

The Contentious Italians:

The Genesis, Evolution, and Decline of the 1968-1978 Protest Cycle

Tommaso Pavone - tpavone@princeton.edu

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1 Introduction: A Decade of Italian Contention

“They told me of their battles with the police, and it was a pitiless account. There were the policemen heavy with sweat and tiredness, weighted down by their gunbelts and their bags full of tear gas canisters; and circling round and round them were the students, dressed in their light trousers and teeshirts and plimsolls . . . Recounting all this while continually interrupting one another, they burst out laughing . . . I began to laugh too, and we all started laughing, first ten of us, then twenty, then fifty, until the whole hall in the Faculty of Letters was full of that bitter, unjoyful laughter.”

- Eugenio Scalfari, *La Repubblica* journalist, at Rome’s La Sapienza University in 1969.¹

“In the factories, they are destroying all constituted authority, they are dismantling the instruments which the bosses use to control and divide them, they are overcoming the taboos which until now have kept them as slaves.”

- Luigi Bobbio, founder of *Lotta Continua* (“Continuous Struggle”), in 1969.²

“We shared the idea that the armed struggle, beside its historical necessity, was also an occasion to build human relations which had to be, I don’t know how to say, absolute, based on the readiness to die.”

- Marco, *Prima Linea* (“Front Line”) militant, recalling the mid-1970s.³

The foregoing quotations constitute a series of snapshots of the most tumultuous period of postwar Italian politics. From the late 1960s through the late 1970s, Italian society pulsed with the thrill of confrontation, quaked with the fear of bombings and kidnappings, and quivered with the cacophony of protest. This protest cycle began, as journalist Eugenio Scalfari documents in the first quotation, within the halls of Italy’s overcrowded and understaffed universities; it quickly spread to the street and the factory floor as

¹Quoted in Ginsborg (2003: 304).

²Quoted in Ginsborg (2003: 316).

³Quoted in della Porta (1995: 147).

activists like Luigi Bobbio, who delivers the second quotation, organized hundreds of strikes and marches. But contention also spread underground, where militants like Marco, as evidenced in the third quotation, sought a brotherhood of Marxist terrorists committed to waging guerilla warfare against the Italian state. It was only at the close of the 1970s that most radical militants had been arrested or had repented, such that the cycle of protest could come to a close. While it may have lacked the revolutionary potential of the 1968 “Events of May” in France, the endurance and cumulative political impact of the 1968-1978 Italian protest cycle remains unmatched in the history of postwar West European contentious politics.

This paper seeks to unearth the causal mechanisms underlying the genesis, evolution, and decline of the 1968-1978 protest cycle via a critical review of three foundational works on the subject. To begin, Paul Ginsborg’s *A History of Contemporary Italy* provides an exceptionally rich account of the “era of collective action” (1967-1973) and the “*anni di piombo*” (the “years of lead/bullets;” 1973-1980). As a historian, Ginsborg is less concerned with articulating a parsimonious narrative than he is with providing detailed historical accounting; yet his post-Marxist sensibilities embed a series of causal arguments within his account that can be crystallized. Second, Sidney Tarrow’s *Democracy and Disorder* delivers a comprehensive political history of the protest cycle and leverages the “political opportunity” and “resource mobilization” approaches to the study of social movements as its primary analytic framework. Tarrow is perhaps most compelling in surfacing the mechanisms that fostered the diffusion of contention. Finally, Donatella della Porta’s *Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State* leverages a similar theoretical frame as Tarrow but introduces a more comparative, state-centered perspective by contrasting the 1968-1978 cycle of contention with similar protests in nearby Germany. These three works articulate implicitly, and sometimes manifestly, divergent causal mechanisms concatenating the sequence of contentious events, providing an opportunity to place them in relation to one another to illuminate the complex dynamics underlying the 1968-1978 protest cycle.

In this light, the critical review is structured in the form of a reconstructed debate, beginning with Ginsborg’s assessment, which is the most historically detailed and hence lays the factual groundwork for discussion, and proceeding with Tarrow and Della Porta’s more theory-driven interventions. This dialogue is compartmentalized into three sections organized in rough chronological order, beginning with the scholars’ analysis of the genesis of the protest cycle in Section 2.1, followed by their interpretation of the dynamics underlying the evolution and diffusion of contention in Section 2.2, and concluding with their assessment of the reasons for the decline of mass collective action in the late 1970s in Section 2.3. I conclude with a brief discussion of the difficulties inherent in interpreting as politicized and complex a historical period as the late 1960s and 1970s in Italy.

