



The return of the tortoise

*Sic looks to Italy and sees a movement
catching history on the wing*

Two thousand or so years ago the Imperial Roman army invented a tactic called the tortoise where a group of soldiers combined their shields to form a shell. This military formation was almost invincible, the tortoise could advance forwards, protected from attack, and with its collective armour it outmanoeuvred the barbarians who fought as individuals. The tortoise played a part in enabling Rome to become an empire straddling the Ancient world, smashing all resistance and swallowing every society it encountered. Now a new empire is emerging, a global empire which engulfs everything it comes across and destroys or soaks up all resistance. In the late 1990s the tortoise re-emerged; its strength was still social co-operation but this time its ethos was anti-Empire.

October 24th 1998 was a European-wide day of protest against the death of Semira Adamu, a Nigerian girl killed by the Belgian police. In Italy there was a demonstration against an immigrant detention centre in Trieste. The Trieste demonstrators looked different from the usual raggle-taggle of political t-shirts and sensible boots; they wore white overalls with home-made foam and cardboard body armour beneath. Their comical roly-poly appearance belied the fact that they were deadly serious. The

white overalls on the front lines had crash helmets and home-made Plexiglas shields. To the amazement of the police the shield-bearers started to group together, a line of chalky white demonstrators overlapping their shields, the rows behind raising their shields above their heads as protection from rubber bullets and tear gas. The demonstration was attacked by police and customs officers, but the front-line

was able to resist and advance to the fences of the detention camp. There, after hours of alternate clashes and negotiations, a number of people were allowed to enter the camp for the first time and document the inhuman conditions of the prisoners. A month later on the 15th November the camp was closed. The tortoise had re-emerged out of history.



1977

How did this happen? Why did such a bizarre and innovative form of protest resurface? It wasn't because the demonstrators had watched *Spartacus* over and over again; the tactics of the white overalls (Tute Bianche) were the result of ten years of theoretical and political development, a decade which saw the Italian movement become the largest and most vibrant in Europe. Italy's political progress was highlighted by the size and intensity of the protests against the G8 in Genoa in 2001 and by the horrific violence used to repress



those demonstrations.

The tortoise's head

The use of shields and padding by the Italian movement captured the imagination of the anti-globalisation movement. Padded armour disrupted the distinction between violence and non-violence, confounding the mass media which tried to divide protesters into good and bad. Being padded, the demonstrators could achieve their aims without having to fight the police on the police's terms. Though they threw the police and the media off-balance the Tute Bianche's actions haven't always been understood by activists from other countries, and their

Movement of '77

methods have led to allegations of elitism or pacifism. To understand the Tute Bianche we

have to look at what has happened to the Italian left over the last thirty years – the roots of today's tactics lie in that experience.

In 1977 while Britain was rocked by the Summer of Punk, Italy was experiencing social upheaval on an altogether grander scale. Unlike the rest of Europe, the revolutionary fervour of 1968 didn't come to an abrupt end in Italy, but continued to develop for another decade. A cycle of struggles autonomous from the large Italian Communist Party reached its high point

with a series of massive demonstrations based around university and workplace occupations. These events – which came to be known as the ‘Movement of 77’ – were an explosion of creative energy which sparked new sensibilities and experimental ways of living. Young people no longer had the same desires as their parents: the jobs for life that the previous generation had fought for now represented a prison of interminable boredom. This generation saw work as an unpleasant chore to be endured, now and then, to finance what they really wanted to do.

In the time liberated from work, young people squatted social centres, they set up free radio stations and set

about self-reducing the cost of living through campaigns to make goods and services a token ‘political price’. The movement was playful and ironic, pricking the usual pomposity of Italian politics. Protesters turned up at demonstrations dressed as American Indians with painted faces and feathers in their hair, and continued the theme by signing political communiqués ‘Apache’ or ‘Mr. Tomahawk’. The press quickly dubbed them the ‘Metropolitan Indians’.

Despite this playfulness large sections of the movement weren’t against the use of force – the left often had to defend itself against fascist groups and the violence of the state. Nor did the movement feel it



SICNOTES

When I was 16 I got a summer job in a chemical factory near to my home in Glasgow. I was off to university in September so it was temporary, but it was useful getting some cash for the summer.

