

‘A Love Born of Hate’

Autonomist Rap in Italy

Steve Wright

IN LESS than a decade, home-grown rap has carved out its own space within Italy’s music scene. Emerging at the end of the 1980s from the local squatting movement and riding the crest of nation-wide university occupations shortly thereafter, Italian rap has since gone on to win a wide audience throughout the country. Today its influence is also apparent within the mainstream of Italy’s pop industry, with prominent performers such as Jovanotti doffing their caps not only to those first rap posses, but also to the political movement of ‘self managed, occupied social centres’ (CSOAs) which produced them (European Counter Network, 1998).

While it has recently found its first English-language chronicler in Tony Mitchell (1996), Italian rap merits greater attention than it has hitherto received, above all from those seeking to abolish ‘the present state of things’ (Marx and Engels, 1976: 49). What follows is a critical look at two such militant rap groups, Assalti Frontali and 99 Posse. Nurtured within the squatting scene, both bands are now finding that their popularity stretches far beyond it – a circumstance which signals problems as well as possibilities. For this reason, I argue that an exploration of the lyrics and other pronouncements of these music groups offers a privileged vector from which to address some of the tensions between cultural labour and political commitment which currently hold sway within Italy’s social centres movement.

Searching for Roots

One thing is certain: this anthology [of Italian rap] exists not as a result of my records, but instead owes much to that whole movement of groups born in the ‘social centres’, with thanks also due to the independent labels that believed in this sound . . . (Jovanotti, 1996: 6)

I can't return to my village empty-handed ('Gocce di Sole') (Militant A, 1997: 162)

Both 99 Posse and Assalti Frontali were founded by individuals with already established identities in Italian autonomist circles. The front man for 99 Posse – Luca Persico, better known as O' Zulu', who lists his hobby as collecting charge sheets ('one sentence of four months and five trials in progress') – became politically active at 14 (Bisca99Posse, 1996: 83, 59). Assalti Frontali's front man, Militant A – another Luca, born like O' Zulu' at the end of the 1960s – was involved from a similarly precocious age with 'the Volsci', the dominant tendency within the Roman autonomist scene of the late 1970s and early 1980s (Del Bello, 1997). The name 99 Posse itself evokes one of Naples's best known squatted spaces, Officina 99; the band's first big hit, 'Curre curre guaglio' (Run Boy Run), celebrates the birth of that social centre at the beginning of the decade. Elio Manzo of the band Bisca, which fused with 99 Posse for a time during the mid-1990s, recalls his first encounter with the latter at a Officina 99 benefit concert for imprisoned comrades, one of whom was Persico (Bisca99Posse, 1996: 27). For their part, Assalti Frontali are an outgrowth of the Onda Rossa Posse, a group formed within the orbit of what was for many years the Volsci's radio station (Radio Onda Rossa, 1998), and are likewise closely associated with a social centre: in their case Forte Prenestino, in Rome's east.

Little has been written to date in English about the Italian social centres, yet the Italian rap scene is incomprehensible without some understanding of them. Hailed occasionally in the local press as laboratories of cultural innovation, more commonly as dens of iniquity and subversion, the CSOAs have become the focus of considerable public and media attention within Italy over the past decade. From a few dozen spaces grouped at the beginning of the 1980s around the remnants of earlier radical circles, the centres have spread across Italy in the course of the 1990s, so that a recent 'unofficial' tally lists more than 130 of them all told (Tactical Media Crew, 1997), of which close to one-third are concentrated in Rome and Milan. Keeping track of the exact number from week to week is near to impossible; since most are the product of illegal squatting, one month may bring an eviction here, the next a new occupation somewhere else (Gianetti, 1994; Dazieri, 1996). As to their activities, the programme at Forte Prenestino shows what is possible in some of the larger centres. Apart from a documentation centre and meeting rooms for political campaigning, there is an exhibition gallery, practice rooms for bands, space for theatrical performances, a dark room, gymnasium and 'tea salon'. The weekly schedule of the early 1990s saw African dance classes on Tuesday nights, yoga on Mondays and Wednesdays, and a gym class on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Regular film nights were also held, along with courses on design and sculpture (CSOA Forte Prenestino, 1993a: 28).

Given its volatility, it is hardly surprising that the movement's direction and purpose have long been hotly debated. Some within it see the

occupied spaces as a means above all ‘to satisfy their own needs and desires’ (CRIC, 1996: 21), others as one contribution to a broader undermining of the existing social order through the development of ‘segments of life, of time, of space, that function according to criteria antagonistic to those of capitalist society, based as this is upon the commodity and its spectacular domination’ (CSOA Forte Prenestino, 1993b: 18). It is tempting to characterize such alternative emphases as the consequence of long-standing differences within Italy’s broader ‘antagonistic’ movement between anarchist or autonomist strands. Such a judgement would be facile, however, for this tension runs through many centres no less than between them. Nor are formal political labels necessarily helpful. While many centres identify themselves as either anarchist or autonomist, it is clear that each term has multiple (and sometimes conflicting meanings), and that some CSOAs are run by mixed groups, or else refuse such labels altogether (Mauro and Luca, 1994).