2 Three Phases, Three Accounts: Explicating the 1968-1978 Protest Cycle

2.1 Genesis

Although the early and mid-1960s had witnessed intermittent forms of protests by factory workers in northern Italy, it was the mobilization of students in 1967 and 1968 that signaled the beginning of a full-fledged protest cycle. Ginsborg posits that four conditions combined to form a historical “conjuncture” that lighted the fuse of the wave of contention. The first factor was the inability of the state to enact systemic policy reforms and tend to the needs of a rapidly changing society: “From 1968 onwards paralysis from above gave way to movement from below” (Ginsborg 2003: 298). In particular, state universities were “grossly inadequate” to handle the growing influx of students: The Sapienza University of Rome, for example, had been designed to house 5,000 students; by 1968, it counted over 60,000 (Ibid: 299). The second was a newfound tolerance of anti-capitalist and social justice advocacy since Pope John XXIII’s pontificate: Dissident Catholic priest Don Milani, for example, wrote a book critiquing the atomistic egoism of the emergent consumer culture that gained a cult-like following amongst students (Ibid: 300-301). The third was the interpretive frame offered by the US anti-war student protests, Latin American guerrilla dissidents (Che Guevara was executed in 1967 and quickly achieved martyrdom), and radical Latin American priests (Ibid: 302). In particular, the latter’s attempts “to reconcile Catholicism and Marxism” resonated with alienated Catholic students: “Not by chance, the first revolts in Italian universities were to be in strongly Catholic institutions” like the Catholic University of Milan and the University of Trento (Ibid). Finally, students’ distrust of existing voice-channeling institutions encouraged a turn to extra-institutional avenues for radical social change: Most importantly, “the Communist Party [PCI] was dismissed for the most part as an ‘integrated opposition,’ incapable of fighting the system” (Ibid: 305).

Tarrow does not contest any of the first three conditions underscored by Ginsborg, but he places greater emphasis on the traditional origins of the student movement, which “grew out of a much older insurgency within the Italian Left and among young Catholics” (Tarrow 1989: 144). Tarrow contends that since the late 1950s the PCI and the Socialist Party (PSI) had certainly not ignored the stresses that social change was placing on Italy’s education institutions; rather, they had been vigorously debating education reform. The debate focused on the Left’s opposition to Bill no. 2314 (known as the “Gui law” after the DC minister of public instruction), which sought to address university overcrowding by imposing limits on the size of the student body (Ibid: 155). The search for alternatives amongst leftist “political parties [and] associations of university officials, of professors, assistants, and students” underscored how “dependent these student associations were” on existing institutions’ agenda-setting efforts (Ibid: 155-156). Indeed, even the student movement’s opposition to the Vietnam war “was placed on the agenda by traditional parties, primarily

by the PCI,” which organized a series of anti-war protests in the hopes that the “new militance stirring among young people” could still be channeled through its partisan infrastructure (Ibid: 161). Thus where Ginsborg stresses historical discontinuity - the unprecedented combination of factors that spurred the student movement - Tarrow emphasizes intra-institutional continuity: “The new university student movement was born out of the conflict and insurgencies of the old party system. From big oak trees little acorns grew” (Ibid: 163).

Like Tarrow, della Porta emphasizes that both in Italy and in Germany the organizational infrastructure of the Old Left provided the student movement with the necessary resources to mobilize. Far from channeling a pre-existing distrust for the Left, the emergent student movement “perceived the Old Left, and in particular the PCI, as their main ally and support” (della Porta 1995: 28). Extant institutional channels for debate within the Old Left served as the organizational platform for mobilization. The *Unione Nazionale Universitaria Rappresentativa Italiana* (UNURI), for example, which until 1967 had mostly served as an inter-university student “parliament” and “reservoir of young leaders of the political parties,” was transformed into a forum for debating the “Gui” law and a space where “student parties,” particularly those with ties to the PCI, could radicalize (Ibid: 86).