I worked with the men, putting great big barrels of chemicals into enormous vats to make cleaning stuff or disinfectant or whatever. The women would bottle the stuff coming out the vats and stick labels on the bottles. Sometimes totally different labels would go on stuff from the same vat – there would be a cheap label and some fancy label that cost loads more. Same stuff though.

It was pretty disgusting work, but you could have a laugh. Sometimes we’d just sit

around after filling a vat while the women did the assembly line thing. Sometimes the women would tell us to hurry up if they were getting bored of hanging around waiting on us to get a vat ready. Being the newest and youngest, and the smarty-pants college kid, I got sent to the other end of the factory sometimes for a long stand or some tartan paint. The gaffer there would just growl and send me back.

The company was run by a lord, a Labour Party lord. He had a Rolls Royce that he got chauffeured to work in. There was an office up the top and everyone said that he just went up there and drank whisky all day when he was in, which wasn’t that often as I remember.

Anyway, one day the word

goes around that we’re on strike. I didn’t really get this because there wasn’t any build-up, no-one had been complaining or anything, it just seemed weird. Then someone explained that it wasn’t a real strike. We just stopped work for the afternoon once a year while our union official went up to sort a pay deal with the boss in his office. He’d gone up there already and we all walked out for a while until he came down and told us what he’d got.

Sounded all right to me. It was quite a sunny day and everyone just sat out in the yard. After a while, this union official came down, looking a bit pissed, gathered everyone together and started to speak.

To be honest, I can’t remember much of what he said. It was very emotional

had to stay within the law: tactics for reducing prices included mass looting sprees which were dubbed 'proletarian shopping'.

The 'Movement of 77' reached its high-water mark in March when huge demonstrations – sparked by the police killing an activist – seized large parts of Rome and Bologna and held them for ten days. In Rome a gun shop was looted and the guns thrown away. This was a clear pronouncement to the state: "We can get guns if we are forced to." In Bologna there were armoured cars on the streets and mass arrests. Against a background of increasing violence from the police and fascist groups, and the emergence of clandestine armed groups in response to these attacks, the movement found itself forced off the creative terrain it had carved out. Suddenly it was locked into a fight it couldn't win. Trapped in a deadly spiralling embrace with the state, the time and space for creativity closed up.



In Italy the 1970s ended with state repression unprecedented in post-war Western Europe. The clampdown left hundreds of militants dead and thousands in prison. The movement was crushed, leaving a legacy of defeat, disillusion and a heroin epidemic.

The trauma of the late 1970s had a lasting effect on the next generation of militants. The use of protected demonstrations has to be seen in this light. The padding was a practical and

though, he'd been fighting for us and he'd got us a great deal. The main thing about this deal was how the women got a bigger percentage increase than the men, he went on and on about this and the women, who were about two thirds of the workers, loved it. They got paid less than the men and this was something that was going to help sort that out. The union man called a quick vote and all the women voted for the deal, making faces at the men. The men complained but the union man said "That's the vote" and went back inside with the lord.

It took about twenty minutes for people to work out we'd been stitched up. The difference the women were getting above the men was pretty tiny and didn't give them equal pay or anything – and both wage rises

were well below inflation. People sort of knew this all along, but it was as if there was nothing we could do about it. People kept saying, "The T & G steward sorts it out, he knows what he's doing." There wasn't any bitterness between the men and women, more a feeling that that was just life. And that there wasn't a lot you could do about it.

I didn't learn that women are gullible or workers are suckers from that strike. I remembered how well that union man worked the crowd, using his fiery rhetoric so it seemed impossible to argue with him. And I learnt how, when things get going, those with power will always find plausible people to keep things safe for them until things go quiet again.

I went on to university and never had to work in a chemical factory again. But I remember that set-up, the Labour lord and his union pal stitching everyone up, while pretending to be on our side. I've seen it loads since then – Paul Boateng during the Brixton uprisings telling the black youth to trust him because he was their friend, Bill Morris promising the Liverpool dockers his full backing, Communist Party (and more recently SWP) stewards on marches telling people to stay in line and not cause a scene because everything's being taken care of.

And every time they do, I remember that union man telling us pretty much the same thing before going back in for another whisky with the lord.

Colin Chalmers

creative attempt to scale down the violence of the forces of law and order. Italian activists had learned valuable lessons from the repression.

