



Resisting and Challenging Neoliberalism: The Development of Italian Social Centers

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In the 1970s, Italy experienced a difficult transition from Fordism to a flexible accumulation regime. The resulting changes in production relations led to the disappearance of traditional public spaces and meeting places such as open squares, workplaces, party offices or the premises of groups involved in the antagonistic, ie anti-capitalist and anti-fascist, movement. Within this context, in the 1980s and 1990s, these groups managed to create new social and political spaces by setting up Self-Managed Social Centers (CSAs), ie squatted properties which became the venue of social, political and cultural events. Over 250 Social Centers have been active in Italy over the past 15 years, especially in urban areas. Their organizational modes are examples of successful direct democracy in non-hierarchical structures and may provide alternative options to the bureaucratic organization of so many aspects of social and political life. Point number one on a Social Center's agenda is a daunting task: it must renovate and refurbish privately or publicly owned empty properties and turn them into public spaces open to the general public. For this task it relies exclusively on collective action, ie cooperative working modes which do not come under the provisions governing regular employment contracts and can thus be used to combat marginalization and exclusion processes which are becoming more and more dramatic in our cities. An analysis of the evolution of this original Italian movement provides the opportunity to address a number of issues associated with alternative practices to neoliberal globalization.

Introduction

In the 20th century, Italy set the example for an extreme capitalistic accumulation model within a party system connoted by self-interest, patronage and downright corruption. The 20-year fascist regime, the 50-year political hegemony of the Christian Democrats (*DC*) as the ruling party and the ensuing *Berlusconi era* set a doleful record. At the same time, the strongest communist party in the Western world and a myriad of collectives, associations and non-parliamentary leftist political groups bore testimony to the effort of the Italian working class to resist and fight capitalistic models of life (Virno and Hardt 1996).

Extremely slow piecemeal reform, repressive police state methods and shady dealings designed to shift the blame for violent attacks by right-wing extremists onto the political left were the tools used to inhibit mass opposition to the economic restructuring masterminded

by the *DC* in the decade from 1968 to 1979 (Melucci 1996). Those were days of social unrest marked by coordinated worker/student protests in factories and workplaces, schools and universities (Balestrini and Moroni 1997). The reorganization of Fordist production and the transition to flexible accumulation models based on the widespread use of temporary work contracts and the grey economy brought about a drastic change in the possibility of carrying out political activity in conventional spaces (ie workplaces, schools and universities) and in the traditional premises of political parties. The result was a dramatic decrease in political spaces. In the latter half of the 1970s and early 1980s, a generalized switchover of the anti-capitalist and anti-fascist antagonistic movement towards more extreme forms of political struggle often entailing the use of armed violence resulted in an "individual and atomized response which expresses itself in disengagement from collective action and disillusionment" (Melucci 1996:272). In the 1980s, faced with the advent of flexible accumulation and globalized markets, the traditional left-wing parties and workers' unions proved unable to devise new spaces for social and political action. Hence the birth of new movements within the political left (environmentalist and anti-nuclear groups) and right (the separatist party named *Lega Nord*). The strategy adopted by extreme left-wing groups to counter the new order emerging in Italian cities was to set up Self-managed Social Centers.

Social Centers revolutionized the political map, especially in suburban working class districts traditionally far removed from the center of political and economic events. Here, they sparked off a fresh cycle of social struggle geared towards gaining control of existing spaces and devising new ones. In this paper, some preliminary remarks on the origins of Social Centers, their links with *Autonomia Operaia* in the 1970s, work modes and practices, will provide the starting point for an in-depth analysis of the movement's social composition, evolution in time and political track record. One main achievement to the credit of Social Centers is the part they played in renovating privately or publicly owned empty properties. In so doing they helped focus attention on land use issues and the struggle for re-appropriating social time. Its remarkable geographical coverage has been and still is a far from negligible strength, which afforded action even in areas where capitalist control of space and production (though varying in scale throughout the country) was greatest. An analysis and assessment of the links between Social Centers and the anti-neoliberal counter-globalization movement (which actually dates back to its early beginnings) requires a more critical approach with concomitant focus on the past history of the workers' movement.

The Origins of Social Centers

The earliest forebears of Social Centers were worker associations organized as *mutual aid societies*, cooperatives and then *Case del Popolo* which arose within the emerging socialist movement at the end of the 19th century, strongly influenced also by political figures such as Bebel, Vandervelde, Jaurès, Owen, Fourier and Shulze-Delitsch (see Degl'Innocenti 1984). Anyway, “Case del Popolo” like the “Maisons du peuple” in France and Belgium, were designed and planned constructions (De Michelis 1986). These organizations and buildings were violently dismantled by the Fascist regime and remained disused following World War II as left-wing political activists looked instead to political parties and unions for support.

After World War II, Italy was still a predominantly peasant-based society, but in the 1950s and 1960s it went through furious, if incomplete, modernization and industrialization, a first economic miracle. Then, however, in the 1970s and 1980s, when the processes of industrialization were still not complete, the Italian economy embarked on another transformation, a process of postmodernization, and achieved a second economic miracle [...] What might usefully pose the Italian case as the general model for all other backward economies is that the Italian economy did not complete one stage (industrialization) before moving on to another (informatization) (Hardt and Negri 2000:288–289).

Upon its first emergence in Italy in the 1950s, the compound noun “Centro Sociale” denoted a “community center” set up and run by municipal authorities (see Ibba 1995; Tortoreto 1977). Its current denotation, ie a venue for political activity and, ultimately, the emblem of a distinct social category, gradually emerged over the 1970s (Ibba 1995).