The diffusion of social centres up and down the country – their numbers have doubled since a similar tally was made at the end of the 1980s (Strumia, 1990: 25) – began with the peninsula-wide occupations which greeted the demolition (and subsequent reconstruction) of Milan’s Leoncavallo centre in mid-1989, and was then spurred on a few months later by the university movement known as the Pantera, which gave many students their first taste of self-managing an occupied space (Arcidiacono et al., 1995). But it is the centres’ long-standing, almost symbiotic association with Italy’s alternative music scene which has most sustained the interest of a wider audience. This has led some working in the academy to characterize the centres’ main constituency as:

... a post-political generation which replaces the ossified language of politics with music; it is a music which homogenizes the space, the desires, the values, by offering an opportunity to be together, to consume or play music together, while not engaging in wage labor. The Beastie Boys’ song, ‘You’ve got to fight for your right to party’, well encapsulates the importance that the issue of free(ing) time from work has for the Cs. (Viano and Binetti, 1996: 245)

Is this merely rhetoric? Certainly many in the movement share the goal of one Roman centre in challenging ‘the classic schizophrenia between political activity and life’ (Infoshop CSOA Forte Prenestino, 1996: 96). Others have argued that such a stance simply tries to paper over the gulf which separates the centres’ ‘politicos’ from their ‘counter-cultural’ types; while the creative tension between a project against (the constituted order in all its facets) and one for (new social relations in the here and now) has often been productive for all concerned, this divide has now become such that it threatens paralysis whenever the movement seeks a unity beyond the mere defence of its spaces (Cappello, 1996, 1998; Zaccaria, 1997: 215–19). What is not in dispute is that the appeal of the CSOA is restricted primarily to the world of youth. For some, this is proof of the movement’s vitality; for others,

including the movement's so-called 'uncle', the late Primo Moroni, it is symptomatic of the Peter Pan syndrome of 'a generation which has decided to prolong its adolescence ad infinitum' (Borrelli, 1995).

Two major research projects of the 1990s have attempted, with the collaboration of some CSOAs in Milan (Consortio Aaster, 1996) and Rome (Senzamedia, 1997), to flesh out the portrait of those who frequent the centres. With a thousand or so respondents drawn from two of Milan's better known squats, Leoncavallo and Cox18, the Consortio Aaster study offered the following snapshot: the great majority of those surveyed were under 30; more than two-thirds were male, and more than half lived with their parents. A third were students (with a third of these also engaged in paid work), a little under one-third were employees, one in six were self-employed, and the remaining sixth were divided fairly evenly between job-seekers and those engaged in intermittent paid work. About 10 percent had university qualifications. Those women surveyed were more likely to have spent some time at university (48 percent), and to be 'quasi-employed' (either student-workers, unemployed, first job-seekers or casual workers). Most had come into contact with the centres through friendship circles, and while one-quarter to one-third rated political or social commitment as an important drawcard, the most common response emphasized 'sociality', along with the attraction of music and other cultural activities. Finally, the researchers noted that nearly one-quarter of those surveyed lived outside the region of Lombardy – 'an indicator' as they put it, 'of the intense territorial connections established between the centres during important initiatives' (in this case, a campaign against the existing drug laws) (Consortio Aaster, 1996: 23–31, 30–3, 39–43, 44).

Youth = rebellion = CSOA? Not everyone within the movement seems happy with this string of reductions, yet all, for now, remain caught within its bind. La Strada, located in Rome's south-west, has set itself the task of winning a presence across all age groups within 'the popular forces', by abandoning:

... the youth-centred logic of dance rebellion, of rebellion as spectacle ... for us the social centre is everyone's place, where rap and the mazurka have the same space and the same dignity. (Smeriglio, 1995: 60)

How successful La Strada has been in this enterprise is not clear; but as even one of its members concedes, for now the occupied spaces are primarily bulwarks for and of young people in the marginalized fringes of Italy's cities (Smeriglio, 1995: 63).

Some musicians associated with the Roman movement have argued that 'those who frequent the CSOAs come to hear the concert; they are not very interested in the social centre as such' (Nano, 1997: 12); a sense that many come simply to consume cheap beer and smoke dope without fear of harassment is equally common (Philopat, 1996: 101; Senzamedia, 1997). On the other hand, there seems little doubt about the intensity of feeling the

centres can evoke amongst those directly involved in their management. Militant A's 1997 book *Storie di assalti frontali* is, amongst other things, a tale of lost innocence, of the defence of political commitment in the face of continued disappointments, above all at the hands of ostensible comrades. But in trying to recapture his sensibilities at the time of the first Assalti Frontali release, he writes:

'I can't return to my village empty-handed' is a phrase that synthesized the state of mind within which the Assalti Frontali project was born. I took it as a moral commitment. A tribute. A canticle addressed to the people of the social centres, the only humanity that interested me amongst our Country's new generations. It sought to demonstrate the difference, to bring enemies to their knees, to illuminate the wealth of the movement. Some said: 'Ah, but you'll always remain in the ghetto.' I smiled because I saw nothing negative in that word. For me the village had an incalculable value. The treasure. What was morally better? Artistically superior? (Militant A, 1997: 70)

Communicating Antagonistically?

Reconciling music and politics has been one of my dreams since I was little. (Meg, in Cornacchia and Giove, 1997)

Certainly no other art form possesses such immediacy. Music has an unrivalled capacity for historical memory and content. (Sergio Maglietta of Bisca, in FA, 1994)

What matters, believe me, is communicating – Sud Sound System, 'Fuecu'. (Pacoda, 1996: 9)

It was punk that first shaped the musical sensibilities of the early social centres. At the start of the 1980s, Italian punks (or punx, as the more overtly political styled themselves) played a major role in the establishment and maintenance of a number of Italy's most important squatted spaces, above all in Milan (Scarinzi and Trau', 1984; Bramante, 1996; CS Cox 18 and Calusca City Lights, 1996: 109–19). Most tellingly, Italian punk inverted the nihilism commonly associated with the phrase 'No Future': rather than a cry of despair, this became an injunction to 'invent the present' (Ibba, 1995: 86; Moroni, 1996: 41–2). By the middle of the decade, the punk scene had swept in and through the Milan movement's flagship, Leoncavallo, turning the place upside down with concerts of 5,000 fans:

Until then the centre had had good relations with the neighbourhood; in practice it was like a little cultural circle. So it wasn't ready for such a massive crowd and it was completely lacking any sort of security. You can imagine the chaos in a punk concert: everyone jumping, stage-diving, pogo-ing. At Leo, to give you an idea, the walls were all white, the posts pink, the senior citizens' bar all beautifully painted. Not even a mural in sight. At the end of that concert, there wasn't one white space left on those walls. But Leoncavallo also began to think a bit more grandly after that concert . . . (Ibba, 1995: 85).

