worker pointed out—it is not good enough to fight just inside the factory. We must also fight outside. The struggle must become generalised, massive, and social [...]" (libcom.org, 2009).

Lotta Continua was founded in 1969 as a result of the "worker-student assembly" at Fiat Mirafiori and was active until 1976 when it disintegrated due to internal divergences. Of the many revolutionary groups to blossom in Italy in the late 1960s, LC was the most engaged in theorising and practising a programme of extending struggle to society as a whole, with a strong appeal to the popular mobilisation against Fascism between 1919 and 1921 (see Figure 1).

In so doing, it took up one of the most important legacies of Italian *operaismo* (workerism), the movement that had flourished in Turin in the early 1960s around the journal *Quaderni rossi* (Wright, 2002; Quirico & Ragona, 2018, p. 87-106). This legacy consisted in the thesis that

the factory tends to pervade, to permeate the entire arena of civil society [...] the factory disappears as a specific moment. The same type of process that dominates the factory, characteristic of the productive moment, tends to impose itself on society as a whole and thus the characteristic features of the factory—the particular type of subordination of living labour-force to capital, etc.—tend to pervade all levels of society (Panzieri, 1976, p. 40).

Consistent with workerism's slogan 'from the factory to society', Lotta Continua made its presence felt not only in workplaces but also in working class neighbourhoods and among other oppressed groups in Italian society.

Tarrow has written that, compared to coeval revolutionary groups, Lotta Continua was more focused on subjectivity than economics (Tarrow, 1989). To understand the changing significance of housing struggle within the group's overall strategy, however, it must be borne in mind that during its short yet intense history, Lotta Continua fluctuated between multiple

* I warmly thank Gilberto Angeloro, Daria Basso, Giovanna (invented name for a female interviewee who prefers to remain anonymous), Davide Lovisolò and Carmela Selvaggio for sharing with me their stories of Turin housing movement occupants and activists in the 1970s.



Figure 1

The headline from Lotta Continua's daily newspaper, with a photo of barricades against the Fascist occupation of the city of Parma in August 1922

positions: the centrality of the working class vs fascination with the underclass, Leninism (albeit renewed) vs spontaneism, anti-parliamentarism vs electoral participation, and defensive vs vanguard violence (though always rejecting terrorism).

The main reason for these oscillations was that the group constantly sought to tailor its strategy, and organisational form, to changing political circumstances (Lenzi, 2016). This represented an innovative approach as compared to the political vs party-social movement dichotomy in which the Italian left (reformist as well as revolutionary) had been stuck since its foundation. At the same time, however, it exposed Lotta Continua to the risk of over-emphasising the significance of certain situations, overfocusing on those that stood out the most and turning such foci into an overall strategy.

Lotta Continua was growing into a nationwide movement at the end of 1970, and between 1970 and 1971 it launched the 'Let's take over the city' programme with housing occupation as its strategic lynchpin. The starting point, as Lotta Continua's journal emphasised, was the group's belief that the expansion and proliferation of social struggle beyond the factory 'against the moral and material misery of social life' (Editorial Board, 12 November 1970, p. 3) constituted the characteristic feature of that historical moment.

This analysis stemmed directly from events at the time. In Quarto Oggiaro, a neighbourhood in Milan, 700 families living in municipal housing formed a 'Tenants' Union independent of any party or trade union and started a wholesale rent strike in 1968. During the evictions in September, the police came under attack from all sides, even from children, while women physically blocked the steps leading to apartment buildings. The brutality of the police fanned the flames of the people's anger: in April 1970, 500 police officers were required to evict just one family. As one of the occupants, an elderly woman, said: 'It's because here in Quarto Oggiaro people have gotten together to fight' (libcom.org, 2006b). In Rome and Naples, the struggle for more affordable housing had intensified significantly by 1969. Given that the people living in shanty towns had nothing to lose, their actions were often direct and violent.

