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‘*I Terroni in Città*’: Revisiting Southern Migrants’ Militancy in Turin’s ‘Hot Autumn’

NICOLA PIZZOLATO

Abstract

This article proposes a revision of the predominant view of southern Italians during the ‘Hot Autumn’ of 1969 in Turin, one of the most remarkable moments of working-class mobilisation in modern European history. The representation of southern Italians as ‘primitive rebels’ and ‘spontaneous’ radicals has its roots in an earlier notion of southerners as social deviants and has obscured a much more complex historical reality. This image, endorsed by historians and popularised in fictional accounts, contradicts contemporary evidence which points to southerners’ singular mix of radicalism and conservatism, resistance and integration.

The *autunno caldo*, or ‘Hot Autumn’, of 1969 in the car factories of Turin has long been recognised as the catalyst for a wave of worker mobilisation that profoundly changed Italian industrial relations and national politics. Its key developments are well known. FIAT factories, and in particular the flagship behemoth plant Mirafiori, were the centre of frequent and spontaneous strikes, so-called ‘wildcat strikes’. Unskilled workers, sustained by university students of the New Left, demanded wage increases across the board, access to the same conditions as those of the white-collar workers within the company, marked improvements to the appalling working conditions in the Fordist-style factories, and a more powerful voice when dealing with management, namely the ability to bargain working conditions at shop-floor level. These issues emerged in the spring of 1969, matured in the summer, and exploded during the autumn of that year. Initially reluctant to follow what they believed too radical and populist an agenda, the trade unions, of different political orientations (communists, Catholics and Socialists), gradually took on board many of the rank-and-file demands. The strike wave was meanwhile spreading beyond Turin and other nodal points to

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the entire industrialised north. In the following years it would also reach the public sector.¹

One remarkable characteristic of the *autunno caldo* strike wave was that the workers' struggle continued even after the signing of contracts (1969 and 1971), pushing trade unions in a more militant and assertive direction. The phenomenon of uncontrollable stoppages, that is uncontrollable both by the unions and by the companies, became known to the Italians as 'permanent industrial conflict' (*conflittualità permanente*), which characterised some industries, and primarily the automobile industry of Turin, until the mid-seventies. The immediate gains of the Hot Autumn for the working class were enormous: at the shop-floor level, a strengthening of bargaining power over the pace of the line, more attention to health and safety issues, more democratic relations between supervisors and workers; at national level, the passage in 1970 of the *Statuto dei Lavoratori*. This new comprehensive labour code inscribed into the law of the country many of the gains achieved in the factories: among other things, making it difficult, if not impossible, to lay workers off at the whim of management, and forbidding the harassment of union members. It also introduced the automatic deduction of the union membership fee from each worker's wage payment. Thus it greatly increased the leverage of the unions vis-à-vis management as well as in national politics. The 1980s would be a period of conservative and employer reaction against all this, but that, as they say, is another story.²

The debate about the causes of the *autunno caldo* has been interdisciplinary, with economists, historians and sociologists emphasising different points. Was it the structural outcome of a cyclical class mobilisation in conditions of full employment due to workers' frustrated expectations of a rise in real wages? This economicist interpretation upholds the idea that recurrent strike waves characterise the history of capitalism, address the gap between real wages and productivity and re-establish the

¹ For an updated overview of the Hot Autumn see Giuseppe Berta, *Conflitto industriale e struttura d'impresa alla Fiat* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998); Diego Giachetti and Marco Scavino, *La Fiat in mano agli operai: L'autunno caldo del 1969* (Pisa: BFS, 1999). Bruno Trentin, *Autunno Caldo: Il secondo biennio rosso* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1999) is a memoir. In English: Sidney Tarrow, *Democracy and Disorder: Protest and Politics in Italy, 1965–1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Robert Lumley, *States of Emergency: Cultures of Revolt in Italy from 1968 to 1978* (London: Verso, 1990); Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943–1988* (London: Penguin, 1990), 309–31; Charles Sabel, *Work and Politics: The Division of Labor in Industry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 145–66; Giovanni Contini, 'Politics, law, and shop floor bargaining in post-war Italy', in S. Tolliday and J. Zeitlin, eds, *Shop Floor Bargaining and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Contemporary accounts are: Dan Georgakas, 'Italy: New Tactics and Organisation', *Radical America*, 5, 5 (1971), 3–39. For the theoretical debate underlying the protest see Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2002). A widely used primary source is Vittorio Rieser, 'Cronaca delle lotte alla Fiat', *Quaderni Piacentini*, 38 (1969), 2–29.

² For an overview of the changes introduced by the Statuto dei Lavoratori, see Gino Giugni, *Il sindacato fra contratti e riforme 1969–1973* (Bari: De Donato, 1973); Ida Regalia, Mario Regini, 'Italy: The Dual Character of Industrial Relations', in A. Ferner and R. Hyman, eds, *Changing Industrial Relations in Europe* (London: Blackwell, 1998); Michele Salvati, 'Muddling Through: Economics and Politics in Italy, 1969–1971' in P. Lange and S. Tarrow, eds, *Italy in Transition: Conflict and Consensus* (London: Frank Cass, 1980).

balance. Or was it a political response to the disappointed expectation that a centre-left government would enact democratic reform? This point of view lays the blame on the centre-left government coalition that emerged in 1963, but failed significantly to raise the living standards of ordinary people or to alter the distribution of power among classes. Was it, finally, a sociological issue: the response of a new generation of 'mass workers' to the consolidation of the Fordist system?³