Yet della Porta also underscores that the timing of the student movement’s emergence is best explained by the shifting structure of political opportunities, as captured by the relaxation of the state’s repressive protest policing style. This transformation was engendered by a realignment in national partisan politics: In 1962 a center-left government was forged by the PSI and the DC that “took a more liberal position towards civil and political rights” by repealing several criminal statutes that had been promulgated by Mussolini’s fascist regime (Ibid: 60). Hence “if a repressive policing of protest prevailed throughout the fifties, by the time the student movement developed the climate was quite different. In the sixties, in fact protest policing - still reactive and diffuse - became less repressive and softer. . . from 1963 to 1967, not a single demonstrator was killed” (Ibid: 61). While Tarrow (1989: 176) does acknowledge that by 1967 protesting was “less risky to life and limb than it had been in the 1950s,” he places comparatively less causal weight on the state’s policing style compared to the agenda-setting efforts of the PCI.

As students began to occupy administration buildings and as the center-left government became divided as to how to respond, however, della Porta notes that the position of “hardliners” in government strengthened; the “police again abandoned restraint,” and six protesters were killed in clashes with police between 1968 and 1969 (Ibid: 61). As a center-right coalition ascended to power in the early 1970s, it passed “new, restrictive laws on public order” which increased the frequency of these police confrontations (Ibid). For della Porta, these tense state-society interactions created enduring solidaristic ties amongst students: As one activist recalled, “the danger we lived together, as soon as it was over, brought about moments of great closeness”

(Ibid: 154). Nevertheless, as we shall later see, della Porta treats confrontation not only as a key mechanism for the endurance of protest, but also for its subsequent radicalization.

2.2 Evolution

With little time contentious collective action spread from the lecture room to the factory floor. The students themselves, argues Ginsborg, were partially responsible for this shift: “Italian students never thought for a moment that they were *the* revolutionary class... they made it clear ... that their aspirations to radical change would only make headway if they carried them to the working classes” (Ginsborg 2003: 309). Yet this effort alone would have been insufficient had northern Italian factory workers been unreceptive to the students’ invitation. What proved jointly sufficient for the spread of contention were the myriad grievances afflicting workers, as the continued influx of southern labor to northern factories engendered a severe housing shortage and unemployment crisis across the industrial hinterlands of Turin and Milan (Ibid: 309-310).

Like Ginsborg, Tarrow explicates the diffusion of protest from universities to factories in part by referring to the student movement’s agency. First, students openly conceived themselves as “workers” and the university as a “factory,” which served to dispel their perception as *figli di papa*’ (sons of the bourgeoisie) and to leverage a language of dissent that labor could understand (Tarrow 1989: 148-149). Further, the successful occupation of university administration buildings - and the media attention the student movement garnered - communicated “how vulnerable the system could be to those who dared to challenge it” (Ibid: 165). Yet, in contradistinction to Ginsborg’s narrative, Tarrow also emphasizes the congruence of interests between students and labor. Factory workers recognized that students could serve as an important strategic resource: By showcasing labor-student solidarity, they could “[foster] the impression of broad public support for the working class” (Ibid: 181). Hence “[if] the Italian students found in the working class the historical bearer of the revolutionary grail, the workers found in the radical students a combative reserve army to help publicize their grievances and man the picket lines” (Ibid: 179-180).

Where Tarrow highlights the strategic motives of factory workers, della Porta’s comparative study takes a more structuralist approach. Specifically, she emphasizes that the spread of contention from students to factory workers had “little to do with student activism” *per se* (Ibid: 28). Rather, and in sharp contrast to the German case, the organization of the Italian state facilitated students’ collaboration with factory workers. In the tradition of German social corporatism, labor unions were fully integrated within the state, which encouraged “movement activists to proclaim the “long march inside the institutions”” rather than to turn to extra-institutional avenues for social change (della Porta 1995: 51). In Italy, by contrast, the PCI and the labor unions were “always in the opposition” and were consequently “in general open to social movements” (Ibid: 17). Indeed, collaborative ventures between students and workers had been established as

early as the mid-1960s in the form of “workerist” groups, which distributed publications like *Quaderni Rossi* (“red notebooks”) and *Classe Operaia* (“worker class”) preaching “the centrality of the working class... and the need for the working class to have an autonomous organization” (Ibid: 86). By 1968, these “workerist” groups emerged as a central bridge linking the student movement with the worker’s movement.