What remained of the movement in the 1980s regrouped around squatted social centres and a few remaining free radio stations. They reflected the more creative side of the 'Movement of 77', allowing a new strategy of exodus. The movement avoided confronting the state on its own ground but sought to weaken it through defection. This strategy was potentially problematic; it could have led to isolation, a separating off from society into an inward-looking ghetto. Some called the social centres of the 1980s

Indian Reservations. To some extent these problems were kept at bay with music, as long-standing Italian militant Hobo explains:

"Music was very important in the social centres. It was a way to attract people, it provided culture and finance."

Music might have kept the torch of radicalism supplied with oxygen but it took a new wave of university occupations in 1990 to fully ignite it and break the spell of defeat. Dubbed the Panther Movement (because it coincided with the escape of a panther from Rome Zoo), the protests revitalised the movement. The protesters were brash and inventive and knew how to manipulate the media. The escaped panther seemed to symbolise the escape from blocked thinking and pessimism.

As Hobo recalls: "Panther brought a real renewal in the social centres,

supplying vital energy and wiping out that diffuse sense of defeat. Many new social centres (actually, most of the existing social centres) were occupied in those years by the panther students. The panther movement marked the beginning of the longer process of de-ghettoisation."

This de-ghettoisation was aided by a journey undertaken by Italian activists into the misty jungles of southern Mexico. The Zapatista movement had burst on to the world stage with their uprising on January 1st, 1994. It sent shock waves around the globe. To some they looked like a throwback to earlier times but their politics were something

new. Inventive, expansive and undogmatic, the Zapatistas constantly looked outwards to defend their revolution. They called an International Encuentro (encounter) in their jungle



Prague, September 2000

stronghold in 1996; thousands attended from every corner of the world. The Encuentro played an important part in bringing together the counter-globalisation movement that Seattle made public. In Italy they built an influential network of groups called Ya Basta (Enough). Their role was to support the Zapatistas but also to apply the new ways of thinking to the struggle in Italy. The Italians who attended took away a new attitude to politics that gelled well with their own experiences. These included:-

- Change the world without taking power
- March with questions on your lips,

not with a blueprint for revolution

- Reject the old binaries that had trapped thinking for so long: violence/non-violence, reform/revolution
- Seek a world made of differences, a world containing many worlds, a world without borders
- Many Yeses, One No – our struggles are united by our shared opposition to capitalism

Ghost town

Italy in the 1990s, like many other countries, experienced a growing disaffection with mainstream politics. The left with its newly expanded social centres didn't have the playing field all to itself. The anger and powerlessness associated with 'globalisation' was seized upon and used by opportunistic right-wing parties to gain power. In Italy the racist Lega Nord (Northern League) were quick to exploit the dissatisfaction.

As Hobo explains: "Lega Nord was successful, so we started asking why. They collected the protest and displeasure of a lot of people, channelling it into the worst populist platitudes. In most of the cases the roots of this protest were fair, but people were duped. They fed their rage with intolerance and egotism."

In fact the struggle with the Lega Nord lies at the root of the emergence of the white overall as a symbol. In 1994 the Lega Nord Mayor of Milan ordered the eviction of the oldest and largest social centre in Italy, the Leoncavallo. The mayor boasted: "From now on, squatters will be nothing more than ghosts wandering about in the city!" Protesters took this description literally: during the demonstrations to protect the Leoncavallo large numbers put on ghostly white overalls and rioted in the centre of the city. The symbolism of the



Genoa, July 2001

white overalls had a powerful resonance; it made visible those who had been ignored but it took a further rhetorical connection to launch the Tute Bianche as an Italian-wide movement.

The Italian job

In Italian the phrase tute blu (blue overall) is the equivalent of blue collar in England and America: tute blu represents the traditional manual worker. But work has changed. The introduction of information and computer technologies has made work seem more immaterial and ghostly. Work is less about making material goods and more about providing services, knowledge and culture. The emphasis is on producing changes in the way people think or feel. Even in industries producing something physical like cars, the material part seems to be less important than the intangible bits like the concept and the brand. The lifestyle the car represents has now become the pivotal point. The experience of work has changed. Jobs are more precarious and insecure, with short-term contracts, self-employment and frequent job changes. Work now seems to invade

the whole of life. The distinction between work time and leisure seems to be breaking down, in an age of home computers, mobile phones, endless adverts and constant shopping we're always at work and work is never finished. It's as if the whole of society has become one giant factory.