In the latter half of the 1970s, the *PCI* (Communist Party) seemed to be in the process of breaking the hegemonic position of the *DC* and taking over the government of the country. In the end, this epoch-making event did not happen, as the *PCI* entered into a compromise agreement—the so-called “historical compromise”—with the *DC* and formed a “national coalition government” with them between 1976 and 1979. Coupled with the crisis of the party system, which was gradually losing its former role as the sole agent for political organization and debate, the *PCI*'s drift towards more moderate institutional political programmes provided scope for action to dozens of left-wing grassroots organizations and collectives. Some non-parliamentary left-wing groups modified their action within cities by playing an active part in protests in factories and schools, thus prioritizing the “microphysics of power” over the methods of institutional conflict.

The emerging movement for women's rights was drawing attention to the perennial rift between private and public life; instead of waiting for the promises of a post-revolutionary society to come true in a highly improbable future, women preferred to voice their criticisms in the political arena of everyday life issues (Balestrini and Moroni 1997). In particular, backed by increasing sectors of the movement, they found fault with the typical Marxist–Leninist assumption that the revolution in private relations should be deferred until after the rise to power of the working class and reorganization of the economic order and pressed for a reversal in priorities. The favourite subjects discussed within the antagonistic movement in Italy were the collective needs of women and working class youths, the marginalization of entire neighborhoods in metropolitan areas and the surge in heroin abuse. These years saw the birth of *Autonomia Operaia* (Workers' Autonomy), a federation of variously sized and composed collectives which urged into action thousands of people and managed to gain the support of numerous intellectuals, including Franco Berardi, Paolo Virno, Nanni Balestrini, Lucio Castellano and Antonio Negri.

Autonomia emerged in the post-1960s heyday of "workerism", an interesting distinctively Italian version of Marxist thought theorized and developed by Panzieri, Tronti, Bologna and Negri in open contrast to the original theoretical core of Marxism-Leninism (Wright 2002). The collectives that were associated in *Autonomia* conceived of crisis no longer as a "social collapse" a blast ignited by the inability of capitalists to meet social needs, but rather as the explosion of social relations whose great complexity could not be traced back to ruptured capital-labor relationships. Crisis was looked upon as the exact opposite of a catastrophe (Castellano 1980). Since its earliest days the workers' movement had thought of the rise to rule as the necessary assumption for changing relations of production and shaping a project for social reform. In contrast, downscaling the importance of the rise to rule of the working class, the points that *Autonomia* put on top of its political agenda were its hatred of work and upward delegation of responsibilities and a call for guaranteed wages (see Comitati Autonomi Operai di Roma 1976). Far from being the mere expression of the logic of refusal and negation in principle as the typical response to the erosion of standards of life in capitalist society, its aims and practices prefigured a glimpse of the modes of life and social relationships that the "new society" of the future was expected to vouchsafe (see Comitati Autonomi Operai di Roma 1976).

Autonomia had its strongholds in Rome, Milan, Padua and Bologna. One of its best-known tag lines "create and build worker autonomy as counterpower in factories and city districts", condenses in a few words years and years of intense political activity in workplaces,

universities and schools, and was aimed at opposing the Italian establishment overall, including the *PCI* and the largest pro-leftist union, the *CGIL* (Virno and Hardt 1996). In the same period, the movement launched a cycle of pro-housing initiatives which led thousands of people to squat in uninhabited flats in Rome, Milan and Bologna.

Although the “Neighborhood Committees” set up in Rome in the 1970s operated in close collaboration with local political institutions, they were actually pursuing social objectives comparable to those of the Social Centers movement (see Testa 1979). Along with hundreds of pro-squatter actions and other initiatives designed to attract the attention of the general public, they were part of the Roman movement’s strategy to build a collective political entity and make up for the loss of meeting places such as the large industrial concerns where people had previously been able to come together especially in cities in the north of Italy (Comitato di Quartiere Alberone 2000).

Significantly enough, it was in the north of Italy, more precisely Milan,¹ that first-generation Social Centers arose (Cecchi et al 1978) in 1975. These followed the harsh class struggles associated with the abrupt shift away from an industry-based economy towards the construction of an economy based on finance, fashion and service industries, accompanied by a relentless rise in rents. Starting from the latter half of the 1970s, sheds, warehouses and other industrial premises owned by Pirelli, Innocenti, OM, Falck, Breda, Alfa Romeo or Marelli in Milan stopped production and were closed down. By the late 1990s, industrial property across a total area of 7 million sq m had been vacated in Milan alone, not to speak of peripheral municipalities such as Sesto San Giovanni, where closures affected a total of over 3 million sq m (Censis 2002). Two hundred and eighty thousand workers lost their jobs in industry in Milan between 1971 and 1989 (Foot 2001).

At the end of the 1970s, the non-parliamentary groups that had joined forces either with *Autonomia*, or with hundreds of other independent organizations, “Neighborhood Committees” and Social Centers came under attack from reactionary forces. By 1979 only a few of the Social Centers set up in the 1970s still existed, among which was the *Leoncavallo* squat in Milan. After that date, the surviving Social Centers kept a low political profile and seldom hit the headlines or attracted the attention of the general public. In the latter half of the 1970s, a network of local radios, bookstores and political collectives remained active and carried on their action.² With the support of non-Marxist groups, including the Punk movement whose supporters used their bodies as a strong means of protest in public spaces, they created the background for the birth of second-generation Social Centers (Consorzio Aaster et al 1996; Dazieri 1996).

Two turning points in the process of growth and expansion of second-generation Social Centers in the 1980s deserve mention. Towards the end of 1985, the *Hai Visto Quinto* school in Rome and many other properties were occupied in quick succession. The year 1985 was a turning point for two reasons: secondary school students gave life to a movement involving the occupation of a huge number of school buildings and the left-wing parties were defeated in a referendum launched to protect wages and salaries.

The *Leoncavallo* Social Center in Milan was stormed by the police in 1989. This event was extensively covered in all media and, coupled with the first national convention of Social Centers held in Milan on 23 and 24 September 1989, helped bring the movement back into the limelight. After 1985 the second-generation Social Centers gradually developed distinctive characteristics which will be the specific focus of this paper.

