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Wrong Place, Right Time

'68 and the Impasses of Periodization

Evan Calder Williams and Alberto Toscano

Abstract This essay critically approaches the use of “1968” as a periodizing category by contrasting historiographic and political debates on the event and aftermath of the French May with the spatial and temporal unevenness that attaches to Italy’s “long” 1968. We explore two interlocking dimensions of the latter: the reprise of the “Southern question” in the midst of this sociopolitical upheaval, on the one hand, and the potent if enigmatic image of an Italian “creeping May,” on the other. A political and historiographic reflection on the Italian case suggests the need to dislocate a linear, if punctuated, periodization of 1968, and to move toward an understanding of the crises and movements that cluster around this date through a framework anchored around the notion of *rhythm* conceived as the site of political and spatial unevenness.

Keywords Henri Lefebvre, May 1968, periodization, rhythm, Southern question

Capitalist development, introducing itself into an archaic and stratified reality, makes the tensions of that reality explode anew, and in turn sees its own tensions surface in a more severe and hastened form.

—Lucio Magri, *Considerazioni sui fatti di Maggio*

The quantity of interval determines the pressure of the tension.

—Sergei Eisenstein, “A Dialectic Approach to Film Form”

Given the flurry of commemorations, hot takes, and reevaluations that inevitably accompany them, political anniversaries such as the semicentennial of May '68 may seem inauspicious occasions to pull back and reflect critically on how or why we periodize historical happenings and processes. And yet the inseparability of anniversaries from such frenzies of memorialization might offer an opportunity to detect some of the latent operations at work more generally in the practice of periodization, ones that may otherwise pass unnoticed.¹ These are most visibly at play historiographically, in retroactive narrative constructions that situate discrete moments as expressions of, or exceptions to, the tendencies of a given period. But periodization can also be seen at work in the very materiality of events themselves, in

sedimented and shifting social forms and imaginaries that give shape to horizons of action and expectation, and make interference possible between what might otherwise be demarcated as unrelated “fields” or “spheres.” Indeed, it is the hope of linking those two diachronic structures, narrative and causal—alongside the strategic benefits promised by such a nexus—that makes periodization so enduringly central to any serious effort to think history politically and politics historically, and which animates the interpretive and tropological frameworks and models on which periodizing hinges: allegory, symptom, analogy, totality, reflection, expression, and so forth.

However, if almost any attempt to inquire into political and cultural history demands both narrative reconstruction and causal explanation, an effort at periodization that takes its bearings not from a decade or “stage” but from an especially notorious or influential event like May ’68 poses a different question: What are the relations of determination, exception, or transfer that take shape between a seemingly singular event and the mesh of forces that might constitute the signature tendencies or “decisive element” of a period? More plainly, how, in focusing on a single occasion, do we map the conduits between the exceptional and the expected, the contingent and the necessary? Does that which appears as qualitatively new express an unprecedented leap ahead or, conversely, does it reveal what has long been present and gathering steam while being refused visibility?

In this essay, we suggest that such questions of periodization have to be supplemented and complicated by the notion of *rhythm*. Thinking the complexities of political and social temporality through this notion is hardly a new approach,² but in this essay, we read rhythm as a specific name for the irregular intervals, lesser occurrences, and incipient energies that may be formalized into sequences, yet which cannot be reduced to the settled traits of a decade, let alone a “period.” The correction this can offer is particularly important, considering two now-familiar operations whose political consequences have been similarly

disabling and which we might regard as the trap that efforts at periodization often unwittingly set for themselves. On the one hand is an excessive fixation on an event that appears as a nearly messianic rupture in historical time. This is often to the exclusion of the far messier array of forces that feed into that explosive occurrence, eliding the mechanisms by which an event concentrates attention and narrative focus around itself, in a process that is subsequently disavowed or concealed when the event itself is taken to typify the social field (and/or historical period) whence it emerges. On the other is a flattening determinism, in which shifts in the “decisive element”—for instance, mutations in the structure of capital accumulation—set fixed and narrow slots of possibility, “schedules” even, within which actors and processes are fated to carry out the drama of a script they have never read. How, then, to navigate between these opposing and complementary pitfalls? More specifically, if grappling with May ’68—and hence with an event as either exception to or consequence of the period it seems to emblemize—has become one of the most relentlessly centered approaches to periodizing the 1960s, what goes missing within it? What are the limits to the sort of historical imaginary that it does not so much produce as it is underwritten by?

