

EP

**THE REAL  
RADICAL?**

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## The Italian Avant-Garde, 1968–1976

Antonio Negri interviewed  
by Verina Gfader

Translated by  
Valentina Milan

Page 200:

*Quaderni rossi*, no. 2 (1962).  
Featured in Pier Vittorio  
Aureli, *The Project of  
Autonomy: Politics and  
Architecture within and  
against Capitalism* (New  
York: Princeton Architectural  
Press and the Buell Center,  
2008), n.p. (c) Princeton  
Architectural Press and the  
Buell Center.

*Classe operaia*, no. 1 (1964).  
Featured in Aureli, *The  
Project of Autonomy*, n.p.  
(c) Princeton Architectural  
Press and the Buell Center.

Covers of course booklets  
prepared at the IUAV (Istituto  
Universitario di Architettura  
di Venezia) and published  
by Cluva, 1965. Featured in  
Aureli, *The Project of  
Autonomy*, n.p. (c) Princeton  
Architectural Press and the  
Buell Center.

**Verina Gfader:** You were involved in establishing journals such as *Quaderni rossi*, *Classe operaia*, and *Contropiano*. In what way were the various formats of distribution – of distributing theories and workers’ actions – an integral part of shaping people’s actions and engagement? And in what way did these journals contribute to your thinking about radical self-organized forms of resistance?

**Antonio Negri:** In Italy we experienced the so-called magazines period, which started within the far left wing after the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Hungarian uprising in 1956. In those years, the most frequently used media for distributing theories and ideas were newspapers and magazines. Until the mid-’60s our movement was a magazine movement, then we used leaflets as well, which were distributed in factories.

**VG:** So printed matter became a channel for distributing theoretical ideas?

**AN:** Yes, for the left wing of the Communist Party, magazines turned into theoretical magazines – voicing a strong criticism toward the Communist Party. From a cultural point of view, this period was very important and was characterized by the works of authors like Franco Fortini and Roberto Guiducci. Pier Paolo Pasolini also took part in this magazine movement until the mid-’60s.

**VG:** Was the magazine the key trigger?

**AN:** The magazine became a point of reference where the different ways of action and intervention were analyzed. In this regard, the group surrounding *Quaderni rossi*, which began to meet in 1958, played a central role. The first issue was published in 1961. The group was directed and kept together by Raniero Panzieri, who had

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previously been the director of *Mondo operaio*, the official magazine of the Italian Socialist Party. Panzieri belonged to the pro-communist left wing within the Italian Socialist Party.

After the Godesberg Program conference in 1959, a group of young people from the left wing of the Turin Socialist Party and from the youth communist section of the University of Rome converged on a common project: an inquiry into workers and their conditions in the factory. Our focus on modes of production and the workday was an attempt to rewrite the first volume of Marx's *Capital* in a way that was specific to the new working conditions that were typical of big industry.

**VG:** Were *Quaderni rossi* and other early journals propositions or theoretical developments? Or were they both?

**AN:** They were definitely both. The most important thing was inquiry – but remember that in Italy in this period sociology was not yet an academic subject. Sociology had been excluded from the university curriculum by Italian idealists like Giovanni Gentile and Benedetto Croce. The only sociology chair in the country was held by Cesare Alfieri in Florence. With *Quaderni rossi* came the project of reinventing sociology; some of those who were contributing to it, like Franco Momigliano and Alessandro Pizzorno, would later become important Italian sociologists. In this regard, *Quaderni rossi* can be compared to the Frankfurt School in Germany.

**VG:** How did Florence emerge as the center of the network between thinkers, workers, and academics?

**AN:** In those years the network of university political centers was fundamental. At the end of

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the war, the Italian industrial area was constituted by the so-called triangle of Genoa, with iron and steel, Turin and its automobile industry, and Milan with its mechanical engineering companies. At the same time, Venice and Marghera were developing into the most important centers for the Italian chemical industry. We also have to take into consideration the issue of internal migration, a huge mass of people moving from the south to the north of Italy. It was in response to these developments that the workers' movement established itself. Between 30 and 40 percent of the workers' movement was extremely well organized – the Italian Communist Party was the biggest in the communist West and was able to express itself both from a political and an intellectual point of view.

I've always found it very difficult to explain the difference between, for example, *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in France and *Quaderni rossi* in Italy with respect to the workers' movement. In France, these were mainly minority intellectual movements connected with publishing houses – most of their exponents would become authors, in the true sense of the word. In Italy, the situation was completely different because a tension with the party was immediately visible. *Quaderni rossi* was soon considered a movement. And the movement was without a doubt made up of intellectuals: Panzieri was an editor for Einaudi, and from 1963 I was a university professor. But at the same time we were militants – at 5:00 a.m. we'd go to the factories and help workers write leaflets.

**VG:** So theory, as such, strongly related to the practice of the workers in the factories.

**AN:** Yes – but remember it was a deeply rooted tradition of the Communist Party to take the intellectuals to the factories. We simply carried it on.