A Review of Social Centers' Practices

As Social Centers differ greatly from each other in origin, political affiliations and organizational modes, it is difficult to provide a comprehensive description of the movement as a whole (Bregman 2001; Dines 1999; Pierrri and Sernaglia 1998). From 1985 onwards, second-generation Social Centers adopted a number of collective practices and common symbolic definitions, building up a network that shares certain specific characteristics.³ Some of these are worth mentioning and can be subsumed under four points. First of all, they adopt the acronym "CSOA" (Centro Sociale Occupato Autogestito) if they are squatters or "CSA" (Centro Sociale Autogestito) if they use premises made available by local authorities at no cost. It is worth noting that some Social Centers do not accept the description "squatted place" and prefer that of "squatted space" instead. Second, they self-produce and self-manage social, political and cultural events and adopt all relevant decisions in (usually weekly) meetings open to the general public. Third, to finance their activities they mainly rely on funds collected by selling low-price snacks and beverages during these events. As the affiliates of a Social Center are "volunteer" workers, they do not earn regular wages or salaries. Fourth, they have formed a network based on similar political affiliations. Most Social Centers are close to the extreme political left and made up of either communists or anarchists.

As considerable differences emerge depending on the geographical scale or time frame adopted from time to time, these characteristics are only useful for the purposes of this analysis.

Squatting, Illegality and Conflict

Social Centers illustrate participatory modes of action designed to bring about change through a deliberate use of conflict (Ansini and

Lutrario 2002). Squatting is an essential component of the strategic mix of these Social Centers not only because it involves breaking the law, but because it is a way of obtaining what has been denied (Solaro 1992). An illegal act such as squatting is also intended as a way to draw attention to the waste of public land and buildings and the high social costs of building speculation (Romano 1998). In practice, as also in other contexts, the primary result of the struggle for rights is space (Mitchell 2003). In terms of organization, a Social Center usually operates "beyond the law": it has no written charter, does not hold regular meetings or produce reports and, first and foremost, it has an extremely high turnover of participants. These modes offer an alternative option to the bureaucratic organization of so many aspects of our social and political life and illustrate forms of direct, non-hierarchical democracy. Huge financial resources and a horde of operators working for profit would be needed if the empty buildings taken over by Social Centers were to be renovated in strict accordance with the law. As things stand, the architectural heritage restored and covered by graffiti by Social Centers includes a vast number of buildings, disused industrial premises, deconsecrated churches, unused schools and movie theatres, etc, which had remained deserted for decades (see Figures 1 and 2). The relevant projects proved costly and complex to complete (Viccaro 2003), resulting in the birth of hundreds of Social Centers in many Italian cities.

The logo adopted by most Social Centers in the 1980s, a flash of lightning that breaks through a circle, symbolically represents the end of a long period of marginalization and social rejection (Tiddi 1997).

A deep gulf separates Social Centers, which pragmatically accept some sort of relationship with institutions, from those that oppose any such contacts in principle. 1993 marked the beginning of negotiations between municipalities and Social Centers for the legalization of squats. While some continued to oppose them, most Social Centers endorsed such negotiations and following a lengthy confrontation process within the movement and between Social Centers and some municipal governments, a few Social Centers were officially assigned the properties and spaces they had so far illegally held. By 1998, about 50% of the existing Social Centers had entered into agreements with the private or, more often, public owners of the squatted properties (Eurispes 1999). Social Centers have generally had difficulty liaising with the parties of the institutional left and have deliberately stood clear of the more conservative or neo-fascist parties (which in turn opposed the movement by dubbing Social Centers "dens of criminals"). At present, Social Centers enjoy the open support of the "Communist Refoundation Party" (*PRC*) and, to a lesser degree, of the "Party of Italian Communists" (*PdC*) and "Greens". On the left-wing political front, relations are especially difficult with the Leftist



Figure 1: Milan: the *Leoncavallo* has been established in vacated printing offices; Rome: the *Intifada* has been established in a disused school building.

Source: photo by P Mudu and G Mudu



Figure 2: Rome: details of graffiti on the outer walls of the Ex Snia Viscosa established in the warehouses of a vacated industrial plant.
Source: photo by F Ianniello

Democrats (*DS*), whose allegedly ambiguous stances on subjects such as war, neoliberalism and citizenship rights often spark off mutual confrontation actions.

Self-production and Self-management

Of the two words forming the compound noun “Social Center”, the term “social” is all-important since the very first contacts with a Social Center are usually mediated by friends and prompted by the desire to be with other people (Consorzio Aaster et al 1996; Pierri and Sernaglia 1998; Senzamedia 1996). The wish to come together outside costly commercial circuits is a need/right claimed by the affiliates of all Social Centers (Maggio 1998). Those who join a Social Center often end up by masterminding the creative drive behind new cultural trends in music⁴ and theatrical activities, etc. Very often, Social Centers help launch cultural trends (eg cyberpunk) which they combine with others and make known to a wider range of people (Ansini and Lutrario 2002).

The fields in which Social Centers operate make up a very long list (see Table 1, the information provided in numerous websites, or Gallini and Genova 2002).

Meetings are open to the public. As everybody is allowed to speak, conflict is the rule and the proceedings are often tiring. Nonetheless,

Table 1: A selection of activities carried out by Social Centers 1985–2002

Political debates and documentation events, legal advice
Solidarity actions in favor of immigrants and gypsies
Concerts, film clubs, exhibitions, libraries, pubs, restaurants
Discotheques and dancehalls for the elderly
Rehearsal and recording rooms, theatres, gyms
Production and distribution of records and CDs, books, magazines, cartoons
Study courses in music, photography, dancing, yoga, Linux, etc

despite the difficulties that such a decision-making process entails, this organizational mode is the only one accepted by everyone (Romano 1998).