To try and suggest how the question of rhythm can offer a needed rejoinder to these limits, the first section of this essay revisits the impasses of periodization as they emerge from historiographic and political debates around the French May. We then shift, in the second section, to the political temporality and experience of a different ’68, the Italian *Sessantotto*, geographically adjacent and in continual interchange with the French one, yet marked by a fundamentally uneven, dense temporal rhythm, compounded by a fragmented social and national geography, in which the syndical *scadenza* is much more prominent than the epiphanic *événement*. We could say that if the French May ’68 collapses revolution into revolt, the Italian “creeping May” (*il maggio strisciante*) and its “red decade” (partially overlapping as it did with the reductively named “years of lead”) create a very different kind

of articulation between these two poles of antisystemic time. This is an articulation, we suggest, evidenced by the theorizing of metropolitan insurrections in 1970s *autonomia* or, in a far less linear manner, by the ambivalent irruption of “Southern” revolts into the oriented temporality of revolutionary praxis. In the final section, we will try to approach this temporal uniqueness of the Italian *Sessantotto* through the question of “creeping” rhythm, and more particularly through the inflection or short-circuiting of the geographic orientation of historical time (qua time of “Northern” industrial and technological progress) by new “molecular” figures of the “Southern question.” This articulation between the social geography of *la questione meridionale* and the political temporality of *il maggio strisciante* could also be regarded as a “rhythmanalysis” of sorts, in the sense that Henri Lefebvre and Catherine Régulier ([1986] 2004: 96) note how “concrete times have rhythms, or rather are rhythms—and all rhythms imply the relation of a time to a space, a localised time, or, if one prefers, a temporalised space.” Such an articulation of space and time may help dislocate the effect of linearity and homogeneity that can often attach itself to the periodizing imaginary, allowing a better grasp of the social “crisis” and “deregulations” (*dérèglements*) of rhythms that produce “antagonistic effects,” in the understanding that “disruptions and crises always have origins in and effects on rhythms” (Lefebvre [1992] 2004: 52–53).

“Events Belie Forecasts”

As regards the French May, the historiographical tendency, patently obvious in the cumulative bibliography accumulated over previous anniversary recurrences, has bent decidedly toward employing the abstract, monumental blankness of the “decade”—the 1960s as such—to stress the incomparable singularity of the event (or, tellingly, events, *les événements*).⁴ With respect to ’68, as Jean-Claude Milner (2009: 84–86) has acerbically noted, this may be a largely unwitting effect of the dependency of the grammar of French politics on a revolutionary historiographic tradition that has *journées* and their dates as its

guiding figure. Yet consideration of just how that figure has been taken up again and again reveals that perhaps the seemingly distant poles of the above-mentioned periodizing trap lie far closer than they seem. For even this kind of stress on the event's singularity can produce a historical fixity akin to the rejection of possible variance by a totalizing schema determined "in the last instance" by what lies seemingly "below" or "behind" the visible stage of political action. Every effort to relentlessly center a single date or moment itself can serve to negate the singularity it wishes to insist on, whether the intention be celebration, mourning, or castigation. For, as Kristin Ross (2002: 3) has meticulously detailed, the legacy of '68 is one in which overmemorialization itself works to unmake historical memory: "Only days after the events subsided in June 1968, an astounding proliferation of verbiage began to be published, and this production has continued, with discernible ebbs and flows, to this day. Discourse has been produced, but its primary effect has been to liquidate—to use an old '68 word—erase, or render obscure the history of May." Moreover, such an "effect" is hardly neutral or the mere consequence of secondary textual accounts crowding out living memory. Rather, the "management of May's memory" generates a situation in which "the political dimensions of the event have been, for the most part, dissolved or dissipated by commentary and interpretations" (1). Suitably defanged, May becomes available as a floating signifier, particularly open to use as a vague stand-in for "a new image of caring liberalism—one that has not turned its back on the humanist aspirations of 68, which brought us anti-racism, feminism, participation and so many other commendable causes," as Alexander Zevin (2009: 129) astutely notes.