Most interpretations acknowledge the importance of the demographic change that brought thousands of southern, sometimes rural, migrants into contact with the urban and industrial society of the north, in cities such as Turin, Milan and Genoa. In Turin, for instance, the impact was enormous. Between 1955 and 1970 Turin's metropolitan area received more than 700,000 southern immigrants, earning it the unflattering title of third 'southern' city, after Naples and Palermo. However, their motivations for joining – or indeed *not* joining – the struggle in the car factories have remained surprisingly unquestioned. Rather, since the Hot Autumn, our understanding of southern immigrant workers has remained frozen in time in a mono-dimensional, stereotyped representation. The aim of this article is to provide a brief history of that representation – one narrowly focused on male southern car workers at FIAT – and how it changed over time, to show how it has encumbered our analysis of this key historical event of post-war Italy and Europe, and to argue that there are clues that should enable us to reject this simplistic account of what happened and to understand why a seriously distorted version gained credence. Historical and fictional accounts of southerners' role during the Hot Autumn, this article suggests, have cast them, undifferentiated, in the role of 'primitive rebels', protagonists of an archaic social movement transplanted into a modern industrial context.⁴ In doing this, historians have mirrored the consensus that developed after the Hot Autumn among a broad spectrum of political forces. While benevolent towards southerners, this new mainstream narrative of their political identity echoed earlier, more malign, stereotyped representations still pervasive in the post-war period. These images also contradicted contemporary evidence which pointed to southerners' singular mix of radicalism and conservatism, resistance and integration.

During the 1950s and 1960s, local administrators, social scientists and the media had represented southern migrants to the north in a variety of uncomplimentary ways: as uncouth, uncivilised peasants who degraded the cities where they settled; as latent criminals who carried with them dangerous attitudes, such as pre-modern notions of honour; as potential strike-breakers who had little idea of the standards of the northern working class. In a way these images lurked back to the post-unification

³ The following books provide an overview of the most significant interpretations of the causes of the Hot Autumn: Tarrow, *Democracy and Disorder*; Lumley, *States of Emergency*; Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy*; Donald Sassoon, *Contemporary Italy: Politics, Economy and Society since 1945* (London: Longman, 1986), 62–4; Alessandro Pizzorno et al., *Lotte Operaie e Sindacato: Il Ciclo 1968–1972* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1978).

⁴ 'Primitive rebels' is Hobsbawm's characterisation of the Sicilian peasants rebellion: see Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959; translated into Italian by Einaudi in 1966), 93–107.

representation of southern Italy, the *Mezzogiorno*, as barbaric, violent and irrational, and to the arguments of the Italian social Darwinist theorists, notably Cesare Lombroso and Alfredo Niceforo, who at the start of the twentieth century had associated the complexion of southerners with those of an inferior race that had a strong tendency towards wrongdoing and mischief, and lagged at an inferior stage of social evolution.⁵ However, the legacy of the Fascist racial laws and the Holocaust had totally discredited these theories in public discourse. After the Second World War, social psychologists and work psychologists (Turin was a key centre in Italy for the development of these disciplines) purged these notions of their racism and gave them a scientific aura. They demonstrated with tests and questionnaires that southerners were either potentially pathological subjects prone to deviancy and unable to integrate into the industrial city or industrial work; or victims, rather than agents, of migration, whose fragile psyche was subject to considerable strain in the urban environment. In the years around 1960s, psychiatrists, in industrial cities such as Turin, lamented a steep increase in the number of southerners that they were treating.⁶ Sociologists were at the same time investigating social labelling and ethnic prejudice. In their scholarly surveys of public opinion in Turin, sociologists Renzo Canestrari and Marco Battacchi posited that southerners (*Meridionali*) were commonly labelled with stereotypical features, such as being impulsive, distrustful, jealous, and obsessive about their honour, which fostered in them the interiorisation of social stigma. According to their surveys a native of Turin would, if possible, avoid contact with southerners and would be offended if he or she happened to be mistaken for one of them.⁷ The encounter between the Piedmontese and the southerner was also framed by the gendered dynamics of the migration process and of recruitment in the industrial sector. In Turin, during the 1950s and 1960s, the metalworking industry demanded the maximum effort from its workers and the necessary robustness to sustain increasing workloads and overtime hours – a stamina that women allegedly lacked. The gendered division of labour in the Fordist factory left women with fewer opportunities of employment and made them invisible in public discourse. In the collision, within the factory walls, the two ‘ethnic’ groups articulated the specific traits of their own masculinity: for the Piedmontese it meant first of all to be seen as hard-working males, as inheritors of their ancestors’ work ethic; for the southerner, to secure the role of respected breadwinners of the family. These sentiments were

⁵ On Lombroso, see D. Fregessi, F. Giacanelli and L. Mangani, *Delitto, Genio, Follia* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1995); A. Niceforo, *L'Italia barbara contemporanea (Studi e appunti)* (Milano-Palermo: Sandron, 1898); on the origins of prejudice against *Meridionali*, see V. Teti, *La razza maledetta: Origini del pregiudizio antimeridionale* (Roma: Manifestolibri, 1993); John Dickie, *Darkest Italy: The Nation and the Stereotypes of the Mezzogiorno* (London: Macmillan, 1999) and Dickie, ‘A World at War: the Italian army and brigandage 1860–1870’, *History Workshop Journal*, 33 (1992), 1–24.

⁶ As remarked in the conference on ‘Immigration, work, and mental health’ (23–4 March 1963), quoted in P. Ambrosi, A. Grassi, M. Rampazi and S. Vender, *Malattia Mentale e società: Storia e critica della psichiatria sociale* (Roma: Il Pensiero Scientifico, 1980), 64.