Self-financing

Until the mid-1990s, only volunteers were active in Social Centers and no salary or wage earners were envisaged (Lombardi and Mazzonis 1998). The fact that some Social Centers have recently resolved to pay salaries to some of their regular volunteers has resulted in ongoing debate, within the groups, concerning proper forms of militancy and the logic of wage earning outside official circuits. Moreover, a few Social Centers have accepted forms of public and private sponsorship. Among them is a Social Center in Rome whose weekly discotheque evenings are being sponsored by the Virgin Group. This decision ignited divisive debate between those prepared to accept compromise as long as this helped the growth of their centers (some went so far as to set up real and proper firms) and those upholding the principle that growth should exclusively be attained through procedures that would ensure complete independence (<http://www.tmcrew.org/csa/csa.htm>; Membretti 2003).

Political Identity and Social Networks

The squatters of a Social Center usually enjoy the support of dozens of sympathizers and habitués who readily give a hand when it comes to organizing special initiatives. In addition, there is a mass of occasional visitors who pass by with friends or are attracted by special events. In Milan, the average monthly number of visitors to a Social Center was found to be 20,000 (Maggio 1998) and a comparable figure can probably be assumed for Rome as well. In short, Social Center attendance can be classed as a marginal, but nonetheless "fruitful" collective activity (Moroni 1994:43). Compared with the situation in northern and central Italy, where Social Centers are visited by members of all social classes, Social Centers in the south are prevailingly supported by people living on the fringes of society (Dazieri 1996).

Regular frequenters and occasional visitors of Social Centers make up a mix whose composition varies greatly in terms of age, gender, educational level and social class. The recent entry of foreign immigrants into this very peculiar social network has resulted in a strong emphasis, within Social Centers, on the need for immigrants to be granted citizen rights. Although some sort of hierarchical structure is at times found to exist among Social Centers and within Social Centers, the movement as a whole can still be described as a search for a “multi-centered non-hierarchical affiliation network” and this network structure is indeed one of the most interesting aspects of the movement. Each Social Center can be described as the central node of a network of activists, sympathizers and occasional visitors, and each such node plays a role in building a collective identity founded on the sympathetic attitudes of an informal circle of occasional visitors prepared to travel in a wide gravitational area to attend events in one or the other Social Center (Consorzio Aaster et al 1996:60). In terms of “status”, Social Centers may range from a simple meeting place attracting visitors from one specific neighborhood only, to internationally known hubs such as the *Leoncavallo* in Milan and the *Forte Prenestino* in Rome. An additional major characteristic of this network is quick mobilization: these centers not only attract over 5000 people to concerts or raves organized in a very tight timeframe (see Tiddi 1997), but are equally swift when it comes to responding to neoliberalist policies. Social Centers have revolutionized long-standing conventional demonstration procedures and political communication codes by organizing street parades with demonstrators feasting and dancing to the music produced by sound systems mounted on trucks. Political parties were quick to imitate and take over these new demonstration modes. Unlike official center-left political parties, they do not need weeks or months to organize political events in public spaces.

In terms of political ideology, most of the supporters of Social Centers are libertarian anarchists or communists. To build a political identity, they rely on continual interaction, which becomes particularly intense during the preparations for social events aimed at denouncing neoliberalist policies from a wide spectrum of different perspectives. Routledge's comment that “This heterogeneous affinity was precisely not an ‘identity’, rather it represented a collectivity based upon the processing of differences through symbolic and direct action” (Routledge 1997:365) is consequently a fair description of this movement as well. Matters for debate include major subjects such as globalization, war, solidarity with Palestine and Chiapas, racism, the rights of minorities, the rejection of copyright law, the production of GMOs, the legalization of marijuana, etc, and are usually the object of clear and critical in-depth analysis.

The Uneven Distribution of Social Centers Across Italy

As a result of the Italian capitalistic model, there are marked differences between regions in terms of the prevailing mix of peasant-based, industrial and informational activities. Large-size industrial concerns are mainly concentrated in the north-west, in the areas around Milan, Turin and Genoa (ie Lombardy, Piedmont and Liguria). The north-east of Italy is characterized by industrial districts which have successfully specialized in traditional sectors such as the textile, clothing, footwear, furniture and other comparable industries (Bagnasco 1992). Farming and service industries have been the traditional mainstay of southern Italy's economy. Average wage and salary levels in the south are half those in the north and young people in search of first jobs account for 40% of the total as compared with the north's 11% rate (Graziani 1998). Due to the huge civil service apparatus, the situation in Rome does not fit within either of the pictures outlined above and calls for separate analysis (Ginsborg 1998).

Politically speaking, the north-west ceased its long-standing left-wing affiliation upon the dissolution of the *PCI* in the 1990s. The north-east had been a stronghold of the *DC*, since the end of World War II, but in the 1990s the place of the *DC* was taken over by Mr Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* party and the *Lega Nord*. Only in central regions does the political left still enjoy majority consensus. In the south, the *DC*—and now *Forza Italia* in their place—have always wielded control in all regions with just a few exceptions.

It is far from easy to keep track of the map of Social Centers over the past 18 years throughout Italy.⁵ Between 1985 and 2003, over 200 centers were established and operated in Italy (see Figure 3 and Table 2), being distributed among all but two regions (The Aosta Valley, Molise). Considering that few centers have been established in Abruzzo, Basilicata, Sardinia and Calabria, it is evident that the movement has difficulty taking root in the south (squats in southern Italy account for only 17% of the total).

An additional problem in many towns in southern Italy stems from the "control" of the territory by criminal organizations. In 1996, a Social Center in Bari vacated its *Fucine Meridionali* squat because it proved unable to challenge rampant mafia gangs in the neighborhood (ECN 1996). The few Social Centers established in southern Italy were mainly concentrated in Campania, Puglia and Sicily.

A local university has always been a major factor contributing to the growth of the Social Center movement. Most squats date back to 1990–1993, the years immediately after a large movement of protest which in 1990 resulted in squatting initiatives involving all Italian universities.