However, if this torqued cancellation of historical singularity is at least partially due to decades' worth of "verbiage" and targeted nostalgia, it is worth considering how these dynamics of exception and determination get figured in accounts written in those "days after," or in the months immediately preceding and following May—in other words, to reflect

on how political chronicles and interventions made sense of the link between highly visible revolutionary sequences and ongoing, at times opaque, crises of *negation* targeting state forms, horizons of historical expectation, and structures of belief. For instance, in André Glucksmann's "Strategy and Revolution in France 1968"—written by July 1 of that year—the exceptionality of May is putatively downplayed from the start. Its "possibility of a revolution . . . only seems so miraculously original because it is the most classic of all" (1968: 121), and it acts as an iconographically charged expression of what was already at stake: "The barricades did not magically pervert a hitherto harmonious France. They merely revealed the battlefield which France was, is and remains" (68). In this sense, especially given Glucksmann's emphasis that the storied barricades were not truly "military strongholds," what May "revealed" was not a turning point, rupture, or constitutively new phase but a "test" of the distribution of power (67). Yet despite this initial shift toward a framework designed to temper the incommensurability of the event, the "Movement of May and June 1968 in France" immediately becomes *the* organizing principle and date around which to structure an analysis of struggles against capitalism. It serves as the capstone of a 120-year span that conveniently arcs from the revolutions of 1848 to the Paris in which Glucksmann is writing, while crucially functioning as a marker of a purported reclamation of geopolitical agency from global South back to the North: "Since 1945, Europe's fate had been decided over its head, settled between Washington and Moscow, shaken only by colonial peoples. Today history is knocking at our door, the Movement of May and June 1968 in France has taken its grip on the course of world events. The French revolution will be decided in France, the European revolution will be the work of Europe itself" (69). Even setting aside Glucksmann's mid-1970s turn to virulent anti-Marxism, his enthusiastic apologias for imperialist intervention, or his cheerleading for Nicolas Sarkozy's nationalist

revanchism, it is little stretch to read in these lines the fantasy of reasserting national and civilizational coherence amid the crises of state and capital.

Despite sharing with the Glucksmann of '68 a language of “contestation,” spontaneity, and ideological crisis, Henri Lefebvre’s *L’irruption de Nanterre au sommet*, a collection of essays written in the months before, during, and after May, moves in nearly the inverse direction, opening as it does with a chapter on “events and situations” whose first words are: “Events belie forecasts” (1969: 7). Yet this reveals a political ground conditioned by what Lefebvre understands as the crucial situation of state power: “The French state today stands above society but extends down to the base of this society. It is not at all confined to the superstructures but in a sense covers the whole of social life” (44). From here, the historical stock taking quickly becomes more complicated than a unidirectional process of saturation and control, as that complete extension of the state is contravened by a general “collapse of this society’s superstructures, which were already eroded by use and abuse by the state power,” a breakdown itself occurring on the already hollowed-out ground of the “ideological and political void which pure power, pure state power, creates around itself,” a “void . . . as vast as the world” (65). This dizzying dialectics of exhaustion and inversion ultimately forms the key logic underlying *L’irruption*, which frames the events of May through a set of negations, gaps, feedback loops, and, crucially, all the “lags, distortions, and disparities characteristic of French society, and of the modern world,” including a “new lag [that] is arising between the compulsions of industrial production and the urgencies of a developing urban society” (71). In this way, far from seeing the revolutionary activity of May as “classical,” uniquely contemporary, or attuned to the future, Lefebvre suggests that it is in and through the intervals formed by this historical arrhythmia that radical activity will find its own pace and agenda. Indeed, the social void of collapsed superstructure surrounding state power is not a canceled field but an energetic vacuum, for “it is into this stratosphere that the

spontaneity of the movement was drawn and propelled.” {AU: page no. ?} Even more bluntly, Lefebvre writes that the “void was filled by *contestation*,” a central term for what he understands as a spontaneous action of revolt that is nevertheless profoundly historical, with its own unique capacity to periodize in and through struggle, seamlessly passing from economic to political factors, and moving “from totality to totality” (65, 66). In this regard, the English translation of the work’s title as “the explosion” and its accompanying vision of an extrinsic, expanding revolutionary dynamic miss the specificity of Lefebvre’s *irruption*: a sudden flooding or pushing *into*, the immediate pouring of historically generated contradiction and revolt into spaces made to artificially lag behind ongoing “mutations” so as to prop up a morbid political-economic order.

