A Window onto Italy’s Social Centres

Assembled and Translated by STEVE WRIGHT

The following materials were translated for the final issue of a journal that never appeared. They provide some snapshots from the social centres in the first half of the nineties.

‘Forte Prenestino’—Alba Solaro

This account of a prominent Roman squat was published in 1992, as part of a longer piece concerning the movement of social centres. Other essays in the book discuss the alternative music scene and cyberculture in Italy. As its name suggests, the Forte had originally been built a century ago as a military base, and stands on eight hectares of land; it was occupied on May Day in 1986, and has played host to concerts with audiences sometimes approaching the 10,000 mark.

‘All of a sudden, we were inside, “running” the place—we who had never managed anything except our unemployment, our homelessness, our own little patch, our streets. And it was precisely the problem of management which soon forced upon us a debate which if experimental, contradictory and at times even boring, was nonetheless very important. In this way the management assembly was set up, because we felt ourselves to be a committee, or a collective, with our own identity to claim and advance. But an open structure, not reducible to this or that political area; also because we believe, then as now, both in the valorisation of diversity, and a trajectory of liberation outside monolithic structures and party lobbies.’

Together with the management assembly the first cultural initiatives were undertaken: language courses, seminars on street theatre, a puppet theatre, a cinema space . . . and the first concerts by groups closely associated with the do-it-yourself (self-produced) circuit. Like Leoncavallo in Milan, the Forte could count upon an enormous edifice which held many possibilities. As the spirits which ‘animated’ it were many: from punks, who had pushed the concert programs, the influx of hardcore, and the contacts with the DIY circuit; to people (not only autonomists) coming from the various political experiences of the seventies, who brought with them debates over nuclear power, anti-militarism and third worldism, the new left, censorship, psychiatry and so on. Almost immediately however the Forte found itself forced to confront an issue which still today remains a central node in the debate within the self-managed spaces: namely, the relationship between ‘consumers’ and the social centre.

‘This debate represented one of the major moments in Forte’s growth, even if it was full of contradictions and dust-ups. On the one hand there were those who proposed replicating what happened in the social centres of northern Italy. In other words, to pay for a ticket/subscription during concerts, as some sort of testimony of participation in the life of the occupation. On the other hand, the awareness that, if digging only into our own pockets was a failure, everyone who had some relationship with the social centre needed to take responsibility, but in a dialectical
rather than forced way. This debate, which was very vocal and even polarised on occasion, halted the Forte’s activity for more than a month, precisely because none of the realities within the centre was able to win a majority . . . .'
people aged over sixty, the centres could conceivably provide meeting spaces for them as well.

To my mind the fracture within the occupations movement is much broader than you suggest: not so much on how to obtain the space, since within the anarchist social centres there isn’t a myth about occupying—anything but! The division is based above all on how to live the space and how to utilise it. On one side there are those who want to become a public sphere within the cities, on the other there are those who see the occupied place as a means above all to satisfy their own individual needs, for example for housing, sociality . . .

Yes, but I’m not ruling that out.

OK! But beyond this already-substantial difference, there are also divisions over many other questions—first and foremost over work. So if on one side some social centres seek to collaborate with the COBAS®, with the self-organised groups and similar realities within the world of work, other places are critical of work in itself.

Let’s be clear: the refusal of work is now the patrimony of the whole antagonistic movement. Cultural differences within the social centres are another matter, even if the labels autonomist or anarchist point to an outmoded dualism. Within our group, for example, there are convinced anarchists.

Whatever the labels, you can see the differences in concrete things. Like the difference between the meeting of social centres led by Leoncavallo of Milan and Officina 99 of Naples, and the group of occupied places which met in Turin at El Paso to produce a national manifesto against the legalisation of squats. In a word, there was and still is such a division.

I don’t know, perhaps I don’t perceive these things. For example, on the question of work: what would be the differences?

In some social centres they talk of ‘working less, everybody working’ . . .

Which in fact means ‘working very little, everybody working’.