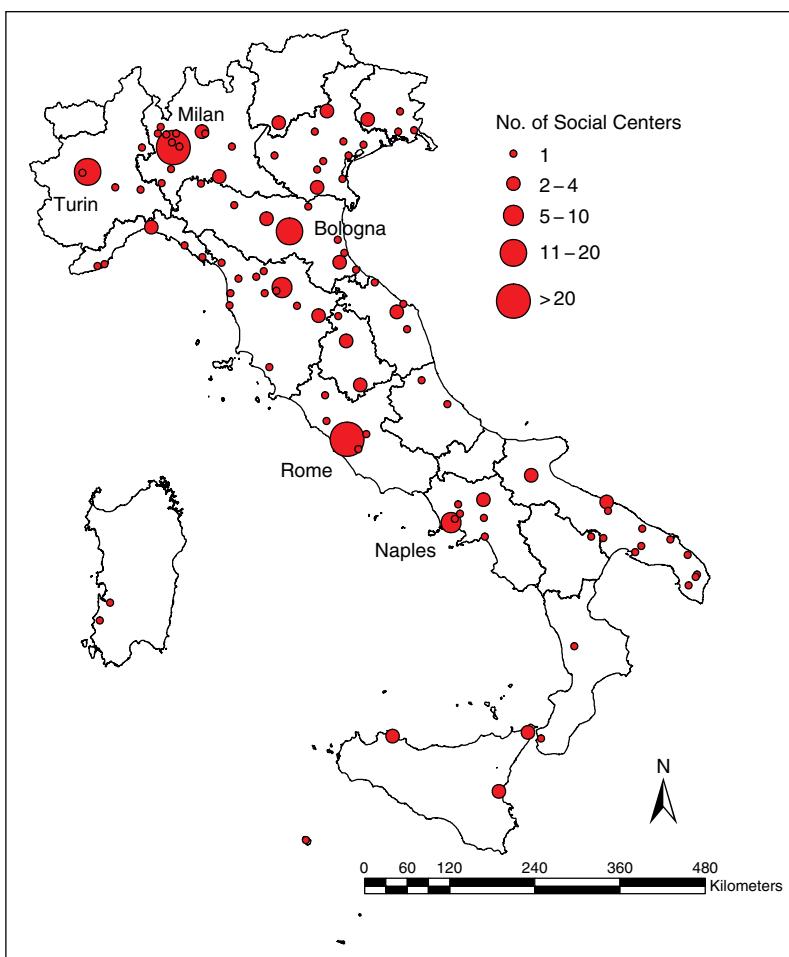


Figure 3: Distribution of Social Centers in Italy 1985–2003

Most of the existing Social Centers were located in larger urban areas, and 50% of the total were concentrated in four cities: Rome, Milan, Turin and Bologna (see Figure 3). It is worth mentioning that about 130 Social Centers were active in 2001–2003.

Table 2: Social Centers in Italy 1985–2003

Area	Frequency	%
North	116	44.3
North-east	(73)	(16.5)
North-west	(43)	(28.1)
Center	99	37.8
South/islands	47	17.9
Total	262	100.0

The geopolitical map of Italian cities is seen to affect the viability and growth of Social Centers, but not their birth, since even cities with marked rightist and conservative traditions have had Social Centers.

There is no denying that economic and political prospects, organizational resources, social institutions, education levels and the effects of broad-scale social change vary greatly from place to place, with concomitant effects on the practices adopted by the movement (Miller 2000). The changing political affiliations of militants, the example set by the movement's grassroots organization and the Social Center experience of students who returned to their native provincial towns after years spent in university cities produced a rapid increase in the movement's geographical coverage.

In the 1980s, Social Centers were mainly operating in peripheral and decentralized areas. At the top of their agenda was the fight against heroin diffusion and building speculation, as well as the effort to break free from the ghettos in which they had been trapped since the 1970s, when mass arrests of *Autonomia* activists, dubbed as criminals, obliged the antagonistic movement to retreat for the sake of maintaining connections and a network that could again prove useful at a later stage. Anyway, there is some ambiguity in the fact that resistance is always countered by segregation, dominance and exile (Routledge 1997). Following the second wave of squatting initiatives, which started about 1985 and reached a peak in the 1990s, Social Centers sought to qualify their role throughout the territory.

The Roman map of Social Centers roughly reflects that of the political parties of the institutional left in terms of territorial distribution, but is utterly different in terms of modes of conduct and the network's spatial mobilization strategies. The fact that most of the existing Social Centers are concentrated in the traditional pro-worker and pro-*PCI* part of the city, namely its eastern districts (Mudu 2004) confirms close links, at least at neighborhood level, with the class structure and the parties that institutionally represent it. The first Roman Self-Managed Social Center, *Hai Visto Quinto*, was set up in 1985, followed in quick succession by *Blitz* and *Forte Prenestino*, *Alice nella città*, *Break Out*, *Ricomincio dal Faro*, *Intifada* and *Zona Rischio*. All of them proved highly influential and built an extremely varied, though very efficient network successfully engaging in the organization of political events and musical happenings (Tozzi 1991).

Two Social Centers were set up by *Autonomia* in Bologna: *Isola* in 1987, and *Fabrika* in 1989. The *Pedro* squat in Padua dates from 1987. In that same period, the Milan Social Centers (*Leoncavallo*, *Conchetta*, *Garibaldi*) were experiencing a revival thanks to the vitality of a new generation of activists. On 16 August 1989, the police stormed the *Leoncavallo* CSOA in Milan. The unexpected resistance of the squatters led to a riot. The police demolished the center and

violently beat the squatters (see Federazione milanese di Democrazia Proletaria 1989). Soon after, the evicted squatters re-entered the center and literally re-built it brick by brick. The property was a privately owned factory situated in a typical working-class neighborhood not far from the city center. It had remained vacant for about ten years, but the situation in the neighborhood had meanwhile changed due to the design of the majority party on the City Council, the corrupt, neoliberalist-minded Italian Socialists (*PSI*), to support building speculators and expel its original working-class residents. This goal was all but impossible to achieve, since the prices of flats in Milan had been soaring to levels unprecedented in Italy. As the *Leoncavallo* property had been a squat since 1975, the news of the police raid made the headlines for weeks. When Social Centers found themselves all of a sudden at the center of public attention, they met with unexpected solidarity from the general public. Thanks to the extensive press coverage of a reality which few people knew about, the *Leoncavallo* became the symbol of all Italian Social Centers, thus ending the first stage in the movement's history.

