

A/traverso: One of a Thousand Little Machines

Abstract

A/traverso, the movement sheet produced by Franco 'Bifo' Berardi and others from 1975-1981, was one of thousands of revolutionary news sheets circulating Italy during the close of the 1970s. The printed word, to paraphrase Lenin, acted as the scaffolding around which Italy's historic 'autonomia' movement was constituted, characterised as it was by the mass youth refusal of work and experimental culture drawing from influences including William Burroughs, Mayakovsky, Deleuze & Guattari. This paper will explore how movement sheets were constitutive of autonomia — and their production and distribution are as fundamental to the history of the movement as their content is. It draws upon a recently published volume of essays by Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, of which I was a co-editor along with Seth Wheeler — the first half of this paper covers arguments and histories that Seth and I wrote together, and can be read in our book. I will use the example of Italy's 1970s movement sheets not only to explore autonomia's history and ongoing legacy, but also to discuss media production as fundamental to the shape and form of social movements, and what that might mean for militants today.

Autonomia: Revolution at the Level of Everyday Life

Before speaking about *A/traverso* as a form, we must first briefly explain the context in which it existed, which can be broadly understood with reference to Italy's *autonomia* movement: specifically its creative wing.¹ If the factories of Northern Italy had provided the locus around which a worker militancy antagonistic to the Communist Party and trade unions had erupted at the close of the 60s (in which *operaismo* gained an empirical and organisational influence), their restructuring at the beginning of the 70s created a new generation of workers with an intermittent and precarious relationship to work. In the months following Italy's Hot Autumn of 1969, and in recognition of a growing wave of struggles that fell outside of the confines of the factory (most notably a wave of rent strikes and housing occupations), the recently established operaist group *Potere Operaio* (Workers' Power), with the support of militants within the student movement, took up the popular slogan 'from the factory to society', alongside new demands for

¹ Patrick Cunninghame.

a flat rate 'social wage' that quickly gained currency among shop floor militants and in wider society.

Informed by an indifference to party politics and by the tactics and militancy of organised student-worker action, a growing counterculture would begin to engage in a programme of activity aimed at the immediate satisfaction of its needs, positing pre-figurative glimpses of a society external to capitalism's dominion. In December 1976 the *A/traverso* collective wrote:

There is a lot of talk about how the masses must make sacrifices. But it doesn't seem to occur to anyone that the laws of economics are not a natural fact, and that there is no natural reason why life should be forced into the cage of sacrifice. This elementary analysis, this elementary exercise of intelligence is strictly excluded from the realm of the sayable. The economy has its laws and these laws are transformed into laws of nature, and life must be sacrificed to the restoration of this temporarily unbalanced nature of the economy...

We will organise events, we will make gestures capable of resuscitating life against the economy.

Here we can see *A/traverso*'s influence by French post-structuralists, particularly Barthes, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari. Arguably, militants comprising creative autonomia looked to create revolution at the level of everyday life, or the immediate redistribution of time and space, and was a movement predicated on mass refusal. Bifo reflects: 'the idea was that wealth lay above all in the availability of time, in the possibility of working the minimum necessary to reproduce community life'. Addressing rising youth unemployment and prohibitive rents, a huge expansion of squatting was undertaken, providing space for new modes of social organisation. Actions such as auto-reduction (mass looting, the refusal to pay market price for goods and services) were justified as the immediate seizure of use-values unmediated by capitalist exchange. As Franco outlines:

Tens of thousands of young workers, students and the unemployed came from the suburbs, gathered in groups in the city centre, entered department stores, took the luxury items displayed on the counters and left without paying. They would enter

cinemas for free, and not pay for tickets. They sat at tables in fancy restaurants, ate and drank and then left without paying the bill.

A/traverso and Its Influences

This is the political context in which thousands of ‘movement sheets’ would proliferate in Italy. Irony and subversion would become their *raison d’être*, deploying provocative jokes and imagery to destabilise the communicative flows of bourgeois society’s power and offering hyperbolic, bombastic and satirical critiques that would help to compose movement discourse and action. *A/traverso* would consciously incorporate ideas belonging to Dada and the early avant-garde, while also presenting ‘Mao-Dadaism’ to signal their commitment to the radical potential of art and literature for the masses. Taking inspiration from the poetry and visual experiments of Mayakovsky and the cut and paste methods of William Burroughs, *A/traverso* would mark a shift from the more ‘rationalist side of movement design’ as embodied by more orthodox left groups such as *Potere Operaio*.

Furthermore, *A/traverso* as a movement sheet would move beyond mere representation as a communicative tool and tend towards open signifiers, or ‘a dynamic and unbalanced terrain of flows and ruptures, connections and breaks’, as Nick Thoburn put it in his interview with Franco. Rather than claiming to impose any strategic direction, the sheets would aim to emphasise certain cultural motifs, certain watchwords with strong aesthetic, ironic and provocative content. It is through the use of such open signifiers that the movement sheets can be understood as ‘machinic’ as conceptualised by Deleuze and Guattari: as productive force of desire that gave collective shape and meaning to mass youth rebellions of the time. The result of this being that autonomia can be conceptualised as a ‘movement without measure’: according to Primo Moroni, who had done a bit of accounting at the time, it can be estimated that between 1975 and 1977 the equivalent of a daily newspaper came out in Italy that sold several thousand copies, made up of this dense network of more or less local sheets that often repurposed each others’ material, or modulated the same concepts over a variety of form. In the riots of March ’77, hundreds of thousands of young militants would storm the cities of Rome and Bologna, and in the final accounting, according to Nanni Balestrini, this wave of struggle would see 40,000 people charged, 15,000 of them imprisoned.