By the late 1980s, many of the social centres had become home to a variety of musical forms marginalized by the pop mainstream: not only punk, but industrial music, hardcore and reggae could be heard within their walls (Pacoda, 1996: 9; Nano, 1997). According to the band Sud Sound System, the centres were 'the only spaces practical and possible for street music'; all the same, they have added, 'introducing rap into the hardcore circuit was not easy' (Solaro, 1992: 64). In part, rap's ascent benefited from the changing times themselves, slowly winning over more of the 'punkeratti' (Solaro, 1992: 64–5) within the CSOAs as punk itself ran out of steam (Bramante, 1996: 209–10). Crucially, rap seemed a musical form particularly conducive to the movement's gradual emergence by the decade's end from the siege mentality of years past. The essential ingredients which privileged Italian rap within this new orientation have already been spelt out clearly by Pacoda: its emphasis upon communicating with others; its legitimization as an emanation of black American ghetto culture, long a source of fascination for the Italian far left; the ease, as with punk, with which 'anyone' could perform it; and finally, its ability to reclaim 'the hypnotic and liberatory function of dance' from the crassly commercial world of discos (Fumo LHP et al., 1992: 539; Pacoda, 1996: 9–11).

Militant A has described Public Enemy's 'Rebel Without a Pause', which he helped broadcast at Radio Onda Rossa in 1987, as 'the most powerful piece I'd ever heard in my life, an adrenalin rush' (Militant A, 1997: 27). For him, the distinctiveness of rap lies in it being:

... spoken word, it's narrative. It tells me of the miseries of the ghetto, of dealing, of gang wars; it speaks to me of revolt, of your changing direction, of having fun, of the power of rhythm. It tells me why we have been so much in silence.

With the world in and around the social centres as their reference point, Militant A and his friends rejected the fashion – then common within the small Italian rap scene of the late 1980s – of performing in English (Militant A, 1997: 28). In Onda Rossa Posse's lyrics, which were amongst the first to be written in Italian, this unshakeable belief in the purity of rap, of its unrivalled capacity for unmediated communication, is obvious: 'I say what I see I invent nothing' ('Batti il tuo tempo'); 'Rap street poetry / rhymes rhythm they leave they strike because they tell the truth' ('Categorie a rischio') (Militant A, 1997: 129, 131). This sentiment sits uncomfortably at times alongside the occasional self-conscious use of English language expressions – for example, the line 'e ora prova a fermaci sucker' [and now try and stop us sucker] from 'Quello che siamo'. On the other hand, it also helps to explain the profound contempt expressed for the overtly commercial Italian rap groups which emerged after 1992. This is not simply a matter of leftist snobbishness, but a rejection of the way in which such groups were seen to trivialize the potency of rap as a form of communication (Assalti Frontali, 1993: 13; Militant A, 1997: 136).

For his part, Tony Mitchell has likened the ‘anger and militant eloquence’ of Onda Rossa Posse and the first Assalti Frontali album to ‘the hard-core style of Public Enemy and NWA’. Going further, he suggests that such groups ‘no doubt have more appeal to the 1968 generation of political militants than to the youth of the nineties’ (Mitchell, 1996: 152). This conclusion seems, if anything, rather forced. It is true enough that the antagonistic movement of the 1990s has approached the question of political violence rather differently to many of the activists formed over the course of Italy’s ‘creeping May’ of 1968–78, for whom, as Oreste Scalzone once noted, ‘on the “if” [of armed struggle] there were no doubts’ (Wright, 1988: 266, 1998). At the same time, anyone who has seen footage of the running street battles which closed the 20,000 strong national CSOA demonstration of 10 September 1994 would be hard pressed to assert that politically motivated violence is completely alien to the culture of those youth who move within the social centres’ orbit (Collettivo video Leoncavallo, 1995). Instead, a tactical, pragmatic astuteness seems to have replaced that premeditated, moral embrace of physical confrontation which characterized many within those earlier generations of Italian radicals: a difference epitomized, in the words of one observer of the 1994 demonstration, by ‘the absolute absence of molotovs in the clashes’ (Ceccon, 1994: 34).

Is the rap of Assalti Frontali and 99 Posse Marxist? Militant A has written that in his first encounter with the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, both were abandoned almost immediately. He further confesses that one of his youthful interventions concerning workplace restructuring was so confused that ‘anyone with a smattering of economics could have demolished it’. If he would later return to Marx whilst completing an economics degree, one senses that ‘Results of the Immediate Process of Production’ is not normally close to hand when he is seeking inspiration for verse (Militant A, 1997: 12–13). In the end, it would be more appropriate to talk here of an autonomist – or better, an antagonistic – rap, one possible path to a space where left Marxisms might find common ground with social anarchisms in opposition to capital relation and state form alike. In this space, emphasis is placed upon the potential and actuality of self-organized conflict within and against ‘the present state of things’, understood as relations of power. In the words of the Neapolitan group:

Bisca99Posse is a group of communists and this is so not because the individual musicians participate in 10–100–1000 assemblies, demonstrations . . . or because it plays at cost in the social centres, but because in every single instance of its own existence, it creates contradictions and prospers from them, it plays the role of cultural agitator and social adhesive and, above all, because it makes of its own experiences, its own passages, its own victories and defeats a collective legacy, a historical memory and contractual power for all, and not only itself. (Bisca99Posse, 1996: 13)

The posse as political vanguard? Passages such as these (‘historical memory

and contractual power for all') can and have been construed in that manner. In the words of some Turin city council officials, for example:

The predominant activity in the Centres is music. . . . For these genres (rap, ragamuffin, heavy metal), the Centres have become the principal site for creation and expression, even the physical place where groups and 'posses' are born and prosper, automatically becoming the official voice of the Centres themselves. (quoted in Enrico and Marco, 1995: 147)

On the other hand, this view has been widely ridiculed by many within the social centre movement itself, with two Modena activists offering the example of 99 Posse as their counterclaim:

In fact the 99 Posse are neither the controllers, nor are they controlled by the Centre. The fact that they continue to maintain an organic bond [*collegamento vivo*] with the Social Centre is a consequence of the wealth and complexity of the Neapolitan experience. If we want to say that the antagonistic cultural messages produced by Officina 99 (but also by the more vast area of the antagonistic movement) are also conveyed to a wider public through the lyrics of 99 Posse, we are saying a different truth. But there is no bureaucratic link between the two realities such that one is the official voice of the other; what instead is involved is a 'relationship of living and prolific interchange' that is almost incomprehensible for an institutional reality. (Enrico and Marco, 1995: 148).