Inside the Anti-Globalization Movement

The two stages of growth experienced by the movement since 1985 were respectively masterminded by Roman Social Centers and, in the 1990s, by those of Italy's north-east.

In 1994, the Italian Social Centers had promptly responded to the revolt against the Mexican government in Chiapas by supporting campaigns in solidarity with the rebels. Some Social Centers looked upon Zapatism as a situation similar to theirs, a movement towards bottom-up local self-development founded on the rejection of the example set by the seizure of the "winter palace" and a political organization not in terms of being but in terms of doing (Holloway 2002).

Social Centers were not entirely new to internationally coordinated actions. In the 1980s they had helped promote solidarity with Nicaragua, Northern Ireland, Palestine and the Basque movement in Spain, and in the 1990s the countries at the top of their agenda were Chiapas, Palestine and Kurdistan. Solidarity is pursued not only by organizing fund-raising events for particular projects or circulating videos and information brochures on the areas concerned, but also through trips and work camps in the countries involved whenever possible (as in the case of Nicaragua). Worldwide, Social Centers liaise with Marxist and/or libertarian groups devoted to political self-determination projects including the People's Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), though some social centers support Maoist groups such as Sendero Luminoso in Peru. Zapatism marked a breakaway from traditional solidarity policies with specific focus on

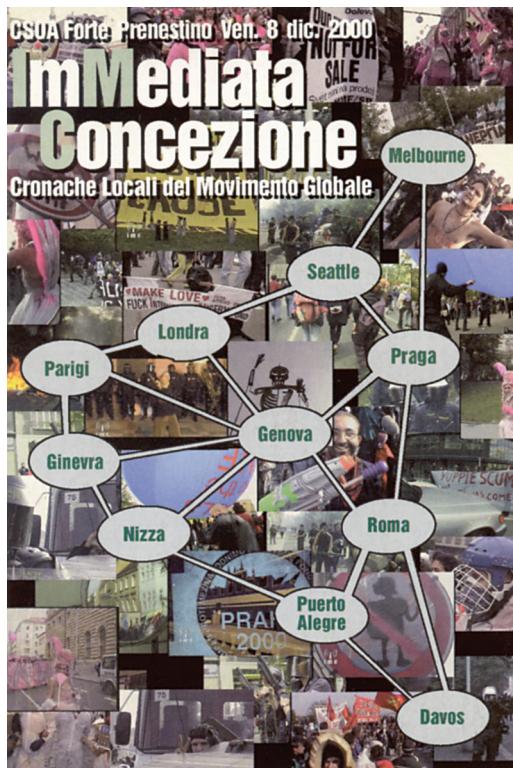


Figure 4: Rome: a brochure on anti-globalization initiatives printed by the Forte Prenestino

the “South” of the World and a progress towards proactive solidarity with two-way exchanges.

From the anti-WTO marches in Seattle in November 1999 to this day, the movement has been pressing for a different direction in the globalization processes under way worldwide and has played a proactive role in the international arena (see Figure 4). In this process, it greatly benefited from on-line communication modes afforded by modern web technology. Its standing within the overall anti-liberalist movement grew thanks to the extensive press coverage of important demonstrations and meetings in Prague (Czech Republic) in 2000, Genoa (Italy) in 2001, and Porto Alegre (Brazil). In July 2001, the Italian Social Centers movement made an effective contribution towards mobilizing dozens of thousands of people in protest against the G8 Summit in Genoa (Andretta et al 2002)—a far-reaching event which shed light on an arrogant and ruthless use of power.

As mentioned before, this most recent stage in the evolution of the Social Centers movement is marked by a growing use of web technology. The earliest on-line information and documentation network,

the “ECN” (European Counter Network), was set up in the 1990s and is still in operation. It set the example for a large number of Social Centers’ specific websites (among which is *Tactical Media Crew*:<http://www.tmcrew.org>) providing information on events that may be of interest to the movement as a whole. The Italian node of the global *Indymedia* network is closely linked to Italian Social Centers.

The importance of Social Centers within the movement opposing neoliberalist globalization processes lies in their ability to mobilize thousands of people in a snap. People take to the streets in their thousands even for local demonstrations, earnestly and constantly committed to gaining fresh understanding and experimenting with what they have learnt in an effort to make available fresh social spaces and press for global political space.

The Current Stage: Political Trends

Thorough political and structural changes in the overall context necessitated redefining existing inter-Social Centers relations. The “official” network that the Social Centers had been gradually building in more recent years had in fact been severely affected by different political affiliations. Initially, there were two main groups, one of which was close to *Autonomia* and such cult broadcasting stations as *Radio Onda Rossa* in Rome and *Radio Sherwood* in Padua, while the other one was closer to anarchical movements. In the 1990s, the political map of Social Centers became even more complex and diversified and *Autonomia* split into two factions: the “Disobedienti” and the movement associated with the grassroots-union organization (Cobas).

In short, today’s Social Centers movement is split into five groups: the *Disobedienti* (Dissentients) who originally dubbed themselves *Tute Bianche* (White Overalls) and assumed their new name after the anti-G8 demonstrations in Genoa in 2001, following the “Milan Charter”;⁶ the *Network for Global Rights* operating in close collaboration with the Cobas Union since its establishment in March 2001; a pro-anarchist group; and a fourth group with Leninist leanings which in 2003 dubbed itself “*Euroopposizione*”. The fifth group includes Social Centers that do not identify with the affiliations of any of the former.