⁷ Renzo Canestrari, ‘La psicologia del pregiudizio sociale’, in *Rassegna di psicologia generale e clinica*, 1 (1959); Marco Battacchi, *Meridionali e Settentrionali nella struttura del pregiudizio etnico in Italia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1972 [1959]).

contradicted by the widespread, if little reported, employment of southern women in the secondary sector and, after 1970, in the car industry too.⁸ As a result, however, the discourse on southern migration was narrowly focused in gender terms, leaving little room to understand the different traits of southern women's experience. Before the *autunno caldo*, the social scientists investigating this issue concluded that the stark difference between social environment and the cultural heritage of South and North transformed (male) southerners into pathological subjects. But the investigators were not free of cultural bias: the standard of social normality was northern Italy, not southern Italy.⁹

The southern intellectual Francesco Compagna criticised some of these arguments in his book called, with a hint of irony, *Terroni in città* – 'terroni' being the slang, pejorative word for peasants with which southerners were welcomed in the north – but his was a lonely voice.¹⁰ The consensus was in any case that southerners – no matter that they were as diverse as Sicilians and Apulians, who could not understand each other's language – were a different ethnic group, apart from the northerners. Sociologists duly classified marriages between northerners and southerners as 'mixed marriages'.¹¹ Even sympathetic commentators, with polemical intent, bemoaned their segregated housing and living conditions by referring to them as Italy's 'white niggers' – an exaggeration, certainly, but indicative of the widespread opinion that Italy was an ethnically stratified society.¹² In the early 1960s, the Turin Federation of the communist party, unable to bridge the linguistic and cultural chasm between Turin's native communists and the newcomers, decided on a plan to recruit and transport a number of organisers from the South, so that they could speak to the immigrants in a language compatible with their own culture. It was a belated solution to the indifference of the newcomers to the party that allegedly embraced the entire working class, but one which had long seen in southerners' distinctiveness an obstacle to achieving political consciousness.¹³

In contrast, by the 1970s, in the wake of the social struggles of the earlier part of the decade, social scientists and the media had dropped the earlier labelling of southerners as a distinctive ethnic group – which prompts the inference that the Hot Autumn changed, or at least qualified, the largely negative connotation that had characterised the latter in the public discourse. Arguably, southerners became fully

⁸ Anna Badino, *Tutte a casa? Donne tra migrazione e lavoro nella Torino degli anni Sessanta* (Roma: Viella, 2008).

⁹ Nicola Pizzolato, "Una situazione sado-masochistica ad incastro": il dibattito scientifico sull'immigrazione meridionale (1950–1970), *Quaderni Storici*, 118, XL, 1 (2005), 97–120.

¹⁰ Francesco Compagna, *I terroni in città* (Bari: Laterza, 1959).

¹¹ IRES, *Immigrazione di massa e struttura sociale in Piemonte* (IRES: Torino, 1965), 276–9; M. Batacchi, *Meridionali e Settentrionali nella struttura del pregiudizio etnico in Italia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1959, 1972).

¹² *Nord e Sud nella società e nell'economia italiana di oggi. Atti del Convegno promosso dalla Fondazione Luigi Einaudi 30/3–8/4 1967* (Torino: Einaudi, 1968), 436.

¹³ Giuseppe Rizzo, 'L'iniziativa dei comunisti verso gli immigrati al nord', *Cronache meridionali*, 2/3 (1964), 77–83, quoted in Fiammetta Balestracci, 'Immigrati e Pci, 1950–1970', in Fabio Levi and Bruno Maida, eds, *La città e lo sviluppo: Crescita e disordine a Torino, 1945–1970* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2002), 164, 160.

Italian in the aftermath of the *autunno caldo*. The part played by southern migrants in this prolonged social conflict made obsolete the scientific debate that wrote off the newcomers as pathological elements transplanted into a sound society – the discourse in which *Meridionali* figured as potential clinical cases. From then on, the still difficult process of social integration of southerners and their children in the north of Italy was mainly explained through the unequal workings of the job market, or as the consequence of gap in skills and education between *Meridionali* and the Piedmontese, rather than in terms of the legacy of a different and inadequate rural and backwards culture that continued to enfold the *terroni*. What had happened then during the Hot Autumn that changed the terms of the discourse?

The Hot Autumn was a moment of collective mobilisation that saw the active participation of southerners in great numbers, in what mainstream media, the social sciences, and virtually all political parties considered to be the testing ground for their integration in the north: the factory. Northerners assumed southerners to be lacking a work ethic, not to mention the skills, necessary to take on a productive role in an industrial society.¹⁴ The Piedmontese work ethic was rooted in a mythic past when workers were craftsmen and used their skill to forge the final product. However, the years of radical conflict at the turn of the 1970s would prove that this conception was obsolete in a time when the Fordist factory produced standardised products, by the hundreds, every day, with unskilled labour. As radicals, and then unions, contended fiercely that factory work was inhumane and degrading and in need of an overhaul, the terms of the discourse changed.

For the post-1969 Left, *Meridionali* were no longer deviant, pathological *terroni* transplanted into a healthy urban society (as the media and the social sciences had portrayed them throughout the 1950s and 1960s): rather it was Fordist society that had created its own social pathologies and southerners were the newcomers who intuitively rebelled against it. According to an activist's speech reprinted in the workers' journal *La Classe*,

[Struggles] in every case were dominated by the militancy and the drive of the immigrant workers. Immigrants from the South, showing their anger against the ruling class, against the whole planning policy of capitalism, its government, its police, et cetera. They arrive in Turin, hunting the big wage packets they have heard so much about, but find instead that FIAT is a slave camp. Naturally they rebel. They refuse to work.¹⁵

During the *autunno caldo*, *Meridionali* were on the right side of history. In a way, the radical Left vindicated the perspective of Francesco Compagna – a liberal – who had argued in his study on internal migrations in the late 1950s that southern migrants should have been welcomed as agents of a belated Italian modernisation, not scorned as a social problem.¹⁶ By the 1970s, those migrants represented the majority

¹⁴ Batacchi, *Meridionali e Settentrionali nella struttura del pregiudizio etnico in Italia*; Cataldo Di Napoli, *I Meridionali al Nord* (Roma: Editoriale Idea, 1967), 101; Luisa Passerini and Marcella Filippa, 'Memorie di Mirafiori', in Carlo Olmo, ed., *Mirafiori: 1936–1962* (Torino: Allemandi, 1997), 341.

¹⁵ *La Classe*, 13–14 Aug. 1969.

¹⁶ Compagna, *I terroni in città*.

of production workers in the factories and figured in the union bureaucracy as shop stewards who represented their fellow workers in bargaining with management.¹⁷ Union officials provided workers with access to the new state-guaranteed health and education schemes specifically aimed at salvaging industrial workers from the negative, rather than uplifting, consequences of industrial work. *Meridionali* were therefore in many respects integrated into an industrial society with which they had hitherto had a problematic relationship.