One point Mitchell (1996: 161) scores against the earliest phase of militant Italian rap concerns its lack of irony, and certainly the tone of Bisca99Posse's political self-definition offers an elegant illustration of this. To respond that neither of the two bands' major cultural reference points – American rap and the Italian autonomist movement – are best remembered for their strengths in this field is a poor defence. How do more recent recordings by 99 Posse and Assalti Frontali stand up in this regard?

The year 1996 saw both bands release major albums, following an immersion in the politics of music distribution for the Romans, and a variety of undertakings with Bisca for 99 Posse. While *Conflitto* and *Cerco Tempo* reaffirm the significance to each group of the spoken, 'committed' word, the differences between them are equally striking. With a significantly different line up from before, it was Assalti Frontali whose sound had changed the most, offering a relentless style of delivery fuelled by the playing of fellow Romans Brutopop. Back in 1990, the release of 'Batti il tuo tempo' had been greeted with cries that 'this is not hip hop' (Militant A, 1997: 40); *Conflitto*, recorded with Don Zientara, blessed with some intriguing samples (including backing vocals snatched from an old Neil Young album) and evocative in certain ways of the guitar-driven style of Rage Against the Machine, has been described by Gianmarco Bachi as 'livid and spectral hip-hop, rap mottled by metallic guitars, waves of noise, blasts of hardcore' (Pacoda, 1996: 57). As for lyrical content, the album echoes Pacoda's argument that

Italian rap, unlike the 1960s radical hymns of a Paolo Pietrangeli, offers ‘a decisive return to the everyday’ (Pacoda, 1996: 7). But it does this with a distinctive twist, for this ‘everyday’ of soliloquies – conducted, perhaps, whilst pacing the streets of Rome – is that of the young militant who ‘would have preferred a revolution’, and ‘for the moment’, must make do ‘in movement for the movement’ (‘In movimento’) (Militant A, 1997: 171).

Conflitto is in many ways a grimmer album than the 1992 release *Terra di nessuno* (No Man’s Land). Grimmer not simply in its arrangements, but in the embattled mood which permeates so many of its songs. Recorded after Berlusconi’s 1994 election victory – ‘not my defeat . . . yet still I felt rock-bottom’ (Militant A, 1997: 103) – gave fascists and Northern separatists alike a government podium from which to ferment hatred against immigrants, *Conflitto* savages the new concern for everything and everyone to be put back ‘in its place’:

Yes I know it’s not your fault / you’re not a racist / you’re a realist / you’re no-one / anonymous / in the panic / nameless / an Italian / an Italian in his Nation. (‘Fascisti in doppiopetto’) (Militant A, 1997: 177)

Behind all this, however, lie not only ‘fascists in double-breasted suits’, but ‘conflict’. As one interviewer has noted (Di Donna 1996: 6–7), the word is a recurrent theme in the album’s lyrics:

I don’t know if I’d know how to live in peace / only continual conflict / between ways of life / points a way out / . . . / conflict is the gist. (‘Conflitto’) (Militant A, 1997: 174)

how many times must I be humiliated / in order to understand the importance of conflicts / a loser’s mindset / destroys all sense of proportion [literally: leads to a night where all cats are grey]. (‘Devo avere una casa per andare in giro per il mondo’) (Militant A, 1997: 168)

I have my time / I use my time / I accelerate conflict. (‘Dispersi nel caos’) (Militant A, 1997: 170)

With its ragamuffin fusion of reggae and rap, 99 Posse’s style has always been more playful musically and lyrically than that of the Roman ensemble, and this is as true for *Cerco Tempo* as for anything before it. While Persico has since expressed disappointment with some of the arrangements on the CD (Cornacchia and Giove, 1997), the three tracks which open it are consistent with the best of their work to date. Like much of the stronger material on *Conflitto*, these pieces are also apparently introspective in nature. Sung in dialect at a measured pace, the opening track, ‘Si tuu’, proffers an intertwining of personal anger and class hatred which, in feeding upon each other, threaten to destroy all perspective. Ultimately, it is love – the love of a lover (‘it’s you’) – which restores a sense of balance: not supplanting hate, but giving it new focus and restoring meaning. ‘It’s pointless

raging at life if you don't know how to love', Persico sings in the final verse, adding elsewhere:

I struggled and hated in order to defend my values, but hatred and violence become disquieting when you lose sight of the love that generated them. Street clashes, being beaten with billy clubs, the daily injustices, the tapped phone, the cops, the raids, evictions, had turned me into a potential serial killer, had robbed me of the capacity to be positive: always against, never for. It was music that pulled me out of this vortex . . . (Bisca99Posse, 1996: 59)

The most powerful piece on the album is 'Non c'è tempo' ('There Isn't Time'). It too proceeds at a stately tempo, as Meg sings – in Italian – of 'dreams and passions' transformed 'into metric units' by the tyranny of capital. Persico responds in dialect: 'in jail you can have as much time as you like'. The chorus allows Meg to state her immediate goal: 'a little more control over what I'm living / it's the present that slips through my hands / but I won't let it or at least I'm trying.' This song, then, is about the daily efforts to claw back some space and time 'of one's own'. On occasion such moments may even contain, in the words of C.L.R. James, 'the future in the present': in any case, as Meg concludes, 'I don't know if I'm awake, asleep or in a dream / but the only thing I know is that tonight belongs to me'.