The fastest-growing group within Social Centers, the “Disobedienti”, adopt Negri’s theorizations on the “multitude” and in their practical action they focus greatly on themes such as biopolitics and the politics of bodies. They entertain fairly formal relations with institutions and some of their supporters have been elected to the Municipal Councils of Milan, Rome and Venice. They are particularly close to the *PRC*. The Global Rights Network was founded by groups previously associated with the Roman section of *Autonomia*; it liaises with the COBAS union, but not with the PRC, and its affiliates

oppose any form of delegation of responsibility upward. Analysing the disintegration process under way within the class system, the Global Rights Network aims to provide evidence of the so-called proletarianization of the labor force and press for the parity of manual and intellectual work.

Survival: Limits and Problems

In its history to date, the movement has experienced both the traditional rifts between opposing factions within the historical political left, eg the confrontation between anarchists and communists, and new ones stemming from the movement's specific and original experience (see Figure 5 where a kind of Aztec calendar symbolically represents the revolutionary left experiences). One major watershed is that between "pragmatic-minded" groups and groups not prepared to strike any compromise with institutions. Moreover, some of the better organized and richer Social Centers in the north-east have made attempts to gain control of the movement as a whole.

The debate within the movement points to diverging opinions concerning the way relations with "external" society should be handled, ie the opportunity to define and establish centers unrelated to the requirements of a given neighborhood (TAZs = Temporary Autonomous Zones) or, conversely, check the tendency towards isolation or



Figure 5: Milan: details of graffiti inside the Leoncavallo.
Source: photo by P Mudu

self-referentiality. A TAZ is a temporary squat used to evade government control in respect of clandestine social activities, raves or other happenings. If it escapes detection, it can be dismantled and set up again elsewhere for a shorter or longer period of time (Bey 1993). The opposite of a TAZ is a Social Center which concentrates on the problems and needs of the neighborhood in which it is located. Nevertheless, although the TAZ definition circulates widely within Social Centers, it is valid only in a small number of cases (Quaderni Libertari 1994). An additional obstacle to the growth of a Social Center are the difficulties encountered in circulating self-produced materials, eg music recordings.

In part, these problems have to do with cross-generational misunderstandings between militant squatters and equally difficult relations between the latter and external visitors. As far as the gender composition of Social Centers is concerned, there is no denying that women are still a minority (see Membretti 2003; Senzamedia 1996). Last but not least, let us mention the emergence of would-be leaders in a few Social Centers, as well as the fact that difficult inter-center relations may be responsible for a low degree of coordination (Andretta et al 2002). As far as within-movement communication is concerned, it is a recognized truth that hardly any Social Center—and especially those located at a distance from each other—have regular interaction except when they come under external attack or during preparations for particularly important events or demonstrations (interview with Daniele Farina, Milan Leoncavallo, in Dazieri 1996).

Despite its difficulties, the “Disobbedienti” continue to have a loose affiliation to the Global Rights Network, but both movements have little contact with Leninist and pro-anarchist groups. The degrees of openness of the latter vary greatly from city to city, so that it is their interrelations with other groups and, generally, individuals that makes the difference. These divisions become particularly noticeable when all the sections of the movement come together on the occasion of demonstrations and radio programmes.

Lastly, the survival of a Social Center may be jeopardized by external attacks, for instance from fascist groups or the police. Over half the existing Social Centers have suffered at least one such attack since their establishment.

Conclusions

Self-managed Social Centers are an innovative form of Italian movement born of the social crisis caused by the transition, in the 1970s, from Fordism to the present accumulation regime. Comparable, though smaller movements have developed in Germany, Spain, Great Britain, Switzerland and the Netherlands (Bieri 2002; Martínez

López 2002), but not the United States, with the sole exception of New York (Prujt 2003).

First-generation Social Centers were established as early as the 1970s as part of an overall anti-institution movement, but it was only in 1985 that squatters occupied an empty building with the intention of using it for social, political and cultural events planned in the course of meetings open to all. This event gave rise to a movement that quickly spread throughout Italy and led to the occupation of over 250 properties in a period of some 15 years. "Though it may be hard to tell at first, the social centers aren't ghettos, they are windows—not only into another way to live, disengaged from the state, but also into a new politics of engagement" (Klein 2001). Due to their successful attempts to provide venues for the material resolution of conflicts, over the years the Italian Social Centers movement has emancipated the antagonistic movement from the "ghetto" in which it was constrained. Thus it has actually opened up a window into novel strategies of resistance and ways of combating neoliberalist globalization policies. Social Centers were successful both because they were a public movement "in the making", committed to the creation of spaces and forums for public discussion, and because they experimented with new cooperation models not founded on the use of paid labor (Maggio 2000; Vecchi 1994).

An analysis of the development of Social Centers in time points to analogies with the history of the working class (especially its struggle for the establishment of a welfare system and cooperatives) and the anarchist movement. In 1852, in "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon", Marx himself found fault with the tendency to build parallel circuits, accusing the proletariat of converging towards "[...] a movement renouncing an overthrow of the old world by means of its great resources, and instead seeking to achieve its salvation behind society's back, privately, within its limited conditions of existence, and hence necessarily coming to naught" (Marx 1996:39). There can be little doubt that the very idea of creating havens free of capitalistic relations is a mere illusion and that the self-referential isolation policies pursued by some Social Centers will only make it easier to discourage, repress and marginalize the movement. But the broader Social Centers' challenge is to change the existing state of affairs by committing their networks to local-scale actions geared towards furthering socialization processes and mutual aid—a goal that must be attained by working not behind society's back, but rather by looking beyond dominant social relationships.