However, the Hot Autumn introduced a new and enduring representation of the southern migrant, whose most exemplary specimen was the southern immigrant at Turin's FIAT factories, the reference point of the radical conflict. This new image depicted immigrants with a different political connotation, but, ironically, it was equally mono-dimensional. It would have a long-lasting appeal for left-wing political activists who looked back at the legacy of the Hot Autumn, as well for scholars who, no matter what their political orientation, assumed it to be a realistic depiction of the typical *Meridionale* in Turin. Yet even more striking is that this remains today the prevalent image of the southern immigrant at FIAT in the mainstream understanding of these events, as shown for instance in the character of southern worker Vitale in the popular TV fiction *The Best of Youth* (2003).

Another cultural product has most famously encapsulated and conveyed this image – though is by no means the only one – and provides further illustration and critique: the biographical novel *Vogliamo tutto* (*We want everything*), by Nanni Balestrini, which appeared in 1971 and has been particularly influential on the historiography. This novel is a useful starting point to probe this representation and to question its value for understanding the historical experience of southern migrants during the Hot Autumn.

Vogliamo tutto is the fictional autobiography of a southern 'mass worker'. It starts with his life in the South, where he goes through a spell of precarious underpaid occupations; we follow him in his migration to the north, and then as he gets involved in the struggles in Turin's car factories in the spring and summer 1969, culminating in the urban riot of July 1969, the prelude to the Hot Autumn. In *Vogliamo tutto* we allegedly enter into the 'mind' of a *Meridionale* through a first-person narrative. The book is inspired by Balestrini's real-life acquaintanceship with southern worker Alfonso Natella, but the protagonist of the novel does not carry a name, which favours his identification with *any* southern worker, not one in particular. In fact, this was precisely Balestrini's intention: he wanted his novel to be an account of *the* immigrant mass worker. Balestrini, later commented that he wrote about the 'typical *Meridionale*, that is the poor *Meridionale*, aged between eighteen and fifty, a jack-of-all-trades, but without a specific skill, even when he has some schooling, always ready to emigrate because he doesn't have steady job'.¹⁸ In the first half of the book the protagonist tells his story with an individual voice, but the narrative adopts a collective voice in the

¹⁷ Lorenzo Giannotti, *Gli operai della Fiat hanno cento anni* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1999).

¹⁸ Nanni Balestrini, *Prendiamoci tutto* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1972), 7.

second half, dedicated to the labour struggles, when the 'we' is substituted for the 'I', as in this passage:

We are the proletarians of the South. We are the mass workers. An enormous mass of workers, 150,000 of us. We workers at FIAT have built the prosperity of capital and of its state. It's we who have produced wealth, of which they don't even leave us the breadcrumbs . . . and now we don't want to work any more, or to die for the development of capital and its state.¹⁹

The protagonist in fact has an instinctive revulsion for any notion of work, which he sees as humiliation, degradation and exploitation. He is in many respects a natural rebel who does not shy away from verbal or physical violence in confrontations with the bosses. During the first half of the novel he is politically uncommitted. However, once at FIAT, during the spring and summer of 1969, he gradually acquires some political consciousness, though not in any conventional Marxist sense. He finds in the New Left's appeal for a 'continuous struggle' (*la lotta continua*) the only way to avoid the dehumanising life of the industrial worker. Through his contact with the students, the protagonist channels his instinctive rage into a more specifically political direction as he now feels part of a proletariat naturally antagonistic to capitalism. The book recounts many episodes of personal confrontation with the bureaucratic authority both of the company and of the unions, but captures also moments in which the protagonist is part of a larger brotherhood of workers who spontaneously engage in strikes and stoppages, and eventually, in the climax of the book, in an urban riot – the riot of Corso Traiano, a large boulevard outside the Mirafiori plant, where workers and the police clashed for an entire day in July 1969.

As a work of fiction, *Vogliamo tutto* deserves its place in the list of insightful literary representations of the Italian working class of the 1970s, which includes other interesting titles.²⁰ Balestrini's representation of the southern worker is in many respects similar to that of a comic strip circulating more or less at the same time, *Gasparazzo*, a *Meridionale* disrespectful of unions and management, bold, full of folk wit, and prone to violence in the name of the revolution.²¹ Yet numerous studies have often drawn on *Vogliamo tutto* as a *realistic* depiction of southern workers during Turin's Hot Autumn. Even though not translated into English, the fictional material of the novel has provided evidence for both Italian and English-speaking scholars of the Italian social movements. Diego Giachetti and Marco Scavino refer to it as a 'pseudo-novel, actually a first-person narrative of a worker in the body shop'. American scholar Roberto Franzosi quotes the novel to comment on the historical situation of assembly workers at FIAT. Robert Lumley acknowledges that it is a fictionalised

¹⁹ Balestrini, *Vogliamo tutto* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1971), 188.

²⁰ For a critical survey of this literature see Giampaolo Borghello and Linea Rossa, *Intellettuai, letteratura e lotta di classe 1965–1975* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1982). On *Vogliamo tutto*, see Arthur Marwick, *The 1960s: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c. 1958–c. 1974* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 519–22, and, especially, Giuseppe Berta, *Mirafiori* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998), 106–10.