In Turin, housing occupations and rent strikes broke out in multiple neighbourhoods in January 1970 and, by withstanding police attacks, the occupants were able to secure public housing for everyone involved. The housing movement did not stop with this achievement,

however. Rent strikes were called for in some districts, and activists appointed as delegates held dozens of assemblies to discuss with tenants how to take the struggle to the next level. In this case, given Turin had served as a hotbed of ‘Hot Autumn’ activism and many of the occupants had taken part in these actions, the housing struggle benefitted from the lessons of this earlier mobilisation (self-organisation and new forms of protest) (Piraccini, Musso & Roscelli, 1974).

Let's take over the city

‘Let’s take over the city’ reflected the turbulence characterising Italian peripheries. However, the period in which it was launched was one of general retreat by the working class due to the employer repression following the Hot Autumn. And yet this wave of social struggle was not intended as a diversion; rather, it was based on an in-depth analysis of capitalism as a form of dominion covering all of social life and not only working conditions. Accordingly, LC saw the move to expand sites of struggles not as the mechanical result of working-class autonomy extending into the social field, but as the spontaneous emergence of a proletarian initiative that had been fostered by struggles on the factory floor. For the moment it remained partial and fragmented, not organised enough to engage all fronts simultaneously.

However, Lotta Continua’s conceptualisation of the relationship between struggles in the factories and struggles in the cities was far from uncomplicated. The group attempted to acknowledge the hegemonic role the working class should play in rendering struggle societal while also constructing a concept of the “revolutionary subject” encompassing not only blue collars but all oppressed people: urban slum dwellers, the unemployed, students, inmates, conscripts (Lotta Continua’s commitment to politicising jails and military barracks was impressive and very courageous). This unresolved tension between the centrality of the working class and the leading role to be played by this multi-faceted underclass was one of Lotta Continua’s greatest contributions to reinvigorating Marxism and anti-capitalist movements. At the same time, however, it also contained the seeds of a kind of populist drift that proved difficult to manage, even though the group itself was well aware of this risk (Editorial Board, 12 November 1970, p. 4).

In this endeavour to connect up diverse and often sector-specific foci of mobilization (for housing, schooling, health, etc) and, above all, to link each of these foci to an overall anticapitalistic project, the group defined the role of housing struggle as follows:

Fighting for housing, through mass actions and in opposition to any reform-oriented delegation, means knowing our enemy by name, from big real estate companies to public housing authorities, from large private speculators to loan sharks [...]; it means being aware of and overcoming the internal contradictions of the proletariat, between urban slum-dwellers and public housing beneficiaries [...]. It is this in-depth collective class analysis that gradually helps to develop the conditions for the proletariat’s political organisation [...] (Editorial Board, 12 November 1970, p. 3).

In the meantime, housing occupations went on. In January 1971 in Milan, 25 families who had been living in specially set up public ‘Homeless Family’ centres that more closely resembled concentration camps occupied a set of apartments in Mac Mahon Street owned and left empty by the Public Housing Institute (IACP). The next morning, more families arrived. A few hours later the police began charging the squatters, throwing tear gas at them. The families resisted and stayed unified, however, until eventually they were all rehoused (Daolio, 1974).

In San Basilio, a Roman slum with a history of being ‘abandoned by the institutions’ (Angelilli, 2016), a wave of housing struggles broke out in April 1971 (Editorial Board, 23 April 1971, p. 6-8). The participants formed neighbourhood committees including many extra-parliamentary left-wing activists. They engaged in what they called ‘target practice’, taking over buildings when they were needed and then ‘ratifying’ the occupations by living in the houses and defending them (Progetto San Basilio, 2018). A meeting was held in June to outline the results of countless discussions held in building stairwells, involving about 800 families. At this meeting, local people put forward new ideas and action plans. In particular, participants decided to begin rallying to obtain a decent medical centre for the area, as it had no facilities at the time. When the municipality stubbornly refused to consider the inhabitants’ demands, they occupied a building. With women, workers and students involved in the occupation and local residents expressing their enthusiastic support, the police did not have the standing to evict or intimidate the squatters. The people who had taken over the centre formed themselves into a permanent assembly that stayed there all night. They appealed to left-wing doctors to become involved in the project and framed their inhuman and often unhealthy living conditions as analogous to exploitation in the factories (Editorial Board, 26 June 1971, p. 21). When the ‘People’s Clinic’ opened its doors, a long banner was hung with the slogan ‘The only way to get anything is through struggle’. As one woman said, ‘This clinic is more than something that meets the real needs of the people here. It is a first step toward ending our exploitation’ (Libcom, 2006a).