The setting for 'Pecche', the last of these three songs, is one of the most private of times: 'when I want my bed and nothing more / when I'm alone'; when, as Persico's vocal adds mischievously, there is neither 'posse nor O' Zulu'. At this moment, when certain roles are said to be cast aside, and with no audience to play to, 'the only thing I want to say is why'. As the liner notes make clear, 'Pecche' is directed against those – above all on the far left – who remain unshakeable in their 'correct views on everything' (Kolakowski, 1974):

I don't trust those who always have the right answer to every question. I doubt certainties. I refuse the role that they try to attribute to me of revolutionary 'guru'. I hate pride. I know I'm in the right only when I'm wondering if I'm wrong.

Against the dogmas of the true believers, then, uncertainty must be clasped to the heart of one's political identity. Militant A puts it similarly in *Storie di assalti frontali* when he talks of his need 'to flee' in the face of 'the blind faith' of '[t]he sect of Marxist-Leninists with their vanguard party which will lead the masses to the new dawn' (Militant A, 1997: 86). Elsewhere he cites the advice of the sexagenerian Sante Notarnicola, a former 'political bandit' whose poems have been an important reference point for a number of Roman posses:

A final thing. One day he spoke to me of his life before prison and told me with a smile to watch out: 'Never fall into myths, never . . . I ruined my life following a myth that was mistaken.' (Militant A, 1997: 31)

Both albums, therefore, offer a dimension of irony too often absent from past work. But this is not the playfulness of 1977, when an earlier generation taunted defenders of the historic compromise and working-class austerity with cries of ‘Less money, more work’. Rather it is inward-directed, concerning the challenges facing those who seek to maintain their commitment in uncertain times. Take Assalti Frontali’s song ‘Verso la grande mareggiata’. Much slower than other tracks on *Conflitto*, it builds at almost a leisurely pace only to recede, wave-like, again and again. It is about ways to pass time whilst awaiting ‘the great coastal storm’, and once again the ‘c’ word is in evidence:

I’m navigating in the asphalt that burns beneath my feet / I love / the city / its human charm / in continual conflict a delirium. (Militant A, 1997: 173)

The author doesn’t pretend to grasp fully the meaning of this delirium, however, just that ‘something is happening / in the chaos’. Should that long-awaited torrential wave catch him ‘lost in a trip’, perhaps a surfboard can be improvised from his desk: in the meantime, the important thing is to know how to bide one’s time:

towards the great coastal storm / the road is long / and almost all uphill / early morning / absolute calm / I have a base with deep roots / and my self-discipline / today the wind is blowing. (Militant A, 1997: 174)

Beyond the Village

At a certain point we discovered that many more people were coming to our concerts and that many of them no longer spoke the language of the people from before. Many had seen us on television. . . . This posed the problem of whether we fucked them off, or tried to speak with them too. And since our parents always taught us that if someone comes to your house, you let them speak, you offer them something to eat. . . . Around 25,000 more people came to the tour, and with whom we needed to speak. They really came from other cultures: some were even carabinieri. Well . . . if there’s nothing to talk about with a carabiniere, with many of the others there is. (Persico, in Cornacchia and Giove, 1997)

In recent years, Assalti Frontali and 99 Posse have each found new audiences beyond the CSOAs. Their efforts to deal with the implications of this success have raised further questions in turn: concerning established practices within the movement regarding the production and distribution of their music, and relations with other political forces, beginning with the institutional left.

For both bands, ‘communicating antagonistically’ has not simply been about content, but also process. Indeed, the practice of *autoproduzione* (literally ‘self-production’: do-it-yourself, DIY) has long been inseparable from the CSOAs. A central ethos of earlier anarcho-punk in Britain (Aufheben, 1995) and Italy (Moroni, 1996: 41–2) alike, involving fanzines as much (or

more) than recordings, a DIY approach to the production and distribution of rap music in Italy was entirely in keeping with the broader squatting movement's watchwords of self-management and direct action. For 99 Posse, DIY has been understood not only as artistic control of their 'product', but the encouragement of up-and-coming bands through the establishment of a small recording label. For Assalti Frontali it would mean the construction in the early 1990s of a recording studio at CSOA Forte Prenestino, as well as an alliance of bands (the 'Cordata') committed to playing, recording and distributing their music through the networks provided by the social centres. In each case, the intention was clear – to avoid the fate of rock music:

Rock made a promise that it didn't know how to keep. It wanted to be a universal language and instead it became a vehicle for the merchandise of the record industry. (Sergio Maglietta of Bisca, in FA, 1994)

Surveying the British scene of the 1980s, the *Aufheben* collective (1995: 6) has argued that, for all its emphasis upon autonomy and DIY, punk 'lacked an explicit critique of the commodity-form'. That said, punk as a movement never claimed as one of its goals the destruction of the capital relation. For some tendencies within the Italian CSOAs of the 1990s, on the other hand, the path out of the capital relation is said to lie precisely through DIY (Wright, 1995). For members of the Brancaleone social centre in Rome, for example, the marginalization of many highly educated young people from regular paid work offers a window of opportunity looking out upon a new form of democratically organized work. Engaged primarily in the production of cultural services and artefacts (concerts, compact discs, magazines, T-shirts), they have argued that the low pay and rudimentary working environment in which they find themselves is a reasonable trade-off for the collective control they are able to exercise over their labour. In this way, they insist, they are turning the uncertainties of 'post-Fordist labour' to their own advantage, fusing political commitment and personal creativity into a form of 'self-managed' non-typical work which anticipates an alternative economy outside the logic of profit and accumulation (CSA Brancaleone, 1994).