²¹ See Nicola Pizzolato, 'Revolution in a Comic Strip: Gasparazzo and the Identity of Southern Migrants in Turin, 1969–1975', *International Review of Social History*, 52, Suppl. 15 (2007), 59–76.

account, but draws on it repeatedly to provide evidence about the conditions of the southern mass workers at FIAT.²²

Many factors have contributed to this tantalisingly 'realistic' reading of a fiction: the incorrect belief that the book was an autobiography of Natella written *through* Balestrini; the informal writing style full of slang expressions which mimicked the southern 'talk', but which was actually the author's stylistic choice; the assumption that Balestrini himself, as a radical activist, was witness to some of the events the book describes, and the transcription, in the novel, of the content of a number of leaflets produced at the time by *Lotta Continua* (initially a slogan for action, then the name of the most popular radical group). For all these reasons, and because of the paucity of actual migrants' voices in the historical sources, the novel has had an enduring power in shaping a persistent image of the southern migrant during the Hot Autumn in academic history as well as in the Italian national imagination: the primitive rebel who intuitively struggles against the forces of oppression, whose heritage makes him reject the discipline of industrial work, and, in certain accounts, who *naturally* allies himself with the groups that are contesting the power structure.²³ In a survey article on Italian labour history, Stefano Musso has described southerners as 'strangers to the industrial culture, who brought to the labour conflict the spontaneity and the roughness of workers' rebelliousness'.²⁴ Robert Lumley has argued that *Meridionali* adapted to the Turin situation old peasant forms of rebellion against rural landlords.²⁵ Renzo Giannotti, in a classic account of worker struggles in Turin, lamented the strikes of July 1969 that had resulted from the 'primitivism of sections of the working class of rural origin that had no industrial experience'.²⁶ All these opinions echoed the representation of the southern worker at FIAT as proposed by Balestrini.²⁷

The fascination with this image has in turn prompted researchers to look for further evidence that would confirm it. And one can indeed find such evidence.²⁸ The cultural heritage of the *Mezzogiorno* had no doubt influenced the form of the struggle of those southerners who protested, and *Meridionali* were no doubt crucial to the success of the labour struggles. The predominance of this representation has, however, deterred research into what was actually a multi-faceted working class, for

²² See for instance, Giachetti and Scavino, *La Fiat in mano agli operai*, 33, 191. Roberto Franzosi, *The Puzzle of Strikes: Class and State Strategies in Post-war Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 264. Lumley, *States of Emergency*, 210–1.

²³ This representation of southern workers resonated with the account of revolutionaries in the nineteenth century, the Sicilian Fasci, famously described by Hobsbawm in *Primitive Rebels*.

²⁴ Stefano Musso, 'Gli operai nella storiografia contemporanea', in Musso, ed., *Tra fabbrica e società: Mondi operai nell'Italia del Novecento* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1999), xxxi.

²⁵ Lumley, *States of Emergency*, 211.

²⁶ Renzo Giannotti, 'Il movimento operaio in Piemonte: un bilancio (1960–1980)', in Aldo Agosti and Gian Maria Bravo, eds, *Storia del movimento operaio, del socialismo e delle lotte sociali in Piemonte* (Bari: De Donato, 1981), 447.

²⁷ Critical analysis of *Vogliamo tutto* can be found in Andrea Sangiovanni, *Tute Blu: La parabola operaia nell'Italia repubblicana* (Roma: Donzelli, 2006), 165–9; Berta, *Mirafiori*, 106–9.

²⁸ The themes of *Vogliamo tutto* are echoed in some interviews selected in Gabriele Polo, ed., *I tamburi di Mirafiori* (Torino: CRIC, 1989).

southerners belonged to both sides of the barricades: the strikers and scabs; the rebels and the policemen.²⁹ Contemporary public opinion was well aware of this irony in the aftermath of the accidental death of twenty-one-year-old law enforcement officer Antonio Annarumma, himself a southern migrant, during the clashes between police and protesters in Milan on 19 November 1969.³⁰ So this stereotype might well contain elements of truth, but the interesting question is how far such a static picture has a restricted and over-simplified our comprehension of a complex phenomenon.

This article aims to draw attention to evidence for a more nuanced, but surely more plausible, account of the southern migrants' role in the *autunno caldo* and of their political and social identity. This evidence is dispersed in a number of published interviews, in memoirs, in documentaries and newsreels produced both at the time and in the decades that followed, in some oral history interviews already conducted and, quite probably, in many others yet to be conducted.³¹

First of all, there are clues that point to the conservatism, as well as the radicalism, of southern migrants. In the memoirs of leaders of the New Left groups we find indications of an enduring reticence among the workers towards the radical activists who agitated outside the factory. According to one of the leaders of the radical group *Lotta Continua*, Guido Viale, 'Workers' mistrust towards us students was always there, and some people were never tired of rekindling this feeling'.³² Legendary southern radical Ennio Furchi has told the story of how the encounter with New Left activists changed his life, but he also made clear that when students distributed leaflets at the factory gates 'he was one of the few who read them'.³³ Some southern workers approached the students only after they had ascertained that they were not communists, but many rural immigrants maintained their reservations about left-wing politics. This attitude had its origins in the rural villages where communists

²⁹ According to Lumley, *States of Emergency*, 209, 63% of police or *carabinieri* were southerners.

³⁰ In the same year left-wing writer and director Pier Paolo Pasolini had famously defended the policemen after the clashes with the student movement by characterising them as sons of the southern proletariat.

³¹ Oral history is well suited to understanding the individual experience of social change. Here I use individual stories to question a mainstream narrative of a collective experience. The oral history of southern car workers in Turin has largely focused on militants who had been prominent in the factory strikes and marches (see Polo, *I tamburi di Mirafiori*), interviewed by historians who wanted to tell the story of the radicalisation of unskilled workers; clues to an alternative interpretation are preferably to be found in narratives of southern workers interviewed with a different research agenda, as in the community study and the company study quoted below. Contemporary documentaries, which often selected workers for interview at random outside the factories or in the neighbourhoods, also showed a wider array of positions.

³² 'La diffidenza degli operai verso noi "studenti" era un sentimento sempre presente; e da taluni anche quotidianamente rinfocolato'. In Guido Viale, *A casa: Una storia irritante* (Napoli: L'Anchra del Mediterraneo 2001), 63, quoted in Sangiovanni, *Tute Blu*, 157.