When Italian theorists began examining the new work experience, the contrast with the tute blu was too tempting: the new marginalised workers, the unemployed and temporary workers formed the bedrock of the social centres. Tute Bianche started to be linked to the new work experiences. In November 1998 a national white

overalls day was declared with demonstrations outside the stock exchange, council chambers and employment agencies. The wearing of white overalls swept through Italy with many of the Ya Basta network adopting the Tute Bianche dress and politics.

Hobo explains: "The Tute Bianche experience started from research (mainly conducted by Toni Negri and Maurizio Lazzarato) on 'immaterial work' – a new concept that helped investigate some major changes happening in society. There's been a continuous feedback between these intellectuals and the movement. The Tute Bianche struggled for the extension of rights to non-workers;



Milan, January 2000

linking the political to the social, putting bodies and lives centre stage. These times are too historically different from previous phases; we have to try new roads and constantly verify them with theory.”

This new movement and thinking was brought together at a 1998 conference of social centres, where they agreed a series of proposals known as the Milan Charter. According to Hobo: “The charter talked about the need for plural participation in this mass movement, with wide and rich differences... So they proposed the creation of a network organised by Tute

Bianche. The critical point was that the movement must exit the losing loop of ‘conflict – repression – struggle against repression’. The aim was to enter a different scene; where social conflict can bring positiveness and start a new loop of ‘conflict – projects – broadening of the sphere of rights’.”

This was an attempt to break away from the margins, to bring an end to the paralysis of purity. Hands were going to get dirty but just how dirty was controversial. The charter talked of the need to get recognition of their rights in all areas of society, even in government, though it was important to the



Tute Bianches not to focus too much on the latter. In their view the state had become less powerful as it was overcome by global capitalism. It was out in wider society that the real battles were to be fought, but unfortunately the state still remained an important point of repression. The movement had to manage its relationship to the state as a means of defence. For instance sympathetic mayors and MPs were encouraged on to demonstrations to make it difficult for the media to demonise the protesters. Some of those linked to the movement even stood in local council elections, occasionally getting elected. All of this was heresy in a tradition that prided itself on its autonomy. In

many ways it was an admirable refusal to be hemmed in by political orthodoxy, but the tactic had the potential to blunt the movement's opposition to hierarchy and parliamentary politics. To Hobo it was worth the risk:

"The point was:

let's start from this and try to acquire some rights that can be extended overall. I can't say if this is a good strategy, I can only see the results and in my opinion they confirm the initial bet. We have been able to bring members of parliament to Belgrade and Ramallah to give voice to the movement, we have been able to bring them to detention camps for immigrants and close them... but above all, we can move from a defensive role and try to propose what we want. We have to fight hard (and

Genoa was a dramatic example) but we can't easily be pointed out as isolated thugs... even the right-wing journals are forced to refer to us as a social movement. They can talk about violence, radicalism, whatever, but they have to admit we represent a part of this society.

"Of course there wasn't complete agreement with the new flexibility. In a very schematic way, we can say that there was a part of the movement oriented towards investigating and interpreting the changes in the world – in politics, in society and in production; while there was another part tied to orthodox Marxism and to an unaltered ideology, which simply couldn't accept any contact with institutions. The social centres split,

between those who subscribed to the Milan Charter and those who didn't. The controversy was hard. They called us traitors and we called them pointless... maybe it's not completely decided, but now it's much softer. In those years we've shown that we didn't abandon the

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conflict, in fact the struggle has increased."

Another point of innovation and controversy was the relationship between the movement and the media. Hard lessons had already been learned about the way media attention can drag the focus of a movement away from its chosen terrain. When the Red Brigades emerged in the 1970s many activists thought it tiny and irrelevant compared to the size and vitality of the Movement of 77. But terrorism acted like a media



Genoa, July 2001

black hole, sucking in attention and setting the terms on which politics were seen and conducted. The essential point was that we don't exist outside the media and we must be in charge of our relations with it.

Protected demos had shields and padding but no offensive weapons. Their tactics were transparent. The ridiculous foam padding meant that they could only push and use weight of numbers – this made it obvious that any violence must come from the police. In fact looking ridiculous, disrupting expectations and mixing up signals was a powerful tactic against the media. A popular Tute Bianche chant was 'Here we come, Bastards', here we come sung to the tune of 'Guantanamera' while advancing with open hands towards the lines of riot police. The unofficial Tute Bianche salute was waving a little finger at the police – a way of saying 'here it is, come and break it'.