OK, but the concept is still there. And then there is the discussion of a guaranteed minimum income. In some occupied spaces there is a discourse which, if still-embryonic, has been developing for some years, and which makes a radical critique of work, which it sees as exploitation and slavery. For example last year in Turin, on the occasion of May Day, there was a national meeting against work, and there will be another one this June in Bologna. Instead of talking about working less, there is an immediate and total release [affrancamento] from work. While this discourse is still in its early days (and not forgetting that the refusal of work is as old as work itself), its exponents don’t hold
dialogues with the COBAS, they don’t make demands. Instead they seek to advance individual paths of liberation from work. As you can see, it’s a very different approach.

CSS Activist

I’ll try to be clearer. Above all there is the guaranteed income. More accurately I’m talking about a citizenship minimum income, which means that for the mere fact of existing I have the right to the minimum means of subsistence, so that I can survive. If I can’t at present overthrow this system, then this system must at least give me housing, income. . . . This discourse over the guaranteed income is also interesting because it can be extended to a whole series of subjects such as immigrants and those with AIDS. Therefore in a situation where I’m unable to make a revolution, I at least try to obtain some minimum objectives in order to keep alive. This is something over which there are often disagreements, and which requires further discussion.

On the concept of work: bloody hell, let’s be clear for a second! Work understood as things I’m able to do of my own choosing [di per se] is different to this crap that capitalism has created. The discourse is that I must free myself from wage labour, and I think that everyone is agreed on this. In all the social centres, even the most ‘punkified’, people work, but they do it for themselves.

It’s logical that to survive you must do things, no one likes to be inactive. But work is something else.

CSS Activist

We could call it human activity.

Yes, but even if we change the name, the approaches within the social centres will still vary. On one side there are those who want a ‘minimum income’ and on the other there are those who refuse it, because they see it as one of the major pillars of social peace. For example, you can see what’s happened in some European countries where masses of young people do nothing more than wait for their monthly subsidy without batting an eyelid and without rebelling.

The minimum wage is not an unemployment subsidy, it is a citizenship minimum income which leads to the second point, which is that liberation from work allows you to engage in really autonomous activity within the communities where you live. There are interesting examples like the Pedro social centre in Padua, which has done all this work with the nomad camps, and succeeded amongst other things in winning those people the right to remain in Italy. And it was this experiment which led to collective projects together with the Roma to establish some minimum services.

Another thing which has led to this division is the legalisation of occupied spaces. The most spectacular case was in Rome, where some social centres had been gathering signatures together with other associations (including, it’s rumoured, the boy scouts) to be granted the places they had occupied, in exchange for a more or less...
symbolic rent, because their spaces were socially useful (a notion of social utility which, having been recognised by the City Council, is very debatable!). At the same time, other social centres which stood aside from this exercise in official approval now face eviction. As has happened elsewhere in Europe, legalisation leads to a division between the good and the bad: those who negotiate with the Council are good, and those who refuse to do so are bad. For example in Rome, the Pirateria di Porta social centre was evicted a few days after leaving the coordinating committee of local social centres.

Look, the Pirateria story went a bit differently, and the social centres which did accept this ‘procedure’ did not fail to show solidarity with those that were evicted. I was in Rome the day after the eviction and all the social centres went to show their solidarity. In any case it’s clear that on the question of disputes with the Council you can’t place a city like Rome or Turin on the same level as Rovereto . . . So it’s logical that in Trieste you carry out what dispute you can. If instead you’re in Turin and so strong that you don’t care what the Council thinks, that’s great, but if there are fifteen of you in Monfalcone (to take a local example), and you’ve already tried to occupy three thousand times to no avail, and the Council says, ‘have this place’, what do you do, do you say no? And the fact that in taking it you risk eviction for the places which aren’t legalised in Italy is something which has yet to be proved. For example in Padua, Pedro has been legalised for more than a year and the Gramigna squat isn’t risking eviction³.