The June 1971 occupation in Via Tibaldi represented a significant step forward for the tenants’ and homeless people’s movement in Italy. It involved the entire neighbourhood: families, workers, and students. In the six days of violence, participants occupied everything, from houses and the streets to the town hall, police vans, and the University’s Department of Architecture. Thousands of police officers tear gassed and clubbed anyone who did not immediately move out of the way. In the end the mayor was forced to give in to the activists’ demands, allocating housing to the families who had squatted and 140 other families who had been evicted (La Barricata, 2019): ‘When they are united, the proletariat can storm heaven and take over the city’, declared LC (Editorial Board, 26 June 1971, p. 2).

Strengthened by this experience, Lotta Continua criticised left-wing organisations that prioritised factory-based mobilisation for having a schematic vision of class struggle, as if ‘politics’ were separate from life; on the contrary, the group argued, it is precisely society, that is, the way members of the proletariat organise their lives as a whole, that constitutes the source of power capitalists draw on to impose their rule over factories and the state. LC saw housing occupation as a point of departure for building ‘red bases’, not to be confused

with those in China and Vietnam (i.e. areas extricated from enemy military control), but rather areas which are taken over by the proletariat, thus reducing capitalist domination, while not altogether eliminated, to such a low degree capitalists can only exert their power by military means. Lotta Continua rejected as strategic options both insurrection (acknowledging that the clash with capitalism would be prolonged) and the construction of 'counter-powers' (suggesting that such a vision neglects the issue of violent confrontation with the capitalist state). Rather, the group pointed to the rise of proletarian autonomy in all spheres of social life—through the proposed red bases—as a prerequisite for the unavoidable shift from proletarian self-defence to armed struggle, intended as a people's war (Editorial Board, 11 June 1971, p. 19).

Housing struggles were not limited to northern Italy; a growing number of housing occupations also took place in several southern regions. According to Lotta Continua, this development confirmed that working class struggles in the north could be linked directly to urban insubordination in the south, united around the 'Let's take over the city' campaign. Besides the above-mentioned occupation in Naples, in Palermo, women took to the front lines in the housing struggle (including clashes with the police). In Syracuse, where houses were usually allocated to the "clients" of local political bosses, people became so angry that assigned tenants required heavy police protection to safely take possession of their new apartments. In Taranto (December 1970), 200 families who had been living in a slum tenement occupied apartments owned by GESCAL (the state housing authority) in the working-class district of Tamburi. According to one of the activists:

We have lost all faith in politicians, people who come 'round every five years asking us to vote for them. They say they'll give us work and homes, but every time they just leave us where we are, in the cold and damp. We hate them all, because they live off our slavery. And they do everything in their power to make sure people don't rebel and take what is rightfully theirs. [...] because we've listened to their promises, dozens of children have died in the slums where we live. We have all had illnesses, and we have all suffered. We shall bear these marks in us forever. The people who have our suffering on their consciences will be made to pay dearly – to pay the whole price (Libcom, 2006b).

While housing struggles differed in terms of social composition – centred on the working class (mostly southern workers) in Turin, cross-class in Milan (both blue-collar and office workers) and mostly underclass in Rome while in Naples urban slum dwellers struggled alongside the working class – they did have some common features. First, they began as spontaneous protests and then gradually turned into organised movements. Second, revolutionary groups were key actors in this process of politicisation: Lotta Continua played a pioneering role but Avanguardia Operaia (Workers Vanguard), Potere Operaio (Workers' Power), the newspaper 'Il Manifesto' and various anarchists were also involved. Then, although these groups were deeply divided on both tactical and strategic levels, they generally maintained good relations when it came to managing occupations. On the contrary, the activists had a turbulent relationship with the reformist parties (in particular the Communist Party, PCI) and sometime also the trade unions. The PCI tried, in vain, to depict squatters as engaged in a 'war among the poor' by occupying at the expense of official housing

assignees. Furthermore, housing struggles were closely linked to those for schooling, healthcare etc. Finally, occupations were immediately met with state repression and fascist violence, which they faced through joint action by the squatters themselves and the revolutionary groups' security forces (consisting of the group members tasked with providing popular self-defence).

