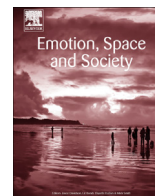




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Emotion, Space and Society

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/emospa](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/emospa)

## Emotional logics in militancy: An ethnography of subjectivation processes in Italian radical-left movements

Elena Apostoli Cappello, PhD \*

IIAC (EHESS - Cnrs), Paris, France

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 15 February 2016

Received in revised form

21 February 2017

Accepted 21 February 2017

Available online xxx

## 1. Introduction

In the 1990s, Italy saw the rise of a new radical left-wing movement, commonly known as *Antagonista* or squatters, which flowed into the anti-globalisation movement of the late 1990s. This new movement is remarkable for how activists have sought to claim their political difference. Rather than emphasizing ideological differences, as activists had done in the 1970s, these activists underline their emotional difference through a variety of discursive and artistic practices. The article examines how this process generates activists' political subjectivities. For this purpose, it takes into account different kinds of empirical material collected during a long and multi-sited participant observation focused on Italian *antagoniste* counter-cultures and their relationships with the Zapatista movement in Mexico. In particular, it highlights how the political practices – interlaced with the relationships between Italian (Roman) “antagonistic” groups – are sustained by a ductile imaginary composed of existential narrations which plastically adapt a shared world-vision to a specific local context. This imaginary stresses the globalising and localising processes that move the activists into a continuous translation, appropriation, de-contextualisation and re-contextualisation.

My study seeks to advance a non-normative interpretation of militancy and social movements, considering them as opportunities for the confluence of subjectivation processes (Ortner, 2006) in specific economic, cultural and historical circumstances. Using “subjectivations” I am referring to Foucault's (1984) work, who argued that experiences of individuals offer the possibility to reflexively shape their relation to themselves in a process that is

both discontinuous and foundational. Within this theoretical framework, I consider emotions as a practice which expresses a militant group's sense of belonging. In addition, I draw on Bourdieu's work arguing that Italian activists mobilize emotions in order to perform their political commitment. More specifically, I engage with emotions' place in a discursive order (“*ordre du discours*”) in a Foucauldian sense: structures that are able to shape and justify actions. Yet I will do so taking into account the historical and social context in which emotions evolve, as recommended for instance by Lutz and Abu-Lughod (1990), Reddy (2000) and Gould (2009). This also relates to Scheer's (2012) suggestion that emotions, as practices in Bourdieu's (1980) sense, are socially situated and form part of a practical commitment with the world.

Studying a variety of contexts in different eras and places, scholars such as King (2008) have observed how activists try to reframe their feelings through emotion-work, in order to distance themselves from the emotional matrix of mainstream society. Such investigations address the role of emotions in mobilising and consolidating social movements, as underlined by sociologists such as Melucci (1989) and Eyermann (2008). Indeed, Berlant (2011) suggests that, since the 1980s, the Western historical present has been perceived affectively, before any other way. This argument may help us to understand the role of public feeling (Czetkovic, 2012) and the osmosis the cultural and the political spheres, as I will point out drawing on my fieldwork.

The observed shift towards discursive and artistic expressions of feeling differently suggests situating the Italian radical movements within a queer philosophical tradition that can be seen as continuing earlier expressions of feminist thought. “Queer theory” is a term coined by Teresa De Lauretis in 1990 and developed in the United States and elsewhere by other scholars such as Judith Butler (1990). Starting from the deconstruction of sexual orientation codes and the binary order of gender, queer reflections have inspired a more extensive deconstruction of the identitarian logics of standardisation and control. Building on this critique of normalisation, various activists have emphasized the importance of “feeling differently”, both as a differentiation from an “old”, “ideological” way of being in leftist politics, and as an act of resistance against capitalist individualism seen as both economic and emotional forms of control. In doing so, they have sought to resist the standardisation of feelings and hegemonic ways of formalising

\* Mailing address: via Buonarroti, 58, 35135 Padova, Italy.

E-mail address: [elena.apostolicappello@gmail.com](mailto:elena.apostolicappello@gmail.com).

affect.

The Italian case has, of course, its own peculiarities which we can better understand considering individuals and their perceived selves, as well as collective temporalities. Philosophically, Negri (2005) talks about the “Italian Difference”, underlining the unusual match between Tronti’s Workerism (“*Operaismo*”) and Muraro’s feminism. This particular relationship between the heritages of workerism and feminism continues nowadays, showing for instance in the debate between Negri (2009) and Braidotti (2011) around biopolitics, subjectivities and “nomadic subjects”. Within the Italian left, the use of emotional discourse started when radical activists encountered feminist arguments in the late 1970s, a process that could involve serious conflicts (Bravo, 2008). These encounters deeply transformed militant practices that were framed around the primacy of charismatic leadership and the collective management of occupied, auto-instituted and self-managed spaces. However, they have also – and perhaps mostly – transformed militants’ way of making sense of their militant experience, evidenced in the oral practice of speaking about oneself.