Pulling back from these particular instances, we might begin to elucidate several strands of how historical singularity gets both hailed and evacuated when it comes to ’68: the fixation on date that occludes its political history, Glucksmann’s event as fulcrum between the crisis of global Northern modernity and restoration of its political agency, and Lefebvre’s negative dialectics of crumbling and flood sketching out the totality whose mutating interstices they take shape around. Yet to these we should add a fourth, whose influence has been especially persistent as a leitmotiv of *la pensée soixante-huit* that has often shadowed the erasure-by-accumulation Ross details. This is another way of singularizing (May) ’68 qua event, but it specifically understands the event as intensively subtracted from the ordinary course of time and the hegemonic ordering of space. For this approach, which participates in an antihistoricist, and perhaps even antihistorical, political metaphysics, ’68 stands in for the implosion of the modern grids of intelligibility for social life and collective action—nation, class, people, but also progress, technology, development, and at the edges even sexuality, race, ethnicity (Ross 2002: 6; see also Toscano 2008). This is ’68 envisaged as a kind of festival of dedifferentiation, a carnivalesque inversion, a joyous apocalypse of the social

order, and—to cite the title of one of the most significant and affecting of the texts that convey this night on incommunicable experience—an unavowable community (Blanchot 1988).

From this vantage point and the political mythology underlying it, “May” becomes not just a revolt in and against the coherence of historical time but also the ecstatic experience of that time’s suspension (Jesi 2014). Yet in this way, the ongoing commemoration of the event of ’68 serves to perform a strange double move: by incorporating the revolt within just an ordered sequence of historical progression and recurrence, yet preserving a mythic core of experience inaccessible by the very parameters of that sequence, it allows the event to be preserved as out of time, a monadic marvel set against a dun background of circumstances that can never fully explain its singular inflammability.

II Sessantotto: The End of the Southern Question?

Any discussion of the limits of periodization that takes ’68—in the epiphanic, explosive, or extended sense—as its object is obliged to detour through Fredric Jameson’s combative and compendious 1984 essay “Periodizing the 60s.” Influential as it is, a number of its moves have become so innate to periodizing schemas, particularly those seeking to read between political economy and cultural or intellectual trend lines, that it is worth trying to defamiliarize them to better see their stakes and promises with fresh eyes. Preoccupied by an especially North American concern with the displacement of class by the politics of minority and identity (a problem seemingly alien from our Italian context, although discernible in a different and still racialized form in the figure of the Southern migrant), Jameson (1984: 208) employs Ernest Mandel’s model of late capitalism to situate the libertarian enthusiasms of the sixties within the capitalist crises and transitions that both permitted and eventually abrogated them:

This sense of freedom and possibility—which is for the course of the 60s a momentarily objective reality, as well as (from the hindsight of the 80s) a historical illusion—may perhaps best be explained in terms of the superstructural movement and play enabled by the transition from one infrastructural or systemic stage of capitalism to another. The 60s were in that sense an immense and inflationary issuing of superstructural credit; a universal abandonment of the referential gold standard; an extraordinary printing up of ever more devalued signifiers. With the end of the 60s, with the world economic crisis, all the old infrastructural bills then slowly come due once more.

We'll note here two crucial points present in this passage. First, like Lefebvre's account in *L'irruption*, Jameson does not dwell on superstructure to shift focus toward cultural production, or simply because the interplay of superstructural symptoms might allow unique allegorical access to glacial infrastructural shifts that otherwise resist detection. Rather, what both theorists highlight is the qualitative and ultimately insupportable augmentation of the importance of superstructure in the '60s, whether read primarily in terms of a new "state mode of production" (Lefebvre){AU: page number?} or the architecture of international finance (Jameson, via Mandel), so that the event of '68 becomes a moment of reckoning with an imposed deferral. More plainly, this is less the trope of the "powder keg" and more a bursting of and surging into (*L'irruption*)—what we might frame in both a financial and historical sense as a bubble, one that temporarily occupied, illusorily inflated, and preserved the space of production or state power at the cost of tremendous fragility and openness to sudden rupture. Second, when we adopt the perspective of the foregrounding of class conflict throughout Italy's "long '68," for instance, and its conscious and reflexive targeting—in both revolutionary theory and political practice—of those very infrastructural and systemic

changes, this schema starts to look decidedly less global, in ways that will hopefully become evident in what follows.