The limit of 'Let's take over the city' lay in the fact that it did not consolidate the achievements of the most successful occupations (such as that in Via Tibaldi) in a mass campaign for housing. Rather, Lotta Continua preferred to pursue 'exemplary struggles', campaigns that some critics suggested were carried out at the expense of the proletariat in the sense that squatters found themselves in a situation for which, lacking a high degree of political consciousness, they were ill-prepared (Daolio 1974, p. 53). New occupations were thus carried out without consideration for the factors that made Via Tibaldi a landmark case (Bobbio, 1988, p. 86-87).

By the end of 1971, Lotta Continua's journal published some columns that, while not openly disavowing 'Let's take over the city', did express some critical assessments. These critiques pointed out the local specificities—for instance, the influence of reformism and lack of revolutionary worker vanguards in Florence and Bologna (Editorial Board, 25 July 1971, p. 18-22) —that had caused housing struggles to fail in some cases, but they also highlighted a wider problem. As a worker from Milan noted at the 'General meeting of the workers vanguard' held in September 1972, housing struggles had not been effectively expanded into a general battle against the crisis provoked by capitalism to suppress proletarian rebellion. The project of building red bases had failed.

In 1972, 'Let's take over the city' was definitively jettisoned as a gradualist and naïve programme. With its usual incorrigible optimism (i.e. taking for granted that working class struggle would remain offensive), Lotta Continua embraced the strategy of 'overall conflict'. The background for this choice was the fact that the state was engaged in ever more harsh repression of struggles, repression in which assaults by fascist paramilitary groups formed an integral part. On one hand, Lotta Continua responded by shifting in a more "militaristic" direction i.e. militant anti-fascism carried out by both mass and vanguard groups, but never involving terrorism. On the other hand, it reorganised itself, returning to a kind of Leninist structure that members deemed the only form capable of facing the clash with authoritarian capitalism. This reorganisation was the first step in the group's transformation into a political, but still revolutionary, party (Bobbio, 1988, p. 100-102).

What remained of 'Let's take over the city' in this new framework? The campaign had a two-fold legacy. First, it provided "backward" areas with the opportunity to pursue a process of politicisation not centred on working class leadership, unlike in Turin and Milan. In Naples and other areas of the south, different modes of production (from Fordism to preindustrial economies) co-existed and all of them were structurally necessary for preserving capitalist society. The dilemma in this context was how to join up the oppressed of such different modes of production—and reproduction—in a common struggle. In Italian history, Lotta Continua was and remains even today one of the very few groups to take up this challenge nationwide. A worker from Naples presented an argument at the above-

mentioned ‘General meeting’ that pointed to the direction in which capitalism was developing. In his city, and more generally in areas not as advanced as northern Italian industrial cities, he observed, it was easier for the working class to ally with other proletarian groups (starting with the unemployed and urban slum-dwellers) because the people were under no illusion that workers represented a privileged category (Editorial Board, 16 September 1972, p. 2). The second element of this legacy was that, although Lotta Continua did dismiss ‘Let’s take over the city’ as a strategy, it did not abandon the ideas behind the campaign (the need to extend class struggle from the factory to society as a whole and the practical work of ongoing occupations).

Housing struggles after 1972: San Basilio and Falchera

Between 1972 and 1974, the housing movement actually increased in intensity. The two main events in this escalation were the continuation of the struggle in San Basilio, Rome and a new occupation in Falchera, a neighbourhood in Turin. Both ended well for the inhabitants in the short-term—they were able to obtain the houses they had been fighting for, although almost half a century later these districts can still be considered ghettos—but both entailed a heavy price in terms of repression.