I don’t mean that these Roman social centres which collected signatures are wicked bogeymen who don’t give a damn if the others are evicted, I’m saying that like it or not the other occupied places are placed in greater risk of eviction as has already happened elsewhere in Europe.

This line of argument on evictions has yet to be substantiated, and we hope that it never will be. As for good and bad: in respect to whom? If the council administrations, remember that we’re talking about politicians, those who have power in the city. If instead you mean in respect to citizens, then this necessarily means in respect of what you do and to your practice.

In any case I question the very premise of the Roman agreement. Although, as I said before, I don’t hold to any myths about occupied places, this discussion concerns those who have already had an occupied place for years and then, whilst having the strength to defend it, opt nonetheless for legalisation. This strength exists in Rome, it’s undeniable, because no-one would dream for example of evicting Forte Prenestino.

Still, in my opinion, the thing that weighed heavily upon the Roman agreement was the territorial presence of fascists, a frightening presence which luckily doesn’t exist anywhere else. And it’s pointless recalling how many social centres have been burned down and

Steve Wright (trans.)
attacked there. If here in Trieste every attempt at occupation was met not only by 200 cops but by dozens of fascists armed with monkey wrenches, you’d think twice.

In conclusion I can say that at a certain point you have to think in these terms: we want a social centre, by any means necessary. But this means not only that you’re prepared to occupy and to be arrested, but also that you’ve come to terms with the fact that if you’re in the shit, you need at least to float, if not to swim . . .

‘Flexibility’—Morion Social Centre

The following is an extract from a longer document written in March 1997 by a social centre based in Venice. Taking as its starting point the spread of casualised working conditions, it argues that those whom the Human Committee in London have recently dubbed the ‘quasi-employed’ are likely in the near future to become a majority within the working class. True or not for Italy as a whole, such a conclusion is certainly far from implausible for a city whose labour market is regulated by the ebbs and flows of the tourist trade.

Having discussed some of the demands which commonly circulate within the social centres—a shortened social working day, a ‘third sector’ of self-managed production, and a guaranteed minimum income—it’s authors turn to the question of organisation:

How can we begin to experiment, around these programmatic elements, with this new class composition’s trajectories of struggle and organisation? How to overturn the flexibility, mobility, and casualisation of social labour against the bosses, as the mass worker once overturned the rigidity of work organisation within the assembly line of the taylorist-fordist factory?

We are still on the level of experimentation, but therein lies an enormous potentiality which is as yet unexpressed. This new class composition based upon flexible, precarious, territorially mobile labour courses through the Social Centres in a material sense; the centres are shot through by that social fissure produced by students who are no longer only students, by unemployed people who are no longer simply unemployed, by workers who are no longer wage labourers in a classical sense; the social centres are produced by this new class composition within which—amongst other things—migrant labour power (which is the most disposable, obviously, to the most mobile, flexible and badly paid jobs) holds full citizenship.

In terms of organisational forms, too, everything has yet to be invented and experimented with for this flexible labour power. The classical ‘union’ form, or the rank and file committee (Cobas) rooted within the workplace, are obsolete organisational formulas, given that this flexible labour power no longer has a classical, fixed, ‘place of work’. Some comrades have evoked the epic of the American Wobblies (Industrial Workers of the World) at the turn of the century. Perhaps we need our own Wobblies of the dispersed metropoles and the mobile
network of sabotage and territorial counterpower, to construct the foundations of the new bill of rights of the postfordist worker.

Rather than a Cobas, we need an organised autonomous subjectivity, one that finds its common identity and aggregation on a territorial basis, around its own independent space of sociality. Territorially mobile, able to intervene with all means necessary, from legal aid (using what still remains of the labour laws from the fordist period) to boycotts against abuses of power, violations of rights, unregulated forms of exploitation, for the real defence of the new class of workers, from the area of casualised social labour to immigrants.

Why not then set up, starting in each social centre, Wobbly agencies—or better Fobbly agencies (Flexible Workers of the World)—so as to begin to (self)organise on this terrain of flexible and precarious labour?