The Printed Word as Form

Beyond their content, movement sheets were constitutive of autonomia in another sense — their production and distribution are as fundamental to the history of the movement as their content is. Offset lithography underscored Italy's radical print explosion during the 1970s, and in comparison to letterpress printing that came before it, required no formal training for copy to be laid out, and as such was decidedly faster, lending itself to a movement that needed to communicate its ideas swiftly. As no formal training was required to set out copy, offset was a more participatory and creative way to lay out newspapers, and had the benefit of being decidedly cheaper than its alternatives. Free from the aesthetic restrictions and cost associated with other print technologies, hundreds of radical newsheets, hastily arranged in bedrooms, cafés or in occupations would flood into Italian society, each operating as a little machine to produce radical subjectivity. Arguments and discussions would often accompany their production, and these debates acted to sharpen the political positions of those who produced them.

Sympathetic printers would lead those who created movement sheets to radical bookshops and other distribution nodes: most notably, a book distribution network called 'red points', made up of 150 bookshops that passed around these printed materials. The circulation of movement sheets would bring their creators into contact with the wider movement, constituted as it was by bookshops, discussion groups, occupations and demonstrations. These contacts, and the movement sheets that travelled between them, created the thick social bonds in which autonomia was built. It should be said that the creative phenomena of the movement sheet was not specific to Italy alone. In Britain and the USA the alternative press; informed by the growing psychedelic pop culture; in opposition to the war in Vietnam; and powered by offset and mimeographic printing, would circulate through the 'Underground Press Syndicate', constituting a transnational 'alternative society' at the close of the 1960s. This international network laid the ground for *A/traverso* and the later Xerox zine revolution that accompanied the arrival of punk rock a few years later — powered by photocopiers exiting the confines of the corporate office and becoming readily available to the mass of youth via newsagents, schools and libraries.

Political Communication in the Present

In contrast to the social bonds made in the process of the design, production and dissemination of the printed word, political communication today is mediated by the digital sphere, and primarily through social media. It is well documented that such modes of communication serve very particular affects, which are very different to those of the print production which acted as the scaffolding of *autonomia* as already outlined.

Firstly, Stefania Milan has noted how digital communication in social movements ‘exacerbates the centrality of the subjective and private experience of the individual in contemporary mobilizations, and has partially replaced the collective politics of identity typical of social movements’. Others including Richard Seymour have similarly argued that the proliferation of digital information technology gives rise to individualism, fragmentation, narcissism and ‘influencer culture’, and are thus antithetical to the realisation of collective movement building for social change. Arguably, the refocussing on the individual prioritised by social media moves us away from the open signifiers that acted as a catch-all for society’s discontents in the case of *A/traverso* and the movement sheets, and towards representation of individual experience. Counterintuitively, it seems then that, because of their specificity, such representations may not have the ability to viralise in the way that the open signifiers of the movement sheet did.

Secondly, those of us that have been involved in political organisations or social movement groups will be familiar with the siloing off of communications tasks to a small cadre of designated ‘expert’ individuals or ‘working groups’. Through a case study of the *Occupy* movement, Anna Kaun argues that the main goal these activists are tasked with are visibility, whereby ‘success’ is measured by the quantitative calculation of shares, likes, and post views, in effect de-synchronising media practices from political decision making and action. A new lower barrier to entry to social movements is made possible here: now the minimum form of engagement is to share an upcoming action or demo on social media, rather than to attend it. What’s more, this form tends to favour communication styles that focus on hegemony and counter-hegemony: its role is much more straightforwardly to offer a counter-narrative in opposition to the status-quo, or to offer truth in response to prevailing disinformation. This approach stands in stark contrast to the more discursive approach of *autonomia*’s movement sheets, which made a virtue of parody and irony.

Such binary and metrics oriented approaches to communication in effect deprives social movements and their subjects of their multiple and sometimes contradictory identities. Instead, we should think of social movements as assemblages — complex systems assembling in response to internal limits and outside stimulus: they are disparate, pluralistic, dynamic, and lacking a clear centre — as the case of *autonomia* exemplifies well. Communicative tools are not just where our political desires are expressed. In their debate, assembling and distribution, they can be where our desires are formed, sharpened and debated too. Without wanting to suggest a nostalgic, wholesale return to print production as an easy answer, it is my contention that the history of *A/traverso* and *autonomia*'s movement sheets had a radically different offer to communicative practices today, acting as they did a laboratory of movement ideas and debates. What would it mean for militants today to take inspiration from such histories, and how could new approaches to political communication help to renew spaces of collaboration, discussion and debate — moving away from fragmentation, individualisation and metrics and towards open signifiers, provocation and playfulness?