Another tactic has been to manipulate the press. Luca Casarini, a Tute Bianche spokesperson, has said: "We have analysts working on communication methods, we know what to do to make



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people talk about us. If a journalist from *Il Giornale* (right wing newspaper) calls me and asks me for a headline I tell him: 'In Genoa we'll declare war on the powerful of the world', and he makes a headline out of it. Or else we spread the rumour of the mouse-men that are now digging galleries through Genoa's underground, and they buy it."

This was a dangerous game to play. A declaration of war made before Genoa backfired when the G8 leaders decided to reciprocate.

Genoa and beyond

The fruits of this new thinking are there to see in the innovative and expanding protest movement in Italy. The first successful padded demonstration was the storming of the Aviano airforce base during the Kosova war; other successes have included the dismantling of an immigrant detention centre, a water-borne protest against anti-immigrant naval patrols, and accompanying the Zapatistas on their glorious meander to Mexico City. But it's in the international counter-globalisation movement that the Tute Bianche's politics have really made

Genoa, July 2001



a mark. The sight of the mass ranks of Michelin men with shields and inflatables at the Prague anti-IMF demo brought the Tute Bianche to international attention. The anti-G8 protests on their home territory of Genoa were to be their biggest test. With 300,000 on the streets Berlusconi responded with escalating violence.

Defensive shields were met with tear gas, indiscriminate beatings and armoured cars driven at speed into the crowds. Worst of all, Carlo Giuliani was shot dead and people were arrested and systematically tortured. It was time for a rethink.

“Padding and shields are not symbols but technical instruments to reduce pain. Sometimes it’s better using them, sometimes not”

Before Genoa there had been a decision to take off the white overalls for fear they were becoming more of an identity than a tool: “The white overalls were a symbol,” says Hobo. “It wasn’t

useful anymore. I think we have to never grow too attached to symbols, as they have their own cycle of life. Padding and shields are not symbols but

technical instruments to reduce pain. Sometimes it’s better using them, sometimes not. That’s a technical choice.”

The events in Genoa seemed to mark the end of a period of development. The Tute Bianche underwent a rethink and

changed form. A new movement, the Disobedienti, was formed.

“This development is not just a rename, it’s an expansion,” explains Hobo. “Casting off the Tute Bianche also represented casting off a presumed role of leadership or avant-garde of a movement. The Disobedients are not only the social centres, they are a multitude composed of all who oppose neo-liberalism: many grassroots organisations, some catholics, sectors of parties... the whole range of people who were demonstrating in Genoa. It was time, especially at that moment, to give to this movement the strength to walk on its own legs. All together, all the different parts of mass movement. Thanks to this they couldn’t pretend protest was confined only to those in the ghetto. All ‘normal’ people watching TV know the truth about the violence of the police.”

A related but even more diffuse development has been the post-Genoa explosion of social forums across Italy. They

are arenas where a wide range of civil society can meet and discuss.

“In each social forum there are social centres, grassroots associations, civic committees, student organisations, pacifist groups, Attac, Rifondazione Comunista (refounded communists), Verdi (greens party), Ya Basta, Cobas (radical trade union), sectors of CGIL (institutional trade union), Mani Tese (a catholic organisation), lila (aids activists), some gay associations, some independent media, etc. As for the general struggle, they brought the concept of generalised strike, meaning that the same rights should be extended to non-workers (students, unemployed, occasional workers, immigrants). There has been complete participation in the recent demos (including the general strike) in all the cities and in the social centres their presence has been very evident.”

The problems being worked through are familiar to others in the counter-globalisation movement – experimenting with new forms of organisation that are relevant to the

present. In Italy the buzz-word is the ‘multitude’, we’ll let Hobo finish off:

“The ‘multitude’ concept came from a necessity to overcome the sectarianism of the former extra-parliamentary groups. The idea is to use networks just as capital does. The force of this movement is really in this networking method: a multitude, not a party. In time it has become a theory that led us to consider the force of difference. We think it’s a winning notion, maybe the only way out.” ✘



Salzburg, June 2001