But the aspect of Jameson's essay that we'd like to dwell on here is a different one: the suggestion that, to periodize the sixties as a complex political-cultural ensemble, we need to give full weight to the presence of a planetary South, under its generic if divisive political name, the Third World. At its boldest, Jameson's essay strives to correlate (no doubt at times forcing an excess of synchronicity) the political and military mutations in anticolonialist and anti-imperialist practice with the superstructural transformations in the "North," especially in its philosophical and theoretical forms. This correlation, crucially, is presented not as an organic, analogical mapping from one level or practice to another but as a correlation between discontinuities or ruptures—and so as a matter of rhythm. Jameson's approach is thus based on positing "a series of significant homologies between the *breaks* in those forms and their development. What is at stake then, is not some proposition about the organic unity of the 60s on all its levels, but rather a hypothesis about the rhythm and dynamics of the fundamental situation in which those very different levels develop according to their own internal laws" (Jameson 1984: 179).

Among the several virtues of this framing is the way it refuses to relegate the global and "Southern" dimension of the sixties to a "merely" political or even moral dimension, foregrounding instead the transformative character of the reference to the Third World on even the most recondite of "Northern" philosophies. Jameson takes his cue from Jean-Paul Sartre's (2004: xliii) claim, in the much-debated preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*—that the colonial world was divided between half a billion "men" and a billion and a half "natives"—to present the sixties as a massive uprising of the subaltern, within and without the First World: "The 60s was, then, the period in which all these 'natives' became human beings, and this internally as well as externally: those inner colonized of the first

world—‘minorities,’ marginals, and women—fully as much as its external subjects and official ‘natives’” (Jameson 1984: 181). This also means that the exhaustion of this decolonial momentum, situated here around 1972–74, is crucial to a periodization of the sixties. This is so both at the “objective” level, which for Jameson involves recalibrating one’s vision to see the force rather than weakness of capitalist power over this phase, and at the subjective one, in which the Third World (or South) is a central reference for an imaginary of radical resistance due to a spatial otherness (as in the heterotopia of the Cuban Sierra Maestra) that cannot survive the reaffirmation of capital’s totalizing infrastructural power. The baleful view from the Reaganite 1980s is that of a closure of the “*momentarily objective reality*” of revolutionary freedom in the 1960s, part of a broader narrative, that of postmodernity, which orbits around the termination of heterogeneity—of any heterogeneity that is not “really subsumed” by capital. Mandel’s late capitalism is thus recoded by Jameson into the key to a full-blown cultural philosophy of history:

Late capitalism in general (and the 60s in particular) constitute[s] a process in which the last surviving internal and external zones of precapitalism—the last vestiges of noncommodified or traditional space within and outside the advanced world—are now ultimately penetrated and colonized in their turn. Late capitalism can therefore be described as the moment in which the last vestiges of Nature which survived on into classical capitalism are at length eliminated: namely the third world and the unconscious. The 60s will then have been the momentous transformational period in which this systemic restructuring takes place on a global scale. (207)

Following this logic, if *South* has long been a name for internal or external survivals of precapitalism—especially in Italy—then late capitalism or postmodernism thus construed would be tantamount to the death of the Southern question.

In the editorial that crowns the 1970 special issue on struggles in the *Meridione* (the Italian South) of the far-left organizational weekly *Lotta continua* (1970a: 2), we find precisely a political counterpart to this rejection of the Southern question:

The “Southern question” [*questione meridionale*] no longer exists except as an ideology at the service of bosses and their domination. Today it is not a matter of “enriching” the political consciousness of the working class with that element of solidarity which is the unification with an underdeveloped South, but rather to make full political use of the overall experience of the worker vanguards that the labor market has pushed to every corner of Europe. This is a possibility that is already being spontaneously realized, day after day.⁶

A left critical of the Italian Communist Party’s (PCI) understanding of the “backwardness” of Italian capitalism had long tried to counter the manner in which Antonio Gramsci’s notebooks had been traduced into a strategy viewed as unstably combining a populist rhetoric with a modernising or developmentalist framework. Opponents of the postwar rhetoric of the “Southern question” could thus challenge the idea of an unfinished national unification project, viewed as a stratagem to blunt the ruptural force of the worker vanguards of the North or even (though this would only really emerge with the celebration of Southern revolts in the late 1960s and early 1970s) as a way of ignoring the antagonisms specific to the *Mezzogiorno* (Ferrari Bravo and Serafini 1975). What the *Lotta continua* editorial powerfully identifies—in a way that might lead us further to supplement Jameson’s own theses on periodization and to inflect their relevance to the Italian case, let alone other national frameworks—is the manner in which the Southern question is politically destabilized and perhaps undone by the dynamic of migration. The South, in other words, is no longer only or primarily *in* the South.