Agencies that can begin with an enquiry into all the forms of atypical contracts used in the sphere of flexible employed labour: fixed term, part time, apprenticeships, training, seasonal, temping, off the books etc.

Agencies which above all begin with an enquiry into the flexible jobs existing in the specific territory, mapping out the various flexible forms of work and those who employ them, with questionnaires circulated during each social centre’s initiatives, with direct interviews, with the realisation that the comrades of the social centres themselves do the most flexible and absurd jobs, but without ever thinking to organise on this front . . .

‘Negative/Positive Aspects of the Social Centres’—Senzamedia

During the summer of 1994 a collective of university students conducted an extensive survey within sixteen Roman social centres. The results, which draw upon the reflections of more than 600 respondents, have recently been published on the Internet. Amongst other things, 145 of those surveyed offered written comments concerning the negative as well as positive aspects of the centres; here are the first twenty of them:

- a tendency towards self-reference in initiatives/vitality, possibility of experimenting with new forms of cultural aggregation;
- for better or worse, it’s always the same people/it’s a non-commercial circuit that develops self-production;
- the privileging, at times, of cultural gatherings/being outside of schemes, including those of the institutional left;
- little politics; difficulties in communicating with people. A certain sectarianism which is starting to disappear/that they exist (there is nothing else in some zones). They are unaffiliated to the parties of the historic left;
- bringing most people together for concerts rather than around political issues/still they make it possible to maintain a political presence in neighbourhoods;
- they can become ghettos, if they don’t also open up to the neighbourhood, to the world outside/a different type of socialisation to that of other meeting places;
• illegality and anti-conformism at all cost/the ‘social’ and the promotion of new ideas and culture;
• difficulties in inserting themselves in the neighbourhood/political activity (even if ghettoised);
• self-ghettoisation and often, strange to say, difficulties in socialising/anti-fascism;
• sometimes it closes within its own ‘area’, other times within a conformism which mirrors that which it contests/place of debate, spectacle, politics. Place in which to practice non-conformism;
• the great risk of becoming a mental ghetto, if it has not already done so/they are the only ones who undertake interesting initiatives;
• often more than social centres, they are private centres for a group of friends/fusion of different cultures;
• music/the courses offered and discipline;
• communism/ communism;
• too many people who don’t even know why they’ve come to a social centre/the possibility of participating in alternative initiatives, giving space to otherwise ghettoised realities;
• lack of social and mental opening, at times political obtuseness and a limited possibility of encounter/comunication (particularly at concerts where participation is greater);
• the following: at times intolerance is paramount/social and political commitment;
• very often they are used by many people only as places to drink and smoke dope / the concerts;
• deviation from their ideals / socialising, solidarity, culture (theatre, concerts, cinema);
• generally the initiatives are open to all, but in the end it’s always the same people and this ghettoises the situation/musical, cultural and political gatherings. Being together.

References

Centro Sociale Morion. (1997) “La ‘flessibilità’ è il nuovo paradigma produttivo. non serve a nulla esorcizzarla, al contrario e’ necessario partire da essa per comprendere, scoprire ed inventare nuove modalità di azione e di conflitto.”
URL: http://www.arpnet.it/chaos/morion.html

Senzamedia. (1997). “Troppe persone non sanno neanche perche’ si va in un centro sociale.” (No longer online but the table of contents at the moment is still cached in Google).


Notes

2 Cobas is a rank-and-file Italian union that emerged out of deep disaffection towards the established trade unions in Italy during the late sixties and seventies (Editor’s Note).
3 In fact the Gramigna ‘popular centre’ would later come under renewed official pressure ‘to move on’. And while the autonomists of Pedro expressed their solidarity with Gramigna, their feelings toward that centre and the marxist-leninist-stalinists who occupy it have been distinctly cool (Translator’s Note).
6 Senzamedia. (1997). “Troppe persone non sanno neanche perché’ si va in un centro sociale.” (No longer online but the table of contents at the moment is still cached in Google.)