³³ Interview with Ennio Furchi, in 'Le svolte storiche - L'autunno caldo' (documentary) by P. G. Murgia, Rai Teche (1977).

were shunned because of the predominance of the Catholic Church, to the point that in the 1960s many southerners still recalled the myth that communists ate babies.³⁴

The ancestral 'spontaneity' that allegedly characterised southerners' protest actions in the car factories has to be reconsidered in the light of evidence which shows that preliminary organisation, albeit outside the traditional union structure, and a certain amount of coercion were crucial to the success of a strike. According to radical activist Luciano Parlanti, on the day of the strike, 'there was always someone in charge. A protest march is not brought forth by itself, out of nothing. Even in those hot days, there was always someone organising. It wasn't at all easy to start off a protest march'.³⁵ Leadership and co-ordination often needed a dose of compulsion to convince reluctant participants. According to one leader, 'using all our strength and ropes ten or twenty metres long, we lassoed the workers [on the line] to drag them into the march. We pushed them or pulled them in. To a certain extent they did not mind being dragged in . . . but I have to confess, I had to beat them up at times'.³⁶ According to militant Dino Antonioni, the use of these hasty methods was justified by the 'belief that we were fulfilling the need of the majority of workers, even when that majority did not understand and had to be forced to strike'.³⁷ Strikes could have hardly succeeded without the support of a sizeable number of workers, and violence was not the key factor of mobilisation, but for every enthusiastic southerner who joined the anti-systemic struggle, there was an unwilling one. Testimonies indicate that some southern workers, namely those who had to provide for their families, did resent the frequency of strikes during the *autunno caldo* and did their best to stay at work.³⁸ Indeed, some workers went out of their way to stay at their factory place during working hours. Angelo Greco, a southern worker at FIAT, recalls that during the strikes many of his fellow southern workers avoided the picket lines at the gates by entering Mirafiori through the tunnels of an underground railway, which had been constructed during the Second World War to ship materials out of the plants secretly after the fall of Mussolini. The existence of these tunnels was unknown to many protesters, so they were not monitored. Others tried to jump in, unobserved, from the walls, even though they could incur the hostility of the strikers.³⁹ These forms of behaviour of course revealed not only indifference to the motives of the protest, but also the belief that working steadily would be in their best interest. Finally, as the *autunno caldo* turned into *conflittualità permanente*, many workers, even in the production departments, where most southerners toiled, gave only token support to

³⁴ Documento 12, 'Riunione Studenti e Operai, 12 maggio 1968', in Liliana Lanzardo, *Cronaca della Commissione operaia del Movimento Studentesco torinese, dicembre 1967-maggio 1968* (Pistoia: Centro di Documentazione di Pistoia, 1997), 56, quoted in Stuart J. Hilwig, "'You Are Not our Vanguard!'" A Study of the Italian Student Movement's Failure to Mobilise the Workers of FIAT in the 1960s', *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory*, 36, 2 (2008), 255.

³⁵ Interview with Luciano Parlanti, in Polo, *I Tamburi di Mirafiori*, 63.

³⁶ Quoted in Marco Revelli, *Lavorare in Fiat* (Torino: Garzanti, 1989), 57.

³⁷ Interview with Dino Antonioni, in Polo, *I tamburi di Mirafiori*, 89–90.

³⁸ An example was the father of Mimmo Calopresti, who emigrated from Calabria in the early 1960s to work at FIAT. See Calopresti's documentary *Tutto era Fiat* (Bianca Film, 1999).

³⁹ Author's interview with Angelo Greco, April 2004.

the boisterous internal marches whose aim was to halt production. 'In 1970', relates a radical activist, 'the internal march was customary and almost every day there was a strike [but] many men just stopped when they heard the tin drums approaching and went back to work when the drums were far away'.⁴⁰

Some southern workers no doubt subscribed to Natella's downright rejection of work, as fictionalised in *Vogliamo tutto*, where the character often proclaims, 'work makes me sick' (*lavorare fa schifo*). However, much more common were those southerners who had a second job in addition to the one they held at FIAT. After the end of their shift in the car factories and on weekends, southern workers often rushed to small workshops or construction sites where they were paid cash in hand. As the only or main breadwinners in the family they were saving money to buy a house and to pay for the education of their children. There is overwhelming evidence of this phenomenon, but it has hardly affected the standard representation of southerners in Turin.⁴¹ Rather than someone who rejected work, the typical southern migrant could be more plausibly described as a workaholic.

A strong component of the image of southerners this article is attempting to deconstruct comes from accounts of former New Left activists, who implied that migrants' rebelliousness instinctively drew them to join their ranks.⁴² For the radical groups who adopted a workerist approach – the idea that industrial workers could organise themselves, and that they were to be the prime movers of political change – the southern worker epitomised what they popularised as the 'mass worker', that is, the unskilled, assembly-line worker, alienated, prone to struggle outside the rules of proper industrial relations, outside the control of unions, and potentially ready for a revolution. Workerist groups emphasised what they saw as a promising feature of southern immigrants, their alleged 'rejection of work'. The notion of 'refusal of work' had in fact emerged in the mid-1960s through the writings of thinkers such as Mario Tronti as a crucial element for the undermining of the capitalist system, but, as we have seen, it hardly characterised the majority of southern workers.⁴³ In retrospect, the *operaio massa*, the mass worker, more often inhabited the pages of the workerist publications than the shop floors of actual factories. When film director Elio Petri named the protagonist of his prize-winning film *The Working Class goes to Heaven* in 1971 (a film quite critical of the New Left) 'Lulù Massa', it was already meant as an ironic commentary on the myth of the *operaio massa* that nourished workerist ideology. Petri's *operaio* Massa was opportunist and reactionary even as he embraced the class struggle.⁴⁴ Using the same pun, immigrant union delegate Gianni Marchetti remarked that during his career in Mirafiori 'I only ever met two [mass workers]: Massa Giacomo, who was in the maintenance department and a union member, and

⁴⁰ Luciano Parlanti, in Polo, *I tamburi di Mirafiori*, 69.

⁴¹ See for instance the interview with Beppe Rorro in Gad Lerner, *Operai* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1988), 31–5.

⁴² Luigi Bobbio, *Storia di Lotta Continua* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1988), 38–50; Revelli, *Lavorare in Fiat*; Polo, *I tamburi di Mirafiori*.