The most important achievement to the credit of the Social Centers movement is probably its contribution to renovating publicly and privately owned vacated properties as an alternative to property speculation. Considering that Social Centers mostly operate in

degraded peripheral areas, this action plays a role in counteracting the unfair spatial distribution of urban resources. While devising and perfecting its anti-liberalist strategies, the movement underwent radical change and today it is a sort of continuum formed both of temporary associations such as TAZs and stable organizations some of which continue to prioritize confrontation and struggle, while others have accepted subsidies from private individuals and local governments. The complex approaches, activities and connections of Social Centers make it difficult to examine them in conjunction with New Social movements formed of temporary or single-issue organizations. In fact, the analyst is confronted with two different, though closely interconnected efforts: on the one hand, actions consistent with traditional class struggle, geared towards re-appropriating social space and time; on the other, collective demands intended to deny the legitimacy of power and the current uses of social and intellectual resources. The spectrum of possible responses to these demands is necessarily wide, and Social Centers are currently prioritizing small-scale actions that sometimes prove capable of fueling more thorough changes, particularly in showing the potentiality of self-management and self-production. The extent to which this model or its single parts can be made to work on a higher scale or extended to the rest of society will necessarily depend on the ultimate outcome of a confrontation process designed to redefine the power relationships. It would be naïve to assume that Social Centers will be able to re-define the balance of power simply by criticizing the existing state of affairs and suggesting alternative social models and lifestyles. What is needed is a libertarian project with an inherent potential for expansion in terms of attracting growing sectors of the population and capable of overcoming the existing balance of power. It is an irrefutable fact that, from the outset, the declared aim of Social Centers has not been to seize power, but to help break up existing power structures and that all these practices can be interpreted as an "exodus" from, or "scream" against, dominant practices. As there is no denying that going beyond the existing power structure requires breaking new ground in an unexplored territory (Holloway 2002), the movement's prospects for further growth will ultimately depend on whether or not Social Centers will be able to discard outworn action modes, devise means of changing the people involved and critically analyse the composition of social classes today. Although this approach might at first sight bear some resemblance to that of the separatist *Lega Nord*, a party preaching disentanglement from traditional power circles, an abyss separates the Social Centers movement from the *Lega*. The most important of many far-reaching differences is the stark contrast between the Social Centers' aim to dismantle power structures and build a social "order" founded on solidarity and the *Lega*'s

anti-solidarity policies. This conclusion is all the more convincing since the spaces provided by Social Centers are open to all, including the immigrants targeted by the *Lega*'s racist policies.

In summarizing, Social Centers are committed to confounding the continuous message of the power structure inviting citizens to keep away from political activity since "there is no way things can be changed". This message is closely reminiscent of the fascist regime's call to the people to abstain from political action and leave the "burden" of decision-making to the *Duce*, the fascist party and fascist corporations. Hence the need not to underrate the part that this minority movement can play in the fight against neoliberalism.

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Endnotes

¹The growth of the first-generation Social Centers movement resulted in a rapid eclipse of the new-born Proletarian Youth Clubs. Over 50 clubs were operating in Milan between 1975 and 1976, though their action was confined to a lesser scale than that of Social Centers. Like the latter, they were concentrated in peripheral working-class districts, but while Social Centers took over vacated industrial properties, most of the clubs carried on their activities in a single room (Consorzio Aaster et al 1996).

²From among the numerous broadcasting stations established in support of the movement, let us mention just a few: "Radio Popolare" and "Radio Onda d'Urto" in Milan, "Radio Onda Rossa", "Radio Proletaria" and "Radio Città Futura" in Rome, "Radio Sherwood" in Padua, "Radio Kappa" and "Radio Città" in Bologna. Groups close to Autonomia were continually operative in Via dei Volsci in Rome when thousands of people were living in illegally seized flats especially in peripheral districts such as Primavalle, S. Basilio and Spinaceto. Small-scale squatting initiatives were also launched in Milan around Piazza Aspromonte and Via dei Transiti, and in Bologna, Via del Pratello.

³The methodology of research includes direct observation, access to self-produced materials and newspaper articles. In addition I had a number of informal conversations and telephone contacts that provided background information and clarified details.

⁴In the 1980s, Social Centers mainly specialized in ragamuffin and punk music; the late 1980s saw the explosion of Hip Hop groups, which in part (99 Posse, Assalti Frontali, Isola Posse) acquired considerable renown some time later; more recently, their music mix seems to be even more abundant.

⁵Our statistics on Social Centers active in Italy between 1985 and 2003 derive from a personal survey which is still under way, and from other sources, including journals, websites (E.C.N., Isole nella Rete and Tmcrew) and books (Adinolfi et al 1994; Dazieri 1996). The total stated includes squats which have been active for at least two months. As a few groups may meanwhile have been obliged to move to another squat, this number is likely to exceed the actual total by about 10%. Two ostensibly

distinct Social Centers with the same or different names may in fact have been established by the same group (cases in point are the Leoncavallo squat in Milan and the Pirateria and Alice squats in Rome). The total number of Social Centers calculated for 1985–2002 based on this method exceeds 260. Previous surveys of Social Centers, eg those by Isole nella Rete (see <http://www.ecn.org>) or Pierri Sernaglia on behalf of the union organization CGIL (<http://www.cgil.it/org.programma/webprep/cso2.htm>) underestimated the relevant total by about 25%. The 1985–2003 total also seems to fall short of the actual number, at least as far as the latter half of the 1980s is concerned.

⁶On 19 September 1988, a group of Social Centers in the north-east of Italy (Pedro in Padua, Rivolta in Mestre, Leoncavallo in Milan and others) and in Rome (Corto Circuito) defined and adopted the "Milan Charter" which lays down a number of primary goals including the following. (1) The right of male and female undocumented migrants to freely circulate outside "Temporary Detention Centers". (2) Decriminalization of offences associated with the exercise of denied social rights. Decriminalization of substance abuse. Release of seriously ill inmates and ailing AIDS patients from prison as part of a movement away from the logic of internment and total institutions. (3) The introduction of guaranteed minimum citizen's incomes.

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