Once northern labor became receptive to calls for contentious action, Ginsborg contends that past episodes of collective action meant that factories were replete with “workers who had had experience of organizing struggles” (Ginsborg 2003: 313). Yet factory workers did not simply rely on pre-existing practical blueprints; rather, they “invented a whole series of new forms of coordinated struggle” that became part of their contentious repertoire (Ibid: 315). These included the “hiccup” strike (*a singhiozzo*, where brief periods of factory work and strike action were alternated) and the “chess-board” strike (*a scacchiera*, where different parts of the factory would strike while the rest labored) (Ibid: 315). In Naples, where unemployment was the most salient grievance driving contention, labor engaged in a week-long *sciopero a rovescio* (“strike in reverse”), where workers flocked to the city hospital to shadow nurses and doctors and “draw attention to [its] dramatic understaffing” (Ibid: 365). Ginsborg concludes that it was a Durkheimian collective effervescence that engendered the spontaneous diffusion of these forms of strike action across the Italian peninsula: From 1968 through the “hot autumn” of 1970, “the [radical] groups lived a magical moment, as significant numbers of workers were attracted to their ideas” (Ibid: 313).

Although Tarrow also references the expansion of labor’s repertoire of contention via the innovative reconfiguration of strike actions, he argues that the diffusion of labor protests was neither due to collective effervescence nor fundamentally spontaneous. First, the spread of labor protest did not reflect a harmonious collective consciousness but a process of “competitive mobilization” wherein “external radicals, labour Left, and Communist Left [worked] from their separate angles for worker mobilization” (Ibid: 185). Indeed, this competition over the pool of potential collective action participants was equally responsible for the earlier diffusion of university protests to high schools and amongst educational institutions, as “[p]ractically each high school occupation gave rise to a counter-demonstration of some sort” (Ibid: 89-90). Second, Tarrow contends that the workers’ strike action surfaced important institutional continuities that belie a simplistic focus on their “spontaneous” emergence: “Many of the early struggles in 1968 - even those that challenged the unions - were led by former or present union militants and were critical of the union line, not of unions *per se*” (Tarrow 1989: 191).

By the early 1970s, however, even Ginsborg acknowledges that any spontaneity of the workers’ contentious actions was replaced by a process of institutionalization. First, the workers’ strikes reasserted longstanding “trade union leadership in the factories,” particularly with the advent of the 1971 economic crisis, which caused “the maintenance of real wage levels and the defence of jobs” to take “pride of place

in trade union actions” (Ginsborg 2003: 313; 320). Second, a series of new radical organizations emerged, including *Lotta Continua* (“Unceasing Struggle”) and *Potere Operaio* (“Worker’s Power”), which “rapidly became mini-versions of the major political parties, with their own hierarchies (almost entirely male), and strutting ‘*leaderini*’ (little leaders)” (Ibid: 318). This Weberian bureaucratization of contention, Ginsborg unsympathetically concludes, quashed the spontaneous creativity of the 1968-1969 period and was as much a cause of demobilization as it was a response to it.

Unsurprisingly, both della Porta and Tarrow disagree with Ginsborg regarding both the dynamics and impact of the institutionalization of protest. First, where Ginsborg depicts a seemingly agentless ossifying process spurred by exogenous economic shocks, della Porta counters that institutionalization was instead a strategic and contested choice by “workerist” groups. Within *Lotta Continua* and *Potere Operaio*, for example, “internal disagreements proliferated,” as both groups “experienced frequent oscillations between an often violent “*spontaneismo*” and the search for institutional legitimacy” (della Porta 1995: 92). Despite these prolonged internal debates, both organizations seemed unable to decide whether to embrace the leadership of labor unions or turn to extra-institutional avenues for social change. They thus “pursued a strategy that proved impossible to implement: the maintenance of of legal organizational structures alongside an emphasis on the need for violence” (Ibid: 94). While della Porta concedes that the 1971 economic crisis ultimately persuaded most activists to defensively “moderat[e] their ideology and tactics” and embrace institutionalization, she maintains that this evolution is best interpreted as a strategic choice rather than an inevitable response to a darkening economic landscape (Ibid: 93).

