

My Year in Italy during the 'Years of Lead'

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In July of 2023 I found myself in the Feltrinelli bookstore near Piazza della Repubblica in Rome perusing the history section.¹ As I casually followed the chronology of publications on ancient Rome and the Renaissance, I passed the *ventennio fascista* and World War II sections and came to an abrupt stop at the area boldly labeled '*lotta armata*.' Here were rows of journalistic and scholarly works about the social turmoil wrought by right-wing and left-wing politics and terrorism during the turbulent *Anni di piombo* (late 1960s to early 1980s). The placard advertising the section was an arresting one: the black-and-white photograph depicts an urban intersection with billowing smoke obscuring the background. Three young men are pictured: one turns away from the camera, moving out of the frame on the right; another on the left is hurrying toward the sidewalk where a fallen bicycle lies; and the central figure, a handkerchief covering his face, is caught in mid leap hovering above the street and outlined by effluvia. In his left hand he clutches a wrapped banner or flag.

97

1. I thank Sian Gibby and Laura E. Ruberto for their feedback to an early draft of this article. This article is an expanded version of my March 10, 2009, blog post «Bologna 1977» *i-Italy.org*, <https://bloggers.iitaly.org/node/7803> (last accessed January 23, 2024).

The striking image and the array of related books immediately caught my attention because I had personal experience of Italy during that troubling era. I had visited briefly in the summers of 1975 and 1978, but it was the year I spent there, 1977, that had the most profound and abiding impact on me, in large part because the cities of Bologna and Milan where I lived were deeply entrenched in that tumultuous historic moment, as were a large number of people I got to know. My Italian voyage that year was not a pilgrimage to ‘discover my roots’ or some mythic ancestral *paese*: I knew my Italian family, albeit from a distance, through years of correspondence and visits on both sides of the Atlantic. My 1977 sojourn was not confined to my migrant parents’ respective hometowns, which I of course visited, but was instead designed to encounter and understand what was then contemporary Italy with all its beauty and contradictions.

The catalyst that led me to Italy in 1977 was the result of a confluence of entwined circumstances involving close to a century of transatlantic Italian migration as well as happenstance. My family’s migration history is a complicated one but not uncommon, for it involved multiple oceanic crossings and numerous returns of us-born children raised and socialized in Italy.² Both my parents, Enrico (1922-2015) and Anna (birth name Anniballe, 1927-1922), were born in New York City, but their respective emigrant parents repatriated and brought them both as children back to Italy. My father hailed from Carunchio (Chieti province), Abruzzo, and my mother was from Maranola, a *frazione* of Formia (Latina province), in Lazio. They returned as adults to the city of their birth – Anna in 1950 and Enrico two years later – where they would eventually meet and marry in 1954. I have vivid childhood memories of my paternal grandmother, Philomena, and my maternal grandfather, Emilio, coming from Italy to stay with us during the 1960s. A summer vacation in Italy in 1975 was my first foray as an adult to meet my Italian uncles, aunts, and cousins whom I knew through letters, telephone

2. I write about my family’s migration history in my article «“Don’t Forget You Have Relatives Here”: Transnational Intimacy and Acoustic Communities of WOV-AM’s *La Grande Famiglia*,» *New Italian Migrations to the United States, 2: Art and Culture Since 1945*, edited by LAURA E. RUBERTO and JOSEPH SCIORRA, University of Illinois Press, 2017, pp. 32-64.

calls, and a lifetime of stories my parents told me about them during countless meals and holiday gatherings.³

In the summer of 1976, my cousin Raffaele arrived in New York City with the plan to drive across the country to California, and so, intrigued by the idea, I joined him. A little over a week later, we met a group of visiting Italian students on the ferry from Sausalito to San Francisco, and I fell into a lively conversation with a woman from Milan named Claudia. During the fall of that year I corresponded with Raffaele, who was studying law in Bologna, and with Claudia, who was by then working in a bank, and both of them urged me to visit Italy. By that time, I had decided to suspend my studies at Brooklyn College, not knowing what field I wanted to pursue, and was working in a neighborhood restaurant scrubbing greasy pots and going nowhere fast. Their invitation was an appealing one. I had taken an introductory Italian class in college and was eager to learn more of the language (as a child I had made a deliberate decision in the early 1960s to stop speaking Italian after being repeatedly taunted by my Brooklyn neighborhood friends – many of whom were also Italian Americans – for speaking Italian with my parents in public). I had also saved enough money to live in Italy for a while without needing to work. So, I booked a round-trip ticket, open for a year, ready for whatever adventure awaited me. Little did I know when I arrived in late January 1977 that I was about to participate in a tempestuous yet exhilarating moment in Italian history that in the end would be a life-altering experience.