But before the reality of migration could violently collapse received wisdoms about Northern vanguards and Southern laggards, the critique of the political and rhetorical uses of the Southern question could also take the form of disputing the identification between a local (Italian, *meridionale*) subalternity and subalternity as a general or global condition. In the early 1950s, the writings of the Left cultural anthropologist Ernesto De Martino on the “popular subaltern world”—which critically sought to valorize aspects of Southern folklore, in dialogue with Gramsci’s own “Observations on Folklore” (first published in 1950)—set off a wide-ranging and heated debate in the communist and socialist press. Among the critical rejoinders were two articles by the then PSI militant Franco Fortini. We think it important to isolate Fortini’s (1977c: 233) response not only because he was a crucial reference for the Italian ’68 but also because he stands out among many of his peers (especially the ones in the orbit of *Quaderni Rossi* and Italian *operaismo*) for his insistent valorization of the importance of Third World politics to the Italian and European ’68, of those “signals reaching you from a history and geography quite different from your own,” and which are crystallized in the existence of “allegorical countries” that haunt our revolutionary imaginary—not least among them Algeria, Cuba, Vietnam. Yet where Fortini bears brilliant testimony to how the “global” South could innervate the politics and poetics of the long ’68, he was also strikingly dismissive (in a manner ultimately rather faithful to Gramsci’s Leninism and modernism) when it came to the hopes set by De Martino and others in the native political and cultural energies of the *Italian* South. In De Martino’s attempt at a political translation of his anthropology of the South, the younger Fortini ([1950] 1977a: 98) detects the specter of a populist irrationalism (one that he would also associate with the writings of Carlo Levi and Cesare Pavese):

How can we fail to note that between the “archaic” masses, the archaic medieval or magic culture of Apulian or Southern peasants, and the industrial and peasant

proletariat of the rest of Italy (and Europe) there is a whole stratification of very “historical” cultures, from the Christian to the positivist? And that the Italian (Western) industrial proletariat is not the bearer of the myth or pre-logicism of the Oriental or African colonial worker? Woe to those who treat the revolution that we want as an “irruption,” as a generous barbarism, as myth, as a primitive aroma, as pseudo-religious commotion, as the movement of “masses” lead by “immortal” leaders. For us it is still what Lenin ironically defined as “the electrification of the country, plus soviets.” Revolutionary alignment must not take place on the most disinherited *category* but on the most oppressed *class*. (see also Fortini [1950] 1977b; Toscano 2015, 2016)

While Fortini would subject this kind of Eurocentric perspective on the centrality of the industrial working class to considerable (self-)criticism in the years to come, it is telling that the judgment on the political marginality and retardation of the Italian South would not be radically undone (and in this he would remain closer to his erstwhile antipopulist colleagues from the *Quaderni Rossi* years, not least Alberto Asor Rosa, whose antipopulist and anti-*meridionalista* opus *The Writer and the People* [*Scrittori e popolo*] (2019) wouldn't exempt Fortini from the charge of revolutionary romanticism).

In terms of the friction between a Leninist political vocabulary, the South, and '68, we could also invoke that remarkable if disorienting document that is the largely one-sided correspondence between the PCI candidate in the Naples 1968 elections, Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi, and the French philosopher Louis Althusser, published as *Letters from Inside the Italian Communist Party to Louis Althusser*. Here the Southern question is not that of a peasantry, whether quiescent or in revolt, with its links to bourgeois intellectuals on the one side and the labor movement and Communist Party, on the other—as in the classic formulations deriving from Gramsci. What lies at the heart of Macciocchi's electoral inquiry

through the *bassi* (slums) of Naples is instead a (largely female) *subproletariat* that short-circuits—in its forms of labor, political instincts, relation to the law, and sociality—the schema of hegemony and organization that the PCI was prone automatically to apply.⁷ Neither a *meridionalista* populism nor a Leninist fetishism of the factory worker (here largely a spectral or privileged figure) can get a grip on this situation. Macciocchi's text is also fascinating for its ambivalences: it both presents a Naples that can largely be grasped through historical schemas produced in the nineteenth century, or even earlier, *and* shows how the seemingly backward activities of this subproletariat are deeply integrated into the capitalist economy of the North, breaking with the simple schema of backwardness. The ambivalence, vis-à-vis politics, class, and periodization, evidenced in Althusser's own letters (interrupted by a protracted bout of depression that accompanies the events of May) is even more striking. On the one hand, in his letters of campaign advice to Macciocchi, Althusser shows great political sensitivity for the specificity of the political experience of the Neapolitan subproletariat, especially counseling Macciocchi to abandon communist rhetoric and didactics for a much more dialogic relation to the women he regards as the key political agents in the *bassi*. On the other, the correspondence comes to a close with Althusser's by now rather infamous letter on May '68 (from March 15, 1969), which employs a kind of periodizing prestidigitation to minimize the role of the student movement (or indeed of any subproletarian elements, here disappeared from the French context, notwithstanding their significance for other, namely, situationist, anarchist, and ultra-left, narratives) and to once again erect a workers' movement framed by the French Communist Party (PCF) as the subject of the rupture:

The mass of the students live in a dream based on a misunderstanding. On the grounds that (and this is a *historico-chronological* fact) the savage repression of their “barricades” served as a “detonator” to the general strike, the mass of the students

thinks that they were the *vanguard* in May, leading the workers' actions. This obviously is an illusion. It confuses chronological order (the barricades come *before* the 13 May demonstrations and therefore *before* the general strike), the role of “detonator” or “the single spark that lights a forest fire” (Lenin), with the historical (nonchronological) role which is *determinant in the final analysis*. And in May it was the working class, and not the students, who, in the final analysis, played the determining role. (Macciocchi 1973: 304; see also Legrand 2009)

Creeping Rhythms

As noted before, Italy's own May '68—itself both ample and fierce, including the mass occupation of universities across the country—was given a potentially odd moniker: *il maggio strisciante*, best translated as “the creeping May.”⁸ The basic intention of the term was to designate, in distinction to the global visibility of the French case, the nonevental or nonpunctiform character of Italy's multiyear “May” and the way it crept ahead slowly in minor instances, flare-ups, and contestations not de facto recognized as mass, organized, revolutionary, or even obviously political. It is worth pausing briefly on the polysemy of the word *strisciante*. It is not a common political or historiographic modifier and appears instead as a rogue term, dragging into that discourse a host of trailing and occasionally sinister echoes. It ranges from creeping plants (*rosmarino strisciante*), to the economic language of creeping inflation (*inflazione strisciante*). It is often a pejorative designation for what sneaks in behind the cover of its supposed opposite—the *individualismo strisciante* (creeping individualism) of a communist thinker, the *misoginia strisciante* (creeping misogyny) of a purported feminist—and a beloved term in horror of a Lovecraftian bent, from *la rinascita strisciante* (the creeping reborn) to *carne strisciante* (crawling flesh).

But perhaps most potently for its political refashioning, the word is also linked to media structures that articulate the passage and movement from discrete fragments to

temporal and/or narrative flow: *una striscia*, a comic strip, *una striscia di pellicola*, a strip of film. Linked to that sense, what *il maggio strisciante* stresses is not only how Italy lacked “a” May ’68, because it had a continual ebb and surge stretching from the early 1960s to the late 1970s, but also how its radical sequence, read in its own terms, suggests a wholly different logic of connection that bound and commingled discrete minor events. Taken individually, many of those events and processes don’t remotely rise to the level of political myth or a narrative of epic temporality; taken together, however, they constitute the blurry articulation of a historical time of crisis and construction alike. In this way, the “creeping” is not a form of retroactive periodization, especially not in a search for a single cause “determinant in the final analysis.” Rather, it shifts focus to a process that was itself continually auto-periodizing, finding and forging links between different registers of struggle and transformation, while seeking to keep momentum across lulls and intervals.

Il maggio strisciante therefore most obviously names a manifestly political conception of rhythm, undoing either a flat characterization of “the period” or an excessive fixation on single events in favor of a more nuanced grasp of small or imperceptible inflections and occurrences that gather into a wave of revolt’s slow roll. It further opens toward a thinking of the intervals between the events—what in theories of rhythm are sometimes called “strong and weak pauses”—which seem to be inactive or empty, yet which cast events into relief as political. Moreover, such intervals also pose harder questions about what is included within that ambit of politics, as opposed to being expelled as “merely” social, inadequately radical, undisciplined, or—especially in terms of the vital transformations of far-left strategy pushed by Italian feminist and gay liberation critiques—outside the visible sites and modes articulated as part of socialist revolutionary practice.