Critics of these and similar projects have suggested that such experiments, eked out as they are on the margins of the official economy, are less a strategy to supplant capital than exercises in self-exploitation (Nutarelli, 1995). The popularity within many CSOAs of 'social enterprises' as vehicles of change – a popularity that has led some 'progressive' local governments to seek to tame the movement by encouraging their diffusion (Moroni et al., 1995) – is doubly curious given that a critique of the commodity-form has long been part of the Italian radical left's broader legacy. Stefano Cappello brings the debate back to earth by pointing out that:

... [t]he CS, from their birth, have always produced commodities, both material and immaterial: from the production of sociality, to musical and theatrical events, up to the first attempts at editions of records, videos, etc. ...

adding that in the 1990s these activities have come to assume a centrality ‘previously unknown’ within the CSOAs (Cappello, 1996: 103). Accepting that the centres need money to survive, it is the self-delusion of the ‘social enterprise’ camp which most concerns him:

To declare oneself to be outside the logic of the market as the pure enunciation of an abstract potentiality facilitates the reproduction – in miniature – of that same logic. (Cappello, 1996: 103)

Self-production has been equally embraced by many of those sceptical about the prospects of an ‘alternative economy’. Arguing that no time in this society exists free from capital, an unsigned 1993 article in the Forte Prenestino magazine *Nessuna Dipendenza* suggests that self-production must be understood as a process whose ultimate goal – ‘the free expression of individual creativity’ – can only be constructed by challenging ‘official commodified circuits dedicated to the profit of the few . . . [f]or this reason we have always thought that self-management is the first form of self-production: the self-production of a path of liberation’ (CSOA Forte Prenestino, 1993b: 18).

‘One of our objectives in the present period is precisely that of strengthening the project of self-production’, Assalti Frontali had declared the same year, in the previous issue of the same journal. Even then, however, differences with others in the CSOAs concerning the production and marketing of music were evident, with the band choosing to register their first CD with the SIAE, a body which regulates the distribution of broadcasting royalties in Italy. Their reasoning – that since someone would pocket this money, better it be those committed to redistributing it within the movement – did not impress everyone within the social centres (Assalti Frontali, 1993: 12–13). Dismissing as ‘pure’ and ‘romantic’ those who counselled no performances or media contact outside the movement, the group took a break from touring to concentrate on its Cordata project (Militant A, 1997: 90).

The reasons for the Cordata’s failure are not clear. Militant A simply writes that, suffering from exhaustion, they ‘shut up shop’, while admitting that the prospect of ‘a new discussion on self-production made me nauseous’ (Militant A, 1997: 109). The weight of opinion within the social centres was still an unquestionably important reference point for the group, however; not long before, according to the director Gabriele Salvatores, ‘an assembly of two and a half thousand people’ had been held at Forte Prenestino, to decide whether the band should provide music for his film *Sud*. When the inevitable soundtrack CD was later compiled, Assalti Frontali would refuse to participate, since the label was that of a multinational, Sony (Ibba, 1995: 158).

By 1996 Militant A’s reservations about the efficacy of existing distribution networks within the social centres movement had deepened into a critique directed less at the political desirability of self-production than its poor practical realization by all concerned, including Assalti Frontali himself. Notwithstanding healthy sales of CDs and concert tickets, he complained,

the band could not make a living from its work. Beyond continual difficulties concerning the movement and reimbursement of stock, the biggest problem was attitudinal, the belief that:

... a self-produced work, in refusing normal commercial values, has no economic value. . . . This is the same reasoning of many users of the social centres who slyly think that entry to initiatives is a right to be had gratis . . . [who] are prepared to spend 50,000 lire for dinner at a restaurant, or twice that to get high on a Saturday night, but feel robbed if they're asked to pay 5,000 lire [to enter a social centre]. (Militant A, 1996: 106)

In a shrewd move replicated by other 'militant' bands such as AK47 and e Zezi Gruppo Operaio, Assalti Frontali arranged for *Conflitto* to be distributed through newstands for 12,000 lire by the left daily *il manifesto*. Despite sales of 25,000, this too was judged a financial failure by the band, whose members, according to Militant A, continued to live in debt. When the group announced in early 1997 that it had signed with a major, it sparked a controversy analogous to that within the English-speaking anarchist scene after British band Chumbawamba entered into contract with a music multinational (Militant A, 1997: 120–3).

By contrast, 99 Posse seems less concerned with the politics of CD distribution than those of performance, and its members were quite prepared to supply music for the *Sud* soundtrack album. Concentrating on reaching the widest audience possible, they had signed a pressing and distribution deal with a major which granted them, 'at little more than the industrial price, an unlimited number of copies to be distributed in the circuits of self-management' (Bisca99Posse, 1996: 19). If concerts represent 'from the political point of view . . . the strongest moment of communication and interaction with people', the band felt caught nonetheless between its commitment to play within the CSOAs, where it was paid only for expenses, and its interest in playing commercial venues, where some sort of income could be made (Bisca99Posse, 1996: 21). More recently, 99 Posse has performed to very large crowds as support act for Jovanotti, a singer long considered a lightweight of commercial pop but proof, in Persico's eyes, 'that a person can change' both politically and artistically (Cornacchia and Giove, 1997).

Instead of a Conclusion

No certainties no truth. ('Pecche') (99 Posse)

Ideas and even principles can change; it's dreams to which you must remain faithful. (Militant A, 1996: 30)

The social centres have long been one of the more dynamic sectors of the Italian left. Yet dynamism tends to bring unforeseen consequences. The second half of the 1990s has signalled the less than comfortable discovery that, like the universe itself, the movement's expansion may only have increased the distance between its constituent parts. For Persico:

Everything has changed: some things are better, most are worse, in the sense that those [centres] which have succeeded in growing have paid a very high price, and don't enjoy either the approval or the collaboration of the others. (quoted in Cornacchia and Giove, 1997)

One of the biggest turns in recent years has been the preparedness of a number of CSOAs to work alongside Rifondazione Comunista (PRC), the smaller of the two parties which emerged from the dissolution of the old Communist Party (PCI). For some this is a necessary defence against the new social right of the Lega Nord; for others it represents a failure of imagination, even betrayal (Cappello, 1998). Whatever the case, neither 99 Posse nor Assalti Frontali have been immune from this shift in perspective. Back in the early 1990s, one of the Neapolitan group's best known songs was 'Rafaniello', which compared the local federation of the PRC to a radish: red on the outside, white on the inside. Asked about 'Rafaniello' late in 1997, one band member stated that:

We don't disown the song, but we don't play it any more, because our public has grown and it risks sending an equivocal signal.