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**VG:** What status did text and theory have in relation to forming groups and their alliances?

**AN:** A major element in this context was the translation of Marx's *Grundrisse*. The volume was published in Italian for the first time I believe in 1967, but Enzo Grillo, a comrade involved with *Quaderni rossi*, started to translate the text ten years earlier and Renato Solmi, the translator of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno for Einaudi, translated a few passages from *Grundrisse* for *Quaderni rossi* – in particular the chapter about the role of the machine.

Look at the Italian editions and at the relationship with Germany, for example. From a cultural point of view, this long-standing connection was very strong. In my heyday it was difficult to become a philosophy professor without speaking any German – I myself translated Hegel when I was young. An opening was created toward the Anglo-Saxon cultural universe, even though a bit later and more generally, we were perfectly conscious of what was occurring outside and this is something of great importance, because even if we were a closed community, our level of conceptualization, of thought's elaboration, was extremely high. Finally, as for our contacts, they were limited, but we still had some outside of Italy, and these became greater after 1968 in Europe.

With the publication of *Empire* with Michael Hardt in 2000 all of the *operaismo* authors' materials started to be translated and so it has become a subject matter for study. But until then everything had been confined to Italy. You have to take into account that the generation responsible for this process was demonized from the mid-'70s onward and then spent the '80s in prison.

**VG:** Although the work of Archizoom and Arte

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Povera, and the important role that magazines like *Casabella* played in their development, runs parallel with your activities, why do you seldom comment on them?

**AN:** Because there was so little dialogue between us. The only interesting thing about the avant-garde for me was the opportunity it offered to make some money – we were asking for paintings from artists in order to sell them to fund our activities. For example, when I was a militant for Potere operaio, Mario Schifano, Roberto Matta, and René Burri were providing us with paintings to sell.

**VG:** Was there any dialogue with architectural groups like Archizoom who proposed a theoretical –

**TN:** No. There was a group here in Veneto called Gruppo Enne whose members were Manfredo Massironi, Ennio Chiggio, and Toni Costa. They were doing Optical art and Massironi was responsible for the visual makeup of the magazine *Classe operaia* between 1964 and 1966/67. Massironi was a good friend of Mario Merz, so between Arte Povera and these Optical artists a lively debate broke out, eventually leading to a break because the Optical artists thought that Arte Povera was strongly connected with tradition, with Lucio Fontana and Burri, etcetera, while Massironi et al were inquiring into the dynamics of machines. Many exponents of this movement would later become psychologists of perception, and others would become designers. Here you can find a strong connection with Archizoom and some other design and architectural groups. For example, Chiggio became the president of the designer's association in Milan at the start of the 1970s.

Opposite:

*Contropiano*, no. 2 (1971).  
Featured in Aureli, *The Project of Autonomy*, n.p.  
(c) Princeton Architectural Press and the Buell Center.

John Cage frequently visited due to his relationship with the pianist and composer Teresa Rampazzi, a

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comrade in our groups. There was also a musical modernism developing: Bruno Maderna and Luciano Berio were more or less originally from Veneto. So although we did not deal directly in art, we were living in art. As a result, the protests against the Biennale in 1968 were huge.

**VG:** Didn't you boycott it?

**TN:** Yes, in an extremely tough way, and it was really interesting because many of the university departments took part in it. Architecture students had begun a self-management process supported by professors in 1964/65, and in 1967 an "occupation" took place, lasting twelve months. Following this occupation by the school of architecture, the other academies started coming together. Then Marghera workers arrived as well, because in those years workers from Marghera would hold their assemblies during the lockouts inside the school of architecture.

**VG:** But wasn't there a one-year strike at the Venice academy as well?

**AN:** It was prompted by the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia, but it was not a strike; it was an occupation mainly with the support of the professors. The rector at that time was Giuseppe Samonà and then there was Franco Albini, a famous furniture designer, the architect Ignazio Gardella, and a number of town planners who all took part.

These different developments all ran more or less parallel with each other, crossing over at certain points. These movements developing on horizontal axes were living in the same theoretical environment rather than creating a precise, determined theory, because the movements' thoughts tended to be negative and critical –

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endlessly creating new spaces rather than filling them.

Aside from this, some militants were indeed doing art and cinema here in Venice. For instance, there was the guy who shoots pornographic films – what's his name?

**VG:** Tinto Brass?

**AN:** Tinto Brass! He made a marvelous film at the time shot at the Lido in Venice, *Chi lavora è perduto*. But Italy lacked a cinema preparing for and living 1968; there was no Godard.