Along with such critiques, it is the persistence, mutation, or explosive termination of the Southern question, in the crucible of the largest internal migration in European history,

that shows how the concept of the creeping also captures a crucial geographical logic—at once spatial and demographic—that enacted a complication and thorough erosion of the clear strategy that many had sought for the mass movements of the Northern industrial triangle. To be sure, certain visions of Southern radicality, including from those that fiercely celebrated it, preserved a basic dichotomy of Northern mediated organization and Southern spontaneous contestation. For instance, in a 1969 text titled “An Exemplary Revolt,” written by a “group of comrades” in Genoa associated with Ludd (an ultra-left formation who defended antiwork politics and illegalism), the fierce rioting in the Campanian town of Battipaglia in April 1969 is hailed as a prime instance of revolt beyond political representation or demands. Against a centrist opposition that “joins in the effort to form a solid *cordon sanitaire* around Battipaglia,” the authors insist that the riot of Battipaglia destroys the “illusion” of access to consumerist wealth, with its fires serving as a beacon beyond the stultifying impasse of sanctioned participation: “For those exploited who look toward the fire of Battipaglia with hope, there are no intermediate objectives in front of them, no demands to put to democracy. Because we don’t defend—we attack—there’s no need to ask for the disarming of the enemy, just weapons for comrades” (Gruppo di Compagni 1969). In short, for those equally disdainful of the police and the reformist socialist movements’ attempt to dictate the terms of acceptable struggle, a Southern riot widely denounced as “senseless” becomes for Ludd a necessary other, severed from the timescale of ordered strategy and thereby available as a vitalizing injection of open rage and proletarian violence into the very theater of politics it has outstripped—contra Eric Hobsbawm’s classic thesis, a rebellion whose promise lies in its entirely contemporary “primitiveness.” Yet if Ludd’s text teeters toward romanticism, it nevertheless had ample reason for this sort of stark bracketing. For instance, in *La fabbrica* (*The Factory*), a 1970 documentary by Lino De Serriis and Alberto Lauriello with all the hallmarks of Italian militant cinema of those years, attention is given to Battipaglia, but

primarily as a pivot to how it might be connected to a strike in Turin, the narrator noting that “many in Turin come from there [Battipaglia], but this isn’t the most important thing. The strike is political, that’s what counts, not the little demands, but a higher level of class consciousness.”⁹

However, even as *La fabbrica* seeks to subsume the specificity of Battipaglia into a single peninsular constellation of unified struggle (while perhaps importantly refusing excess partitioning of that kind of explosive revolt as uniquely “Southern”), its mention that “many in Turin come from there” gestures toward a crucial element of a “creeping” articulation of political time. Due to the tremendous numbers of migrants from Southern towns and cities who traveled northward to make a living (and hence provide the exploitable labor that made Italy’s “economic miracle,” or *il Boom*, possible), by 1961 far-northern Turin had literally become Italy’s biggest “Southern city”: it had the largest population of *meridionali*, including actual cities in the South themselves. If the Southern question “ended,” it was because it was atomized, broken out of the territorial template of a civilizational dividing line and diffused into countless small encounters and struggles. Such a dispersion by no means erased that line but instead fragmented and dispersed it, as the “social bomb” (as Giuseppe Berta termed it) of Turin and other northern cities were still deeply marked by hierarchies of linguistic difference, requirements of technical education, and the spatial distribution of housing, with the migrant populations overwhelmingly forced to live in crowded, dangerous, and largely illegal (*abusivo*) and informal slums, shoddy new-build apartment blocks, and shanty towns on the periphery (Berta 1998: 60; Williams 2013).

Nevertheless, this transformed the terrain of radical politics as thoroughly as that of the cities themselves, especially given the influx of those who had ample reason to refuse the conditions dictated to them but largely did not come from industrial workplaces, with the version of organizational and union discipline familiar to such sites. This was exactly the

shift detailed by the *operaisti* (workerists) that came to be gathered under the figure of the “mass worker.” It is worth noting here that some of the crucial early elaborations of that notion were developed in relation to making sense of a particularly infamous and widely condemned riot that occurred in Turin in 1962, known for the central square in which it most visibly unfolded, Piazza Statuto. In the aftermath of that riot—which emerged most directly from a metalworkers’ strike foiled by the very unions representing them and which became a fierce multiday running battle in the city’s heart—unions and left parties tripped over themselves to insist that disciplined and organized workers couldn’t do something like *this*. They instead sought to cast blame on a set of familiar scapegoats: provocateurs