During that year I traveled back and forth between Bologna and Milan, at times staying with Claudia, with whom I became romantically involved, or renting and crashing at people's apartments in Bologna. My base, so to speak, was at Raffaele's parents' house in Abruzzo, which I visited from time to time. During the frequent train rides I made I began to witness, if only incidentally, some subtle things revealed about Italian society, as when I observed stooped *contadini* laboring in fields who straightened themselves to wave at us whizzing by, or when I shared cabins with Italian migrants

3. I have no memories of the 1957 trip my parents took to visit relatives when I was two years old other than the ones created subsequently looking at home movies and family photographs.

who offered me slices of their hard salami and cheese as they traveled back and forth to Turin, Zürich, Frankfurt, and other places of sacrifice and desires – temporary stops along an unceasing journey toward security. But it was through the interactions with newfound friends that Italy revealed itself to me as I, in turn, participated in a host of activities that defined the era.

Image 1. *Portrait of the author posing in a borrowed trench coat and scarf, Bologna, 1977.*



Source: Joseoh Sciorra

Image 2. *My regular crew of friends outside of the Piccolo Bar in Piazza Verdi, Bologna, 1977.*



Source: Joseph Sciorra

At first, I didn't like Milan. Perhaps because it was too similar to New York City, too big, difficult to comprehend easily with just a few visits. It couldn't compare to Bologna, that university town with its porticoes that embrace you as you stroll. My unenthusiastic reaction was colored by the fact that Claudia worked 9 to 5 in a Milanese bank, and I was a loungeur on a year-long holiday in search of escapades (although I did briefly teach English off the books in a language school run by former Berlitz School teachers). Eventually I came to truly appreciate Milan as Claudia familiarized me with its blue-collar roots, taking me to the beguiling *osterie* that were even then seen as fading relics of the past. Our romance indubitably left its mark not only in how I came to view the city but also in my developing Italian-language proficiency, which became so marked by my pronounced Milanese accent that it made my Abruzzese relatives laugh.

Image 3. *Playing soccer amidst Arnaldo Pomodoro's sculpture in Piazza Verdi, 1977.*



Source: *Joseph Sciorra*

But Bologna became my de facto playground as I quickly joined, when Raffaele introduced me, a dynamic group of leftist students of working-class backgrounds (I also encountered a few students who leaned right politically and were for the most part *figli di papà*, who dressed in brand-

name clothes, and, as I would learn later, indulged in hard drugs like cocaine and heroin). Most of these young men and women hailed from various parts of the country and were the first in their families to attend university. Valentino from Puglia, Giuseppe from Sicily, Daniele from the Veneto, Gianfranco from Sardegna, and Vasco from the Trentino-Alto Adige, were just a few of my new friends. There was also another Giuseppe, from Umbria, who went by the nickname ‘Humphrey,’ sported a trench coat à la Bogart in *Casablanca*, and who would greet me with Alberto Sordi’s mangled English, «What’s a matter American boys?» from the film *Un Americano a Roma*. These students would become my new Italian coterie of *compagni*.

Our meeting point was Piazza Verdi – where sculptor Arnaldo Pomodoro’s rusting trio of modernist ‘totems’ stood somewhat incongruously – and in particular the Piccolo Bar. For one year, this spot was the center of my universe. I ate full-course lunches for 300 lire in the nearby university cafeteria, slipping in without having to show a university card (I would pocket a bottle opener from there as a treasured souvenir). It was at the piazza, at the corner of Via Zamboni and Largo Respighi, that I first encountered playwright Dario Fo and his satirical *Mistero Buffo* as the focus of a large gathering who pressed into the crowded bar to watch on its small TV when he returned to prime time after being banned from the airwaves for fifteen years. In other parts of the city, I ate hot *krapfen* fresh from the oven coming home before dawn. I honed my Italian learning the songs of *cantautore* Francesco Guccini, who became a cultural touchstone for me; his acerbic «L’avvelenata» appealed to my rebellious sensibilities and served as my theme song that year:

Mi piace far canzoni e bere vino, mi piace far casino, poi
sono nato fesso
E quindi tiro avanti e non mi svesto dei panni che son
solito portare
Ho tante cose ancora da raccontare per chi vuole ascoltare
e a culo tutto il resto!

*[I like writing songs and drinking wine, I like making a ruckus,
then I’m born an idiot
And so I carry on, true to myself and don’t take off the clothes I
usually wear*

*I still have many things to tell for those who want to listen and
fuck everything else!]⁴*

I even visited one of his *osterie di fuori porta* in an unsuccessful attempt to catch a glimpse of the singer from whom I was learning about contemporary Italian language and society.

Image 4. *Students in Piazza Verdi, 1977*



Source: *Joseph Sciorra*

By the time I arrived in Bologna, students had occupied the university to demand school reform and to protest the lack of jobs available upon graduation. I soon accompanied my new friends to political meetings held in various university buildings. One time I joined Raffaele to DJ a music set on the pirate radio station Radio Alice when a group of women burst into the studio and ousted us from the airwaves to discuss a host of pressing feminist issues. My linguistic competency allowed me to engage in endless political discussions (at a time when few Italians spoke English), and I took to reading *autonomista* publications like the weekly *Lotta Continua* to familiarize myself with my peers' politics. I joined a few demonstrations, not always fully comprehending the political issues in question, in which protesters shouted the slogans of the day, from the puerile («Scemi! Scemi!») to that of the Paris student revolt of May 1968 («Ce n'est qu'un début, contin-

4. All English translations are mine.

uons le combat!»). During one of my infrequent telephone conversations with my parents they said somewhat fretfully that they thought they had recognized me in a photograph of demonstrators in Bologna published in a spring issue of *Time* magazine. Despite all these animated activities, the complexities of the situation eluded me: the underlying societal conditions; the espoused radical agendas; the full extent of the advocated political violence; and ultimately the severity of the country's crisis. To a large degree it was all a lark for me, a young American traveler on an extended holiday caught up in the intensity of the moment.