Who do you vote for?

Rifondazione. (Giordano, 1997: 26)

A similar change is evident for Militant A. Questioned by the same reporter, he admitted that he felt 'no cultural bond' with Cossutta, the leader of the PRC's pro-Soviet wing, 'nor perhaps a political one'. Still, he continued:

I vote for Rifondazione, after years of not voting, because Bertinotti above all has tried to carry our voice too into government circles. (Giordano, 1997: 21)

A closer look suggests that other, generational shifts are also at work within the social centres movement, shifts which further complicate such growing differences. What happens, for example, when particular cohorts of activists within a youth-centred movement begin to age?

For a certain period the CS represented, for most people I know, the place that resolved their problems. But as they grew older, their problems weren't resolved; rather, the CS became one problem more. If you arrive at a level of incompatibility with the CS either you change it, or you leave. Those who changed it have paid the price of contradictions, however they still have it; those who haven't changed live moments of great difficulty. (Persico, quoted in Cornacchia and Giove, 1997)

Militant A has been blunter in his conclusions: the difficulties in ensuring that the self-management of the CSOA remains a collective undertaking have been exacerbated, he believes, with the emergence of the latest levy of recruits, polarized between:

... those completely ignorant of even the most elementary bases of revolutionary subjectivity (an ignorance so total as to be almost comic) ... [yet] very well-disposed and open to dialogue ... [and] those hyper-ideologues, who are instead the most closed and obtuse, and who are continuing the vendettas of the 1970s into the 1990s. (Militant A, 1997: 106)

The Italian social centres movement's current stasis – insights into which can be found in the work of both 99 Posse and Assalti Frontali – cannot last indefinitely. If Militant A is right, the return of a ghetto mentality, if understandable back in the climate of the 1980s, will likely prove as disastrous as the centres' possible normalization as 'social enterprises'. It is also conceivable that, in an increasingly fragmented and casualized society, where struggles continue to be 'dispersed into chaos', the movement may simply disintegrate as such. For now, at least:

The CSA are an important place of possible communication, proliferation and visibility for an antagonistic point of view; they are one of the few spaces in an ever more fragmented society where different subjects, which otherwise remain segregated in their respective specificities and places of belonging, can socialize and interact politically. (Zaccaria, 1997: 234)

As one of their most potent cultural exports to the rest of Italian society, indigenous rap represents the limit case of the centres' ability to communicate with other 'popular forces'. The CSOAs' capacity not only to provide that 'same space' and 'same dignity' for 'rap and the mazurka' alike (Smeriglio, 1995: 63), but to risk contamination from without in the very process of advancing social self-organization, may well determine the movement's broader relevance or otherwise as it enters the new millenium.

Note

All translations from Italian are my own. I am grateful to the following friends for their assistance in the gathering of materials: Franco Barchiesi, Luc Pac, Pierangelo 'Hobo' Rosati, and (above all) Beatrice Stengel. Thanks too to John Hutnyk, Peter Lentini and Sanjay Sharma for their comments on an earlier version, and to Rosa Lorenzon for double-checking my translation of lyrics. Not to mention my anonymous referees. I must also acknowledge the financial support of the Australian Research Council.

References

- Arcidiacono, Michaela et al. (1995) *L'aeroplano e le stelle: storia orale di una realta' studentesca prima e dopo la Pantera*. Rome: Manifestolibri.
- Assalti Frontali (1993) 'Un altro sasso nello stagno', *Nessuna Dipendenza* 2: 10–13.
- Aufheben (1995) 'Kill or Chill? Analysis of the Opposition to the Criminal Justice Bill', *Aufheben* 4: 1–27.
- Bisca99Posse (1996) *E' odio mosso da amore*. Milan: Zelig.
- Borrelli, Francesca (1995) 'Una agora' tra i banchi di libri e riviste', *il manifesto* 28 March.