Finally, Tarrow resists Ginsborg’s conclusion that institutionalization quashed the spontaneous innovativeness of contentious action. Labor unions’ increased control over contentious action in the early 1970s, for example, did not diminish the creativity of protests: “Tactical innovation [measured as the number of distinct action forms per disruptive event] . . . continued - and this is the main point - after the unions had re-established control. Would this have been the case had the unions been trying to suffocate conflict, as their movement antagonists maintained?” (Tarrow 1989: 187). Furthermore, the heteropatriarchy of labor unions had the beneficial unintended consequence of spreading contention to new social domains. For example, many “women became feminists in reaction to male hegemony over the new Left,” and indeed an organized women’s movement only emerged following the peak of strike action in the “hot autumn” (Ibid: 99-100). By proclaiming that “the personal is political,” the women’s movement integrated perhaps the quintessential institution of the *ancien regime* - the family - within the protest cycle. “It is only when such institutions,” Tarrow concludes, “are riddled with contention that we know that a protest cycle has invested a whole society” (Ibid: 194).

2.3 Decline

If, as Tarrow contends, a short-term consequence of institutionalization was the diffusion of contention to new social domains, Ginsborg counters that in the long-term it proved to be one of two primary causes of the protest cycle's decline. Efforts to forge an electoral alliance with the Old Left were doomed from the start, as the PCI never sought the collaboration of the new radical parties that emerged following the "hot autumn." This was due to the fact that the PCI's chairman, Enrico Berlinguer, focused his efforts through the 1970s at forging an "Historic Compromise" with the Christian Democrats (DC) to promote a "shared moral and ethical code" and "produce a new political order" (Ibid: 356). As far as Berlinguer was concerned, distancing the PCI from the radical left's contention was a price worth paying in exchange for a seat at the governing table. As a result, the workers' movement "fossilized" and lost momentum, prompting the most impatient students and workers to join revolutionary groups, such as the Red Brigades (BR), which sought "to give pride of place in political action to violent, armed struggle" (Ibid: 361). The *anni di piombo* thus began: A series of political kidnappings of prominent judges and politicians at the hands of the BR ensued, culminating in the 1978 abduction and murder of prominent DC politician and former Prime Minister Aldo Moro - himself a key negotiator of the DC-PCI "Historic Compromise" (Ibid: 363; 384-385). This turn to terrorism "completely absorbed" the attention of Italians, who began associating the BR with the student and worker's movement of the 1968-1972 period (Ibid: 379). Moro's murder then contributed "a very widespread feeling of revulsion" and pushed most left-wing activists towards *riflusso* - a return to private life (Ibid: 385). "As one murder followed another," Ginsborg writes, "the advocacy of 'revolutionary action' . . . was hammered out of the heads of Italian youth" (Ibid: 401).

The second factor underscored by Ginsborg in explicating the decline in radical contentious politics was the Machiavellian response of the Italian state, aimed first at marginalizing the student and workers' movement and then coopting its terrorist spinoffs. The marginalization strategy took the form of a covert "strategy of tension:" From 1969 through 1972, the Italian Secret Service aided and abetted the actions of neo-fascist terrorist groups, including their December 1969 bombing at Piazza Fontana in Milan that was quickly attributed to "anarchists" instead (Ibid: 333). This strategy, borrowed from the colonels in Greece, was designed to "sow panic and uncertainty" amongst Italians and facilitate muscular state intervention to maintain law and order (Ibid: 334). Indeed, most Italians quickly grew wary of any revolutionary or extra-institutional calls for social change. Finally, the state's cooptation strategy took the form of a 1980 law spearheaded by Carabinieri general Carlo Alberto Della Chiesa, which promised reduced prison sentences to "disillusioned terrorists" who became *pentiti* ("repentants") and collaborated with the authorities. The law proved a remarkable success, as "the BR columns were dismantled one by one" (Ibid: 386). The democratic state thus reconsolidated partly thanks to its own Machiavellian efforts and partly thanks to the implosion

of the radical left in light of its failed institutionalization and bloody radicalization - at best a tepid victory for democracy.