Between 1973 and 1974, hundreds of families in Rome came together in a huge housing movement that soon became a nationwide matter of law and order. Indeed, 1974 was marked by both massive housing struggles and massive efforts to repress demands for this social necessity. In San Basilio, the ruling class saw an opportunity to launch its final attack on the housing movement as a whole. Following ten months of occupations, clashes, evictions, and reoccupations, on 5 September 1974 evacuation vans arrived for a first attempt at definitive eviction. After a number of high and low points in negotiations between authorities and occupants, the institutions took a hard line: as a former activist points out, the second wave of evictions was intended to be violent so as to provide a clear signal to all the social movements of the period, not only the ones demanding housing. It was no longer the municipality or Public Housing Institute charged with putting down the revolt. This time, it was the national government. Supported by locals from other neighbourhoods, the occupants forcefully opposed the eviction by erecting barricades and clashing with police in a popular uprising that proved intolerable to the political and economic elite as well as the Communist Party (Progetto San Basilio, 2018).

On 8 September 1974, the situation came to a dramatic head when in the middle of the fighting a police platoon pushed its way through the crowd, throwing tear gas canisters directly at demonstrators. Once again the occupants fought back, but this time the police began shooting into the crowd. They hit Fabrizio Ceruso, an activist from *Autonomia Operaia* (Workers Autonomy, Antonio Negri’s group), a 19 year old who had come to the occupants’ aid. He died a few minutes later (Editorial Board, 10 September 1974, p.1 and 4).

The revolt became more and more violent. Some of the squatters, *not* the activists, were carrying weapons and they brought them out, until the police withdrew. Finally, an agreement was reached that the occupants would leave their apartments and be transferred to

Casalbruciato, another disadvantaged neighbourhood nearby that hosted countless vacant public housing units (Progetto San Basilio, 2018).

A few days after the killing of young Ceruso, a huge wave of public housing occupations involving over one thousand families broke out in various parts of Turin. The two revolutionary groups at the forefront of this new wave of struggles were, once again, Lotta Continua and Avanguardia Operaia.

The occupation in ‘new Falchera’, an underprivileged neighbourhood in Turin’s northern periphery, involved 1,500 families (counting both occupants and assignees) and resulted in one of the largest and most well-organised housing occupations in Italy (Ginsborg, 2003, p. 367). The apartments were not yet completed and thus lacked electricity, water, lifts and so on. Services in the district were inadequate as well, with only one grocery shop, a few houses and minimal public transport connections to the city centre.

From the beginning, the leading figure of the Falchera occupation was a young Lotta Continua activist named Tonino Micciché. Micciché had moved to Turin in 1968 from Sicily, where he was born in 1950; he had been hired by Fiat but, after joining Lotta Continua and being arrested for a mass clash with fascists, he was fired. Micciché was the first, alongside Daria Basso, to be sent by Lotta Continua to Falchera. He became known as ‘the mayor of Falchera’ as he was always on site to handle the occupants’ problems and needs and to represent the movement in negotiations with the institutions (Falcone, 1999).

The vast majority of the occupants were from southern Italy. Just over half of the men were factory workers, making the group of squatters different to previous occupations, although there were also representatives of various underclasses including unemployed people and construction workers with precarious jobs). The women, in turn, were mainly housewives.

A few stories from this occupation illustrate the different trajectories involved. Gilberto Angeloro, another leading figure in the occupation, was at that time a member of the Communist Party and sat on the Council of Delegates of the public electricity company Enel. He was contacted by Lotta Continua activists looking for someone capable of hooking up the electricity, since the squatters were not entitled to a regular contract. As soon as Angeloro arrived at Falchera he met Micciché, who asked him about his living situation. Angeloro explained that he was on the waiting list for public housing. Micciché replied: “You can get that out of your head, as the apartments here will definitely all be occupied.” At that point Angeloro called home and informed his wife that he was about to join the occupation. As Angeloro worked and his wife had to take care of their children, it was Micciché who stayed to guard the apartment they had taken (Interview with Gilberto Angeloro, 8 May 2019).

Carmela Selvaggio, from Sicily, was evicted from the apartment in the city centre where she lived with her family, including her husband, who had needed a wheelchair since the age of 25 due to a degenerative disease, and their two daughters. She would have liked to rent a house, but without regular pay check it was impossible. Carmela heard on the radio that people were occupying housing in Falchera and went there with one of her daughters. A *carabiniere* officer tried to stop her, but she was determined to occupy. She left her daughter

in the apartment she had chosen and then went back home to gather the rest of the family. Her apartment became a self-managed day care centre for the occupying families (Interview with Carmela Selvaggio, 27 May 2019).