- Bramante, Gabriele (1996) 'Dal punk al rap: percorsi di indipendenza', pp. 206–14 in Sandrone Dazieri (ed.) *Italia underground: mappe e reti della cultura alternativa*. Rome: Castelvechi.
- Cappello, Stefano (1996) 'Il silenzio dei centri sociali', *Collegamenti/Wobbly* 2–3: 101–6.
- Cappello, Stefano (1998) 'L'antagonismo socialdemocratico', forthcoming in *Chaos* 11.
- Ceccon, Carlo (1994) 'I ragazzi dell'hinterland', letter to *il manifesto* 15 September: 34.
- Collettivo video Leoncavallo (1995) *milano 10 settembre 1994*. Milan: Centro sociale Leoncavallo.
- Consorzio Aaster (1996) 'Polisemia di un luogo', pp. 21–83 in Consorzio Aaster et al., *Centri sociali: geografie del desiderio*. Milan: ShaKe.
- Cornacchia, Antonio and Franco Giove (1997) 'Intervista ai 99 Posse al "Coppola Rosa" di Adelfia', <http://www.ecn.org/lists/movimento/msg00824.htm>
- CRIC (ed.) (1996) *In ordine sparso*. Turin: Centro di Ricerca e Iniziativa Comunista.
- CS Cox 18 and Calusca City Lights (1996) 'Cox 18: una microstoria metropolitana', pp. 105–60 in Consorzio Aaster et al., *Centri sociali: geografie del desiderio*. Milan: ShaKe.
- CSA Brancaleone (1994) 'Autogestione mon amour', *DeriveApprodi* 5/6: 104–5.
- CSOA Forte Prenestino (1993a) '7 anni di Forte Prenestino', *Nessuna Dipendenza* 3: 28.
- CSOA Forte Prenestino (1993b) 'Stretti tra il tempo . . .', *Nessuna Dipendenza* 3: 18–19.
- Dazieri, Sandrone (1996) 'Centri sociali', pp. 136–74 in Sandrone Dazieri (ed.) *Italia underground: mappe e reti della cultura alternativa*. Rome: Castelvechi.
- Del Bello, Claudio (ed.) (1997) *Una sparatoria tranquilla: per una storia orale del '77*. Rome: Odradek.
- Di Donna, Giulio (1996) 'Assalti Frontali', *Breakout*: 6–7.
- Enrico and Marco (1995) 'O apocalittici o integrati?', in Primo Moroni et al. (eds) *Centri sociali: che impresa! Oltre il ghetto: un dibattito cruciale*. Rome: Castelvechi.
- European Counter Network (1998) 'Isole nella Rete', <http://www.ecn.org>
- FA (1994) 'Il ritmo della metropoli fra rap e politica', *Domenica*.
- Fumo LHP et al. (1992) 'Rap militante', *Decoder* 7: 538–44.
- Giannetti, Massimo (1994) 'Cento centri in movimento', pp. 85–104 in Francesco Adinolfi et al. *Comunità virtuali: I centri sociali in Italia*. Rome: Manifestolibri.
- Giordano, Attilio (1997) 'Avanti popolo?', *il venerdì di Repubblica* 24 Oct. 16–26.
- Ibba, Albo (1995) *Leoncavallo 1975–1995: venti anni di storia autogestita*. Genoa: Costa e Nolan.
- Infoshop CSOA Forte Prenestino (1996) 'Sottrarsi al mercato per rilanciare l'auto-produzione', *Derive Approdi* 9–10: 96–8.
- Jovanotti (1996) 'La musica della razza urbana', pp. 1–6 in Pierfrancesco Pacoda (ed.) *Potere alla parola: antologia del rap italiano*. Milan: Feltrinelli.
- Kolakowski, Leszek (1974) 'My Correct Views on Everything', pp. 1–20 in Ralph Milliband and John Saville (eds) *The Socialist Register 1974*. London: Merlin.

- Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels (1976) 'The German Ideology', in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5. Moscow: Progress Press.
- Mauro and Luca (1994) 'Centri sociali: l'agrro di signorressa (TV)', *Germinal* 66: 27.
- Militant A (1996) '... quel bue che gira sempre intorno', *Derive Approdi* 12/13: 105–6.
- Militant A (1997) *Storie di assalti frontali: conflitti che producono banditi*. Rome: Castelveccchi.
- Mitchell, Tony (1996) *Popular Music and Local Identity: Rock, Pop and Rap in Europe and Oceania*. London: Leicester University Press.
- Moroni, Primo (1996) 'Vita, morte e miracoli dell'underground', pp. 17–50 in Sandrone Dazieri (ed.) *Italia overground: mappe e reti della cultura alternativa*. Rome: Castelveccchi.
- Moroni, Primo et al. (eds) (1995) *Centri sociali: che impresa! Oltre il ghetto: un dibattito cruciale*. Rome: Castelveccchi.
- Nano, Rankis (ed.) (1997) *Come Again: Vibrazioni dal basso*. Rome: Edizioni Xoa Autoproduzioni.
- Nutarelli, Luca (1995) 'Autoproduzioni, taz e fritto misto: funzione dei centri sociali e patologie schizo-socialiste', *Invarianti* 26: 35–40.
- Pacoda, Pierfrancesco (ed.) (1996) *Potere alla parola: antologia del rap italiano*. Milan: Feltrinelli.
- Philopat (1996) 'Cox 18, rumori di fondo', *Derive Approdi* 9/10: 100–3.
- Radio Onda Rossa (1998) 'Home Page' <http://vivaldi.nexus.it/commerce/tmcrew/ror/ror.htm>
- Scarinzì, Cosimo and Fabio Trau' (1984) 'Correggio's graffiti', *Primo Maggio* 22: 23–30.
- Senzamedia (1997) *Troppe persone non fanno neanche perché si va in un centro sociale*. <http://vivaldi.nexus.it/commerce/tmcrew/csa/ricerca/index.htm>
- Smeriglio, Massimiliano (1995) 'Come altrove i cavalli', pp. 60–5 in Massimo Canevacci et al. (eds) *Culture del conflitto: giovani metropoli comunicazione*. Genoa: Costa e Nolan.
- Solaro, Alba (1992) 'Il cerchio e la saetta: Centri Sociali occupati in Italia', pp. 11–68 in Carlo Branzaglia et al. *Posse italiane: centri sociali, underground musicale e cultura giovanile degli anni '90 in Italia*. Florence: Tosca.
- Strumia, Renato (1990) 'Globuli rossi: i centri sociali autogestiti', *Collegamenti/Wobbly* 26: 25–6.
- Tactical Media Crew (1997) 'Centri Sociali Autogestiti', <http://vivaldi.nexus.it/commerce/tmcrew/csa/csa.htm>
- Viano, Maurizio and Vincenzo Binetti (1996) 'What is to Be Done? Marxism and Academia', pp. 243–54 in Saree Makdisi et al. (eds) *Marxism Beyond Marxism*. London: Routledge.
- Wright, Steve (1988) 'Forcing the Lock? The Problem of Class Composition in Italian Workerism', PhD thesis, Monash University, Melbourne.
- Wright, Steve (1995) 'Confronting the Crisis of Fordism: The Italian Debates', *Reconstruction* 6: 25–34.
- Wright, Steve (1998) 'Missed Opportunities – New Left Readings of the Italian

Resistance', pp. 77–97 in A. Davidson and S. Wright (eds) *'Never Give In': The Italian Resistance and Politics*. New York: Peter Lang.

Zaccaria, Angelo (1997) 'Cari compagni e compagne dell'altra sponda!', *vis-a-vis* 5: 212–37.

Steve Wright has co-edited *'Never Give In': The Italian Resistance and Politics* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998) and *Work of the Future: Global Perspectives* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1997).