⁴³ Mario Tronti, *Operai e Capitale* (Torino: Einaudi, 1966).

⁴⁴ For an account of the representation of the mass worker see Sangioanni, *Tute Blu*, 153–72.

Massa Giuseppe, who was a militant working at the automotive department and not a union member'.⁴⁵ And it was not only unsympathetic commentators who were sceptical about the unskilled workers' taste for radical politics. Internal documents reveal how *Lotta Continua* was beset by workers who did not exactly embody their revolutionary prototype. If given the opportunity to speak in assemblies, workers, so some of the militants complained, often showed a penchant for lengthy 'narrative and apolitical' statements, sometimes turning into a bland indifference to politics (*qualunquismo*), to the point that some objected – wrongly, according to the majority in the group – to the idea of having to listen to them.⁴⁶

In any case, among those southerners who chose to join the ranks of the protesters, political activism did not automatically mean militancy in New Left groups. On the contrary, after a brief spell of wildcat strikes, most politically active southerners joined the unions as *delegati di linea*, shop stewards, whose introduction had been bargained between the unions and the company as a way to institutionalise the widespread conflict. Radical groups, rightly, from their point of view, denounced such shop stewards as tools for bridling spontaneous industrial conflict.⁴⁷ But being a shop steward appealed to those *Meridionali* who wanted to cast their lot with the workers, yet who also felt fulfilled by having a role 'recognised' by the company, the unions and their fellow workers themselves, a role that gave them dignity and made more meaningful their everyday life as industrial workers.⁴⁸ As Sidney Tarrow has pointed out when analysing the *autunno caldo*, workers might have been non-union, but they were seldom 'anti-union'.⁴⁹ That *Meridionali* became shop stewards, sometimes as a first step to a career within the trade unions, was a sign of the new opportunities opened by the strikes.⁵⁰ It showed that the most significant factor in southerners' participation in the struggle earlier on had been their lack of integration into industrial society, rather than some atavistic rebellious spirit.

Another problem with the image of the southerner unquestioningly endorsed by historians is that it portrays (male) immigrants in Turin as a homogenous group, even though there were many differences between them.⁵¹ These differences were not only in regional origin or in political attitude, but were related to their diverse age, marital status, social origin and migratory experience: all factors that had an impact on a southerner's political behaviour. Often lumped together as former field

⁴⁵ Quoted in interview with Vittorio Rieser, 3 Oct. 2001 in Guido Borio, Francesca Pozzi and Guido Roggero, eds, *Futuro anteriore: Dai 'Quaderni Rossi' ai movimenti globali – ricchezze e limiti dell'operaismo* (Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2002), appendix.

⁴⁶ *Lotta continua*, 'Proposte relative all'organizzazione del nostro lavoro politico', Centro Studi Piero Gobetti, Fondo Marcello Vitale, Box 3, folder 1.

⁴⁷ Bobbio, *Storia di Lotta Continua*, 43–4 and 65–8.

⁴⁸ See the oral histories of Beppe Rorro in Lerner, *Operai*; Alfano Bonaventura in Alfano Bonaventura, *Mirafiori e dintorni* (Roma, Ediesse, 1997); and interviews with migrants Francesco and Nicola (no surnames given) in Angelo Castrovilli and Carmelo Seminara, *Mirafiori, la città oltre il Lingotto* (Torino: Ages, 2000), 81, 83.

⁴⁹ Tarrow, *Democracy and Disorder*, 193.

⁵⁰ A good description of this process is in Alfano, *Mirafiori e dintorni*.

⁵¹ This is the image for instance conveyed by Donald Sassoon in an otherwise excellent synthesis of contemporary Italy: Sassoon, *Contemporary Italy*, p. 63.

hands (*braccianti*), *Meridionali* actually arrived in the north after stints in precarious occupations that had nothing to do with ploughing the land. Furthermore, they came from cities as well as from rural areas. Some were uneducated, but many had spent at least a few years in secondary education, though often in vocational schools.⁵² Some of them arrived in Turin after working in small factories abroad, particularly in Germany and in Switzerland.⁵³ In other words, they were hardly primitive or unadulterated peasants, even though they might well have been ill at ease in an industrial metropolis the size of Turin.

As we have seen in the case of married men having two jobs, age and marital status were other factors that strongly affected southerners' radical proclivities. However, the most compelling variable in relation to their participation in the *autunno caldo* was probably their migratory experience. Those who arrived in Turin between 1955 and 1965 were more reluctant to join the protest. Not only were they more likely to be older men, but also they had arrived at FIAT after a long period in precarious, low-paid, often unsafe, jobs in the secondary labour market.⁵⁴ Before 1967 FIAT was in fact more likely to recruit workers through its own networks of existing employees (who introduced their friends and relatives, hence favouring fellow Piedmontese) and often rejected applicants who had no previous industrial experience. Crossing the gates of a FIAT factory was for earlier migrants the crowning achievement of a tortured path in the labour market. It meant a steady job, fringe benefits, and somehow also a change of status, because being at FIAT meant being a step above other industrial workers. 'FIAT was my aspiration', recalled a southern worker; 'when, back in the village, you'd say you worked at FIAT people considered you a lucky guy with a prestigious job'.⁵⁵ When in 1967, under the pressure of increased consumer demand, FIAT took on thousand of new southern workers recently arrived in town, it opened its gates to a totally different southerner, whose first impression of Turin was associated with what he (rarely she) perceived as degrading and relentless industrial work in the car-body works and other demanding production departments. The large new wave of arrivals between 1967 and 1969 also meant that their perception of the factory was worsened by the appalling housing conditions in which they were forced to live for

⁵² Anna Anfossi, 'L'immigrazione meridionale a Torino', in CRIS, *Immigrazione e industria* (Milano: Comunità, 1962); Fofi, *L'immigrazione meridionale a Torino* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1963).