Tarrow's account of the decline of the protest cycle is most proximate to Ginsborg's first argument, for he traces the ultimately self-defeating turn to violence of the most militant protesters to the institutionalization of contention. Importantly, however, Tarrow elaborates a slightly different causal mechanism: Whereas Ginsborg posits that institutionalization "fossilized" labor protests and prompted many to turn to more cathartic and extreme means, Tarrow argues that violence was spurred by the dynamics of competitive mobilization: "As the number of new groups grew and the 'market' for social movement activity shrank, organizers tried to outbid one another for social movement support. The result was an increasing intensity of conflict . . . Its final expression would be the organized violence at the end of the cycle" (Tarrow 1989: 222). Specifically, as the superior organizational infrastructure and experience of labor unions enabled their regaining control of factory protests, unions began to crowd-out more militant currents. These extraparliamentary groups, such as the BR, then succumbed to the "temptations of violence" and "took their ideological conflict to the street. Struggles between people replaced conflict over interests" (Ibid: 241). This extreme turn, as Ginsborg also notes, forced the hand of social movement actors, for "there was nothing left for those who refused violence but institutional politics" (Ibid: 289). Competition within the social movement sector, then, breeds polarization, and while most actors ultimately embrace *riflusso* a minority often seeks to regain control of the political agenda via a last-ditch effort to forge a distinctly bloodier path.

Della Porta's analysis of the radicalization and ultimate decline of the 1968-1978 protest cycle contrasts sharply with Ginsborg's analysis and qualifies Tarrow's. Most importantly, she argues that the "strategy of tension" proved initially counterproductive by spurring the radicalization of left-wing groups. The Italian intelligence service's complicity in the 1969 bombing in Milan's Piazza Fontana contributed to "the belief that the state was involved in a sort of dirty war" and motivated the most radical left-wing activists to fight fire with fire (della Porta 1995: 159). It is no coincidence, for example, that the BR were founded in Milan just a few months following the Piazza Fontana massacre and quickly began setting fire to cars throughout the city (Ibid: 89; 23). The strategy of tension even had a radicalizing effect on non-terrorist groups: As neo-fascist groups began to attack students occupying university buildings and workers marching on strike, the latter developed "self-protection" units that became increasingly organized: "stones and sticks" in the late 1960s were replaced by "rifles and guns" in the 1970s (Ibid: 153-154). When right-wing terrorism was combined with an increasingly "hard" protest policing style in the 1970s, "strong feelings of revenge" diffused, and leftist activists adopted a "battle spirit towards politics" (Ibid). In short, although the "strategy of tension" bolstered public support for a tougher, "law and order" stance on the part of state authorities, it equally contributed to the organization of the very leftist violence it sought to repress. This is precisely where della

Porta's narrative also diverges from Tarrow's: Whereas Tarrow posits that the political violence emerges via a process of competitive mobilization within the center-left relatively late in the protest cycle, della Porta demonstrates that the origins of political violence can be traced to the peak of contentious mobilization and to confrontations between leftist protesters and State-supported neofascist terrorists.

In the final analysis, however, della Porta fully agrees with Ginsborg and Tarrow that the use of political violence by leftist terrorist groups was self-defeating in the long-run. As student occupations and factory strikes dwindled and terrorist kidnappings and murders ascended to the center stage, the public was so "shocked" that "only small minorities criticized the institutional and police strategies for dealing with violent protest" (Ibid: 62). Della Porta's most intriguing argument, however, builds on a series of interviews with former militants themselves, who recalled the growing sense of isolation, ideological exhaustion, and disillusionment fostered by years of underground terrorism. "You built a network of friends," one interviewee recalled, "of personal relations always inside this circle. I think that already at that moment a kind of unconscious ghettolike isolation took place" (Ibid: 152). "I did not meet human beings on a human basis anymore," another former militant added, "We lost a lot of our sensitivity" (Ibid). The claustrophobia of an underground life exclusively dedicated to radical politics deepened to the point where many activists voluntarily turned themselves in to the police in an act of cathartic liberation: "All my political evolution had been mediated through political and ideological categories," one militant recalled following arrest, "the phenomenon of collaboration [with the authorities] and repentance, derived also from this sense of freedom, which comes from the possibility to recollect your life using the normal logic for which a murder is a murder, a wounding is a wounding, a ferocious comrade is a ferocious man, and not a vanguard with a higher level of class consciousness" (Ibid: 147).