But that exuberance – of political discourse, of intrigue, of danger, and of the world imagined anew – could not be denied, for it elicited an exhilarating and prodigious feeling. And it was the students who I had the good fortune of befriending who engendered that positive sensation. The amity, the good humor, and the playfulness of youth made for an elating and alluring indulgence. Giuseppe (aka Humphrey) summed it up best years later when he was interviewed about his experience at that time:

A Bologna bastava entrare in facoltà per essere quasi preso all'amo dai compagni del collettivo, che ti pescavano alle lezioni, in biblioteca, dal bidello o in corridoio. A me vennero quasi a cercarmi al bar di piazza Verdi, il Piccolo Bar. La vita era come una giostra, dalla mattina alla sera in piazza e poi nelle osterie. Un' esperienza del tutto nuova per uno come me, venuto da una cittadina che era poco più di un paese. Un nuovo modo di pensare. Una sorta di liberazione interiore.⁵

[In Bologna, it was enough to enter into the department to be practically hooked by friends of the group, who would come get you during classes, in the library, have the porter find you, or in the hallway. They would almost know to come look for me at the Piccolo Bar in Piazza Verdi. Life was like a carousel, from morning to night in the piazza and then the taverns. It was an experience that was completely new to me, because I had come from a small town that was little more than a village. A new way of thinking. A sort of interior liberation.]

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5. Enrico Franceschini, *Avevo vent'anni: Storia di un collettivo studentesco, 1977-2007*, Feltrinelli, 2007, 88.

The frivolity and ease of companionship made living in Bologna that year a heady rollercoaster ride for me, a freeing of the spirit in the shaping of an alternative future.

Image 5. *Musicians performing in Piazza Verdi on April 22, 1977*



Source: Joseph Sciorra

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On March 11, 1977, in the city the Italian Communist Party had governed since 1945, the carabinieri shot an unarmed medical student, Francesco Lorusso, 25, during a demonstration. Pitched battles ensued between students and the police, with barricaded streets and Molotov cocktails used on one side, and tear gas and rubber bullets on the other side. Tanks rumbled down Via Rizzoli. French intellectuals Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Jean-Paul Sartre, and others denounced the state's repressive methods. When I surreptitiously tried taking photographs of a group of police assembled at the city's Two Towers I was approached by a plainclothes officer asking for my documents. When I feigned ignorance of Italian, saying I left my US passport at home, I was put in the back seat of an unmarked car, in which several machine guns lay on the floor. At one point the officer turned to me and, placing his pointed finger shaped into a pistol at my forehead, said this is how the police would deal with someone like me in the United States. When we arrived at police headquarters, I produced my passport, stating I was a tourist passing through Bologna on my way to France, and I was let go. In September, student groups forced the municipal government to sponsor

a three-day national conference against repression, with free food and use of the sports stadium made available to the 100,000 people who came to Bologna. The streets, especially around the university, were filled with throngs of festive revelers.

At the end of the year, with my ticket about to expire, I returned to the States having decided I would study anthropology and art history (Claudia and I would remain long-distance lovers for a while and, eventually, friends, which we are to this day). The following summer I visited Bologna briefly on the way to a cousin's wedding only to discover the ebullient mood I had experienced the previous year had evaporated. Members of the Red Brigade, a left-wing terrorist group, had kidnapped and killed former prime minister Aldo Moro, and the state's repression of the extra-parliamentary left and others escalated after that. The tension among my friends was palpable. By the time I returned to Bologna again in 1982 I had completed my undergraduate studies and had just begun my Master's degree at New York University. That year, I met up with Giuseppe/Humphrey, who was working in a bank on Via Zamboni, and Valentino, who was married, had a baby daughter, and was unemployed. In the five years that had passed since my Italian sojourn the little world we had briefly shared was gone.

The last time I went to Bologna was in July 2007. During my short stay I walked the city's streets, revisiting Piazza Verdi and other haunts from thirty years ago, and at one moment I found myself weeping uncontrollably. My tears were not from nostalgia for *quando eravamo giovani e belli* or for *la mia cara Bologna*, which had changed so drastically from my memories. I cried instead because I was overwhelmed by the sheer power of those times, by the force of the camaraderie, by the fervor of the political convictions, and by the dynamism of creativity that was once visible everywhere. The Years of Lead were irrefutably a time of social unrest and horrific terrorism that racked the country to its core. And yet it was the vivacious fellowship and youthful optimism that I had enthusiastically encountered that have left an indelible mark on me to this very day. The Italy of 1977 remains one of the many Italies that I continue to return to from time to time.