⁵³ As demonstrated by Franco Ramella in his essay on southerners in Turin, 'Immigrazione e traiettorie sociali in città: Salvatore e gli altri negli anni Sessanta', in Angiolina Arru and Franco Ramella, eds, *L'Italia delle migrazioni interne* (Roma: Donzelli, 2003), 339–85. See also Revelli, *Lavorare in Fiat*, 16, 31.

⁵⁴ Franco Ramella, 'Immigrazione e traiettorie sociali in città'; Franco Ramella, 'Le migrazioni interne: Itinerari sociali e percorsi geografici', in *Storia d'Italia* (Annali 24, Migrazioni; Torino: Einaudi, 2009), 425–48; Fofi, *L'immigrazione meridionale a Torino*.

⁵⁵ Interview with Nicola (no surname given) in Catrovilli and Seminara, *Mirafiori, la città oltre il Lingotto*, 83. Interviews with southern migrants show many examples of this attitude. See for instance the *Meridionale* Peppino Muscarà hired in the late 1950s who recalls his wife's reaction to the news of the hiring at FIAT: 'She was excited. She thought it was like entering the university. She used to say "My Lady, at last!"', in Renata Jodice, *Torino 1945–1983. Memoria FIOM* [Federazione Italiana Operai Metalmeccanici] (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1984), 109.

lack of planning, not to mention the latent, and sometimes explicit, hostility of the native Turinese who felt besieged by the rowdy newcomers.⁵⁶

In conclusion, there are important reasons to challenge the mainstream image of southern migrants during Turin's Hot Autumn: the southerner as fighter, passionate rebel, destined to destroy the system. This image has been frozen in time in Italian national consciousness in part because of the paucity of probing historical inquiry on this subject, but also because it reflected the point of view of basically all the protagonists of that historical period – apart of course from southerners themselves. New Left militants romanticised the *Meridionale* as the embodiment of the revolutionary mass worker who shunned unions and who would overturn capitalism; trade unionists and the communist party excused their initial failure to gain workers' allegiance by the massive presence of newcomers who thought of industrial relations in terms of peasants' revolts.⁵⁷ Even the middle-level company management complained that the exorbitant intake of uprooted workers, devoid of industrial culture, and disillusioned by city life, had allegedly undermined the acceptance of factory life and its discipline that had previously reigned in Turin.⁵⁸

Southern migration had a great impact on the unfolding of the *autunno caldo*, but in more complex ways than this stereotyped representation has led us to believe. Stereotypes are not wrong because they are untrue, but because they do not tell the whole story.⁵⁹ In retrospect, the importance of the internal migration lay not in that every southerner was a radical, but in the structural changes which engendered urban congestion, lack of services and housing for the newcomers as well as a fast recomposition of the working class. Unrest among car workers showed that rampant discontent bred by a chaotic migration could lead to unpredictable outcomes. In contrast, what these voices from different points of the political spectrum seemed to share was the enduring influence of a representation of the southerner that had its roots much further back in time, in the discourse of the social sciences on this subject for a century previous to the *autunno caldo*, and in the idea of a subject that historically and socially belonged outside the boundaries of modernity and whose introduction into a rational and disciplined society resulted in some sort of social harm. Scholarly accounts have later assimilated aspects of that interpretative patrimony through the

⁵⁶ Giuseppe Berta, *Confitto industriale e struttura d'impresa alla Fiat* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998), 149–52. For a direct witness see the interview with the FIAT chaplain in the magazine *Sette giorni in Italia e nel mondo*, 127 (16 Nov. 1969), 23.

⁵⁷ There are many examples of this argument. See for instance this statement of Gianni Alasia, head of the communist Chamber of Labour: 'the old unionised workers of Turin learned new tactics from the southern immigrants, they brought with them the ideas of Jacquerie, the peasants' revolt', quoted in Hilwig, 'You are not our Vanguard', 255.

⁵⁸ Luigi Arisio, *Vita da capi: L'altra faccia di una grande fabbrica* (Milano: Etas Libri, 1990).

⁵⁹ Writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie argues that 'The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story'. See Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 'The danger of a single story', TED talk, available at http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html (last visited 17 Nov. 2011).

use of dubious sources such as *Vogliamo tutto*. Now is the time for historical inquiry to shed the assumptions behind that legacy.

**‘I Terroni in Città’: Une réexamination
du militantisme des ouvriers
migrants meridionaux pendant
l’‘automne chaud’ de Turin**

Cet article propose une révision de l’opinion prédominante des italiens méridionaux pendant l’‘automne chaud’ de 1969 à Turin, l’un des moments les plus remarquables de la mobilisation ouvrière dans l’histoire européenne moderne. On a représenté les italiens du sud en rebelles primitives, en extrémistes ‘spontanés’, mais cette notion remonte en fait à l’idée que les méridionaux sont des déviants, une idée qui masque une réalité historique bien plus complexe. Cette image, renforcée par les historiens et popularisée dans les romans, se trouve en contradiction avec l’évidence de l’époque, qui indique par contre un mélange méridional très particulier d’extrémisme et de conservatisme, de résistance et d’intégration.

**‘I Terroni in Città’: Eine Überprüfung
des Kampfgeistes südlicher
Migrantarbeiter in Turin während des
‘Heißen Herbstes’**

Dieser Artikel regt eine Korrektur des vorherrschenden Bildes von den Südtalienern während des ‘Heißen Herbstes’ von 1969 in Turin an, einem der in Bezug auf die Mobilisation der Arbeiterklasse bemerkenswertesten Momente in der modernen europäischen Geschichte. Die Darstellung der Südtaliener als ‘primitive Rebellen’ und ‘spontane’ Radikale ist tief in der damals bereits vorhandenen Wahrnehmung der Menschen aus dem Süden als soziale Abweichler verwurzelt und verschleiert eine weitaus komplexere historische Realität. Dieses von Historikern gebilligte und durch fiktionale Darstellungen verbreitete Bild wird von zeitgenössischen Quellen widerlegt, die auf eine einzigartige Mischung von Radikalität und Konservatismus, Widerstand und Integration im Charakter der Südtaliener hinweisen.