To conclude, one might wonder whether Ginsborg's bitter narrative of the Italian state's Macchiavellian victory and della Porta's disproportionate preoccupation with leftist terrorism provide an unnecessarily gloomy appraisal of this decade of Italian contention. Indeed, Tarrow emphasizes that we should not lose sight of the positive political legacy of the 1968-1978 protest cycle. While "Italians are more likely to remember the period for violence and terrorism . . . by linking terrorism to the peak of mobilization" Italians do themselves "an injustice," for the enduring legacy of the protest cycle lies with the student and workers' movements of 1968-1973 rather than with the terrorism of the "years of lead" (Ibid: 11; 323-324). These organized forms of contention, rather than their violent spinoffs, ultimately consolidated and expanded Italian democracy. They did so by (1) promoting political reform (as "the cycle turned organized labour into a full member of the polity"), (2) freeing Italians from their dependence on party organizations (as "advocates or divorce and abortion, ecologists, neighborhood groups of all kinds, [and] protesters against capital punishment" recognized that they need not let partisan elites control the political agenda), and (3)

expanding the repertoire of legitimate forms of political participation (as “the factory assemblies, the public marches and meetings, and the lobbying campaigns” endured post-1978) (Ibid: 344-347). Perhaps Tarrow’s account is overly sympathetic, but in any case it underscores the degree to which the complexity of this decade of contention lies not solely in its evolutionary dynamics, but also in its multifaceted and profound impact on Italian politics.

3 Conclusion: Making Sense of Protest

If there is one pattern that this critical review has sought to surface, it is that the dynamics of the 1968-1978 protest cycle are as contested by academics as they are debated within the collective memory of Italians. Efforts to establish causal inference are complicated by the fact that the multitude of protest events are overdetermined - a diverse set of exogenous and endogenous stimuli generate similar observable implications and could thus be referenced to explain the emergence, evolution, and decline of protests. One strategy to address this problem, as evidenced by Paul Ginsborg’s interpretation of the rise of the student movement, is to embrace this complexity and bundle all potential causes of contention under the label of a historical “conjuncture.” Another strategy, embraced by Sidney Tarrow and Donatella della Porta, is to leverage pre-existing analytic frameworks - such as resource mobilization theory and the political opportunity approach - to sort through stochastic complexity and construct a reasonably parsimonious causal narrative. Ultimately, both approaches possess their own strengths and weaknesses, and the adoption of either path will most likely be determined by the scholar’s temperament and by the preferences of his or her audience.

But there is a more important complication inherent in interpreting a phenomenon as complex as the 1968-1978 Italian protest cycle. Namely, the “thickness” of the historical record problematizes any attempt to maintain a critical distance and forge an objective interpretation. Della Porta, for example, attempts to devise “neutral and univocal” concepts by substituting the terminology of “protest policing” for the language of “repression” when discussing the Italian state’s efforts to maintain law and order. Yet to the individuals involved in the ideologically polarized climate of the 1970s, these semantic manipulations would likely have appeared futile: There is no way to construct a fully “neutral” interpretation of the state’s use of its monopoly on the legitimate use of force, just as any theoretical framework that limits one’s focus on a restricted set of empirical phenomena can be rightfully accused of implicitly endorsing a particular ideological interpretation. Why, for example, does della Porta provide a forum for leftist militants to explicate their actions while ignoring the motivations of their neofascist counterparts? Why does Tarrow emphasize that disorder is constitutive of democracy, rather than noting how it may also undermine democratic endurance? And why does Ginsborg emphasize the failures of the student and workers’ movements rather than the positive reforms that emerged during the 1970s? To be sure, these choices are justifiable and practically

necessary to avoid drowning in a blitzkrieg of inductive insights. But when the object of social inquiry is as politicized and complicated a period as the 1968-1978 protest cycle, it seems more constructive to embrace its scholarly reconstruction as a partially ideological project and to resist recoiling behind the veneer of the dispassionate social scientist.

4 References

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