In early October, the occupants, encouraged by Lotta Continua and Avanguardia Operaia, established a Struggle Committee (Comitato di lotta, CdL) consisting of two delegates for each condominium staircase tasked with defending the houses and maintaining good relations with the assignees. Both the city council (then centre-right) and the Fiat-owned newspaper *La stampa* did their best to set the assignees against the squatters, but in the end they had to admit that there would be no war between poor people in this case, except for one tragic exception. Indeed, a common slogan of the protests was ‘We all want a house, both assignees and occupants’ (Interview with Davide Lovisolò, 27 May 2019).

As a response to the Public Housing Institute’s official waiting lists based on clientelist criteria, the occupants and activists undertook a detailed census of the tenants, specifying where each person lived, whether they had applied for public housing, their family composition and so on. On the basis of this census they divided occupants into three categories, according to the urgency of their housing needs. This system also became a model for other occupations, although it was completely rejected by revolutionary groups such as Lotta Comunista who sought to obtain all their demands at once (Interview with Gilberto Angeloro, 8 May 2019).

In November, the centre-right city council committed to guaranteeing all the occupying families an apartment in due course, with rents not to exceed 12% of the total family wage. However, the city did not follow through on its agreement (Editorial Board, 5 January 1975, p. 4) and this failure triggered new protests, including occupations of the Town Hall—held by activists for 48 hours—and the Public Housing Institute.

Police assaults in the neighbourhood were rare but when they did occur, they spared no one, not even women and the neighbourhood’s ‘worker priest’ Paradiso: he was beaten just like the others. Generally speaking, however, the occupation at Falchera did not meet with brutal repression. The reason it was spared is that the participants had a strong security force, composed mostly of Lotta Continua activists but also including some from Avanguardia Operaia. The occupants also did their part. Carmela’s wheelchair-bound husband kept a pile of stones on their balcony ready to be thrown at the police, as this was the only way that he could defend his wife (Interview with Carmela Selvaggio, 27 May 2019).

The women played a key role in the occupation. While their husbands and fathers worked, they guarded the apartments and protested in front of the Town Hall. Feminist members of Lotta Continua, Avanguardia Operaia and the ‘Feminist Alternative’ collective organised specific actions aimed at involving the Falchera women, thus broadening the agenda of the occupation. The feminists occupied and self-managed the too-small day care centre and pressured the city council until it agreed to provide services for all the children. Their meetings were soon formalised into a ‘Women’s Struggle Committee’, and in April 1975 they established a self-managed women’s health clinic in an abandoned building (Bracke, 2012, p. 229). Giovanna, one of the occupants, remembers this as a wonderful

experience, perhaps even more so than the occupation itself, although it was not easy to persuade the men to rethink issues of sexuality, gender roles etc. (Interview with Giovanna, 8 May 2019).

The book *L'occupazione fu bellissima* (The occupation was wonderful), written by two Lotta Continua feminists, presents the stories of the occupying women—mostly southerners with limited formal education—and their rather complicated encounter with the northern, well-educated female activists of the revolutionary groups (Re & Derossi, 1976). The self-managed women's clinic, staffed on a voluntary basis by physicians (including a well-known gynaecologist) and medical students, aimed to provide women with information about and access to contraception and even abortion, although the latter was illegal in Italy at the time. Although the clinic lasted only a few months (until women's clinics, *consultori*, were legalised), it represented a turning point in the history of feminism in Italy in that it fostered consciousness-raising among women who were not at all used to talking about their experiences of family life and sexuality (Calosso, 2018, p. 106-8).

The story of the *consultorio* is further evidence that Lotta Continua and Avanguardia Operaia made a crucial contribution to this struggle, not only in providing a strong security force but, more generally, in managing the occupation and enriching its agenda. As Gilberto Angeloro noted, “without them, we could not have done it” (Interview, 8 May 2019). These activists, most in their twenties, soon found themselves handling a wide range of issues as they devoted themselves utterly to the Falchera occupation (Basso, 2008, p. 96).

Relations between Lotta Continua and Avanguardia Operaia were complicated by competition as well as intense ideological and practical divergences. LC was more inclined to spontaneism and triumphalism, while AO was more Leninist and pragmatic. On the whole, however, they worked together fruitfully at Falchera for an entire year (Interview with Davide Lovisolo, 27 May 2019).

On 17 April 1975, an event occurred that changed everything: Tonino Micciché was shot by a housing assignee, Paolo Fiocco, as part of a dispute over a garage. The young activist died instantly while Fiocco, a security guard by profession who had joined a fascist trade union, spent only a few years in prison for the crime (Basso, 2008).

Despite the hostility of the political and economic establishment (and its fascist agents), neither the political activists nor the occupants were prepared for such a tragic end. The occupation was well-organised and had been able to rely on a strong security force (Interview with Gilberto Angeloro, 8 May 2019). There is no doubt that the smear campaign waged in the media and especially the Fiat-owned newspaper against the occupation encouraged this act by a mentally “unbalanced” person (Interview with Davide Lovisolo, 27 May 2019).

According to Angeloro, “more or less everything fell to pieces” with Micciché's death, not least because threats were made against the occupation's leading figures even during the murder trial (Interview with Gilberto Angeloro, 8 May 2019). More than ten thousand people attended the funeral for Micciché and his coffin was carried from Falchera to one of Turin's main squares. Attendees included revolutionary group and activists from many occupations

as well as members of the Communist and Socialist parties and the trade unions (Falcone, 1999, p. 53-4).

From the beginning, the Communist Party was so hostile towards the Falchera occupation that it pressed for police intervention. The struggle nevertheless achieved wide support among the working class, as evidenced by Micciché's funeral: all the workers' councils from the big factories supported the occupation, thereby challenging the Communist party despite the fact that many workers voted for the party. The strength the working class had acquired throughout the Hot Autumn was a great aid when it came to both organising the occupation (modelled after the system of factory delegates) and consolidating it (Interview with Gilberto Angeloro, 8 May 2019).

After the 1975 elections ushered in a left-wing city council made up of representatives of the Communist and Socialist parties, relations between the occupants and local institutions improved. To address the occupants' needs, the new mayor, Diego Novelli, negotiated with the Struggle Committee (despite the opposition of his own party, or at least a part of it) until all the occupying families were allocated housing in late 1975. At the same time, Lotta Continua and Avanguardia Operaia showed themselves willing to deal with the institutions. This choice was sharply criticised by other groups (especially Lotta Comunista): when mobilising occupants in other parts of Turin these groups rejected any form of negotiation, a choice that contributed to the failure of their own projects. According to former Avanguardia Operaia activist Davide Lovisolò, another leading figure of the occupation, the housing struggle also made another less tangible but at least as important achievement: raising the political consciousness of groups who had been excluded from social citizenship. Those occupants who had already taken part in factory-based struggles made a significant contribution to the Falchera occupation, but at the same time some of those who were becoming involved in politics for the first time at Falchera went on to serve as factory council delegates (Interview with Davide Lovisolò, 27 May 2019).

The end—and a new beginning?

Lotta Continua did not view occupations and the related project of founding centres such as kindergartens, clinics and 'red' markets as providing social services. Rather, the group envisioned such activity as a kind of school for the proletariat and a chance for them to finally start managing their own needs. By accessing the collective services established in the occupied houses, 'we learn'—the Lotta Continua journal stated— 'to be Communist, by giving priority to those who are more in need and distributing things according to collective decisions' (Editorial Board, 11 June 1971, p. 22). In addition to serving as schools of Communism, housing occupations also—probably to the regret of many (male) Lotta Continua activists—operated as schools of feminism.

Interestingly, in the autumn of 1976, a few months the conclusion of the Falchera occupation, Lotta Continua held its last congress in Rimini. By that point the group had disintegrated due to its frequent, and sometimes contradictory, strategic shifts, its weak and centralised organisational structure, disastrous election results and, above all, the issues of

violence and gender that had exacerbated internal tensions to the point they were becoming unsustainable (Voli, 2015).

Italy's long wave of social conflict ended in 1980, at Fiat Mirafiori where it had all begun, when an agreement rejected by the (blue collar) workers was nonetheless signed by the trade unions, thereby irreversibly changing power relations in Italian society (Revelli, 1989, p. 84-129).

The downward spiral of repression – reactions to repression – further repression proved fatal to social movements in 1970s Italy in a dual sense. It ended up disintegrating movements while simultaneously setting the stage for the criminalisation of those that followed. Indeed, subsequent movements have regularly been accused of following in the footsteps of their (allegedly violent) predecessors as soon as they begin to unsettle the status quo. After all, the tradition of treating social protest as a problem of law and order (Grispigni, 2003) is part and parcel of the history of a country in which Fascism is constitutionally prohibited and yet has been “normalised” since the aftermath of World War II.

Against this background, it is necessary to take an historical approach to tenants' organising in order to show that improvements in housing are less the fruit of enlightened policy and more the result of pressure exerted by tenant movements' self-organized struggle (Huron & Gray, 2019). This phenomenon has nothing to do with current residential occupations carried out by fascist groups, however. These latter instead aim to supplant what they see as the left-wing's "hegemony" over low-skilled workers and unemployed people, inserting their own practices and theories that, although copied from the left, are clearly rooted in racism and nationalism (Wolf, 2019).

Fortunately, radical left-wing groups and organisations like grassroots unions and squatter-activists continue with their housing struggles, even in San Basilio and Falchera. Today's activists and the old occupants alike both harbour a memory of past comrades who died of either police repression or fascist violence.

Although current housing struggles may be numerous and intense, however, they are also isolated and sectoral, thus resembling the first struggles in the post-World War II years. In other words, they are not effectively linked to an overall anti-capitalist strategy. The key difference between today and the 1970s may well be the permanent paralysis of the labour movement, at least the labour movement as we knew in the twentieth century. As Werner Schmidt has pointed out, that movement 'belongs to history and will never again arise as historical subject – at least not in our part of the world' (Schmidt, 2014, p. 187).

It is thus worthwhile to revisit the insights provided by Italian workerism and its most direct heir, Lotta Continua. In the late 1950s, workerism's greatest theorist Raniero Panzieri argued that monopoly capital (Bellamy Foster, 2018) – the continual concentration and centralisation of capital on a world scale – was southernising the whole of Italy. What Panzieri (1958) meant was that the gap between highly advanced regional development centres and semi-feudal areas was growing, thereby exacerbating inequalities. In analysing this gap and referring to so-called 'backward situations' in which labour is atomised and made precarious, Lotta Continua repeatedly insisted that factory-based struggles themselves must

begin with organisation at the social level (Lotta Continua, 31 January 1970, p. 10). ‘Social disintegration reveals, then, that weakness can turn into strength’ (Lotta Continua, 1 May 1970, p. 2). They furthermore recognised that:

neighbourhoods become a crucial battleground [...] Every struggle that flows from neighbourhoods immediately undermines the structure of robbery and exploitation built on the backs of the proletariat in every moment of their lives. [...] Therefore the repression of social struggles is invariably lightning-quick and harsh. [...] Social struggle can only be general, [directed] against the comprehensive power of masters (Lotta Continua, 1° October 1970, p. 6).

This idea that urban struggle is central to challenging contemporary capitalist relations is not remotely a relic of the past. Such ideas are being echoed today (Gray, 2018) in the face of the monopoly-finance capital that is southernising the entire world – and the heightened inequality resulting from the pandemic. Of course, the problem remains of how to coordinate the variety of struggles into one unified, anti-capitalist project. The question of who might carry out such work (a political party, a federation, or something else?) remains unanswered. Yet Italy’s Hot Autumn ‘demonstrates that thousands of activists can move towards revolutionary socialism in a short period of time, and that they can do so by creating their own democratic forms of struggle from below’ (Keach, 2019).

After all, Judith Butler’s point about ‘gatherings’ may be applied to social movements in general. ‘One could say, ‘but oh, they do not last’, and sink into a sense of futility; but that sense of loss is countered by the anticipation of what may be coming: ‘they could happen at any time!’ (Butler, 2015, p. 20).

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