**VG:** No Godard?

**AN:** No, not at all. Well, there was Pasolini, but he was quite a different thing.

**VG:** In what ways? How do you see Pasolini's place within that, and in relation to your work at that time?

**AN:** There was a violent break with Pasolini. Alberto Asor Rosa wrote the book *Scrittori e popolo* in 1965, and he attacked the whole of realism, all that was called Italian communist realism; he described Pasolini as a middle-class writer who succeeded Giovanni Pascoli. So, a very violent break occurred between the *operaisti* and Pasolini and the reason is apparent: according to the *operaisti* the subject of history was the productive working class; according to Pasolini, on the contrary, history belonged to the farmworkers, the simple, common people, the immigrant with strong muscles – there is nothing to do here, the difference between these two positions concerned the way of conceiving things and therefore the gap was too big to be filled. Besides, in 1968 Pasolini wrote a famous poem

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A crowd gathered for a demonstration. Photo by Marion Scemama.

Protesters brandishing a Potere Operaio banner.

Potere operaio protesters in action, November 18, 1972. Photo by Massa Carrara.

Featured in Sylvère Lotringer and Christian Marazzi, eds., *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1980). (c) Semiotext(e).

against the students who had taken part in the struggles at Valle Giulia, which had represented a very powerful action.

The break was total and as far as I am concerned it is still valid today. Even though I believe that Pasolini's work has effectively documented a great passage in Italian history, it is still too nostalgic and passive.

**VG:** In *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, you mention the White Overalls with reference to Italian social centers – including bookstores, radio stations, and lectures – as being essentially political throughout the 1970s. Again thinking more broadly, there was also the flourishing club scene and immersive sound environments and meeting places built around architectural experiments from 1968 to 1976. With the Florentine avant-garde architectural movement Gruppo 9999, who designed the club Space Electronic, an alternative social space was created – generating a series of small communities in communal spaces, even going so far as to include school activities. Could this possibly be seen as an alternative form of protest or resistance on the basis of the inclusion of workers, the youth, the people?

**AN:** The social centers in Italy have very different histories. They were founded in the 1970s as what were called “proletarian youth centers.” They began by organizing these big parties like, for example, the one at Parco Lambro in Milan, which was particularly important. At the same time, the first independent radios were established: Radio Alice in Bologna, Radio Sherwood in Padua, Radio Blackout in Milan, Radio Onda Rossa in Rome. This period was undoubtedly very strange. For example, in Milan, where I was living in the 1970s, there was a social center in the Ticinese

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neighborhood. The people involved in that undertook an actual territorial occupation from 1974 until 1977/78. Today this area is called *movida* due to it being a center for nightlife, but at that time it had nothing to do with *movida* because it took its origins from proletarians. Social centers were spaces for workers with very cheap restaurants. Police could not enter in these areas.

**VG:** Was there a barricade?

**AN:** No, if a police car went in, it was stopped and it was burned. A fundamental feature to bear in mind is that 1968 in Italy was not the same as in Germany or in France: in Italy it lasted ten years.

**VG:** So it's more like an ongoing ten-year event.

**AN:** Yes, ten years during which every kind of event happened, especially in the big cities – Rome, Milan, in Veneto, too. Veneto played an important role with respect to the working class, even if Veneto was not a workers' region like Turin. In Rome the situation was similar. But Milan was undoubtedly the place where everything happened. In Rome things happen in a folkloristic way, whereas in Milan things happen in a real way.

During this period, industry began its transformation as automation processes were implemented and work began to move from the factory into the city. The publishing industry, for instance, would no longer be a tower containing thousands of workers. The development of Milan as a center for design happened when designers moved outside of the large companies into the city to develop their own practices. Milan became a productive metropolis and we experienced the passage from the “mass worker” through the “social worker” to the “cognitive worker.” Architecture departments started to occupy a

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central place from a political point of view – look at the Politecnico in Milan.

**VG:** In terms of architecture, was the design of the factories – and the organization of space generally – taken as an important factor at the time?

**AN:** Definitely. In particular, we were talking about the traffic in the city. When I lived here in Venice in the mid-'60s there was a focus in the architecture school on standardization and the design of prefabricated proletarian houses for the working class. At the end of the decade the focus switched from the house to the city structure and the creation of spaces to freely move around and meet in. These spaces formed a continuum between the industrial outskirts and the city center.

**VG:** Looking at these various so-called radical movements and practices across art, design, and architecture, do you even see true radicality as being heightened in this period? Or do you feel that Arte Povera and Archizoom and the like were too orthodox to be true radicals?

**AN:** We should try to understand what true radicality is. In Italy, radicality was the Brigade Rosse, and they certainly had very little in common with Arte Povera. There are, let's say, different kinds of radicality. Arte Povera, which was a very important phenomenon, was strictly connected to a negative and ironical vision of reality, becoming poetic precisely because of this dimension. But Arte Povera was not reality. From this point of view, I prefer the Russian avant-garde of the 1920s, which directly intervened in everyday reality.

I'm now trying to reconstruct the ten years after 1968 in Italy that we spoke of earlier, which is difficult because my archive disappeared when

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I was imprisoned – one of the reasons why I agreed to give this interview is that it helps me remember.