This transformation is related to two main processes. First, transnational exchanges between the Italian contemporary radical left and the Zapatista movement in Mexico proved influential for this transformation (Baschet, 2005). Second, the appropriation, de-contextualisation and re-contextualisation of the Zapatista discourse (Berger, 2001) as enacted by local actors in Rome has intensified the clash between the feminist strand of the movement (Bracke and Maud, 2015) and the Leninist-Maoist strand. This has led to the challenge of categories such as “leadership” and – potentially violent – “seizure of power”. Following the frame of the political imaginaries that give meaning to practices in line with Marcus (1995), but following also Appadurai’s (1999) notion of “imaginary worlds”, I have observed the circulation of activists who are looking to establish roots through circulating. To do so, I followed Italian anti-globalisation groups: their initiatory journeys and “political pilgrimages” (Apostoli Cappello, 2009) to insurgent Chiapas led me to outline the topic of my research. In what follows, I will first provide some background on my fieldwork in Italy and Chiapas. I will then present evidence I have collected in individual biographies as well as in three main kinds of events that typically happen in activist squats: artistic performances; collective storytelling about militant travels; and theoretical writings.

## 2. Engaging with activism in Italy and chiapas

The ethnographic field research was conducted in Italy and Mexico between 2005 and 2009. During research stays in insurgent Chiapas, I participated in numerous caravan tours (“Carovana” in Italian) organized by the Italian antagonist and pro-zapatista “Ya Basta!” association (YB in what follows). YB originated in 1996 and is mostly composed of militants who were part of the *Autonomia Operaia* and *Lotta Continua* movements in the 1970s (Bianchi and Caminiti, 2007). In Italian journalism and common sense, “*antagonisti*” are those who are part of the radical-left social movements associated especially with the so-called Occupied Social Centres (CSOs), but not only. *Antagonisti* is a term that these movement actors are claiming for themselves fairly unanimously, meaning to express their conflict with the institutions of the Italian political system, with the party system, and with hegemonic values in Italian society in general. The *antagonisti* also adhere to a number of political commitments, including both unorthodox Marxism and anarchist libertarianism. YB activists, and the Italian *antagonista*

movements more broadly, are also referred to as “*autonomi*”, as they carry on the heritage of the 1970s *Autonomia Operaia* movement.<sup>1</sup>

Nowadays, the *antagonisti* manage the CSOs, squatted urban places self-managed by collective groups (Sommier, 1998). They use these occupied spaces to create places where they can experience and enact their difference. Describing them in terms of an “exodus” (Virno, 2002), the activists claim that these spaces are “free” from what they consider “external society’s” rules, psychological and political categorisation and laws. The squats are, in American anarchist Hakim Bey’s terms, “Temporary Autonomous Zones” (Bey, 1991; see also McKay, 1996). Beyond managing CSOs, YB activists also regularly visit the Zapatistas in Chiapas in order to learn about the native utopia (Nash, 2001), which they present as communitarian and ecological. The process of constant absorption and translation between the chiapaneco and the Italian activists’ languages seemed to condense within a few weeks, during the YB caravans, what has been happening for years among Italian activists. During the caravans, I was able to observe how this trans-oceanic political relationship operates in daily life. I focused on how the experience of the Zapatista journey is included, from the point of view of life histories, in the political and existential path of each activist. In this process, the experience takes on specific meaning and is subsequently used as an interpretation to explain activists’ previous political activities as well as their future existential plans in Italy. As I have argued elsewhere (2009), this practice constitutes a sort of initiatory journey.

In Italy, participant observation took place in Bologna (where I lived from 2003 to 2004), Padua (my hometown), Venice and Rome. Conducting research among people who sometimes operate illegally (i.e. by squatting), I have anonymised my interlocutors. Some of the people I interviewed and followed for a long time have had a political background in *Autonomia Operaia*, which occurred within the large 1970s Italian workers’ and students’ movement. Many people lived very closely to the political groups that have been identified as “armed struggle” (the Red Brigades or *Lotta Continua*, for example) and were legally treated as such. Others have experienced prison or escaped abroad to France or Latin America. It was very important for me to broach the subject of the legitimacy of violence as a political practice with them. This subject is strongly related to the choice of adhering to the Zapatista approach, which instead claims the renunciation of violence, unless as a defensive tool. For this reason, only activists who have a public role as political representatives, are indicated with initials, the others with a pseudonym. Only published texts are fully quoted.

The self-managed squats can be considered “villages” inserted in a global dimension through the transnational circulation of militants. The activists I have decided to call “*cosmopoliti spaesati*”, or “disoriented cosmopolitans”,<sup>2</sup> consider the national scale completely outdated. Still, they don’t give up the local (rather than municipal) scale as a place of democratic transformation of society, as it blends with intense transnational movement (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). I will analyse here the strategic reliance on the insurgent Zapatista movement’s discourse, in particular a fake letter by *Subcomandante Marcos* as used by *antagonisti* activists in order to claim and legitimate their political action in a Roman context. The Zapatista discourse, I argue, introduces a poetic dimension that provides a coherent framework creating order and shared meanings in daily practices. Moreover, I will consider the use of songs and books from the actors of the anti-globalisation

<sup>1</sup> Padua and Rome were important *Autonomia Operaia* nuclei and established a still detectable local political tradition.

<sup>2</sup> It is hard to translate into English this category which refers to the term “*spaesamento*” used by the Italian anthropologist Ernesto De Martino (1977). In “estrangement”, the spatial dimension disappears.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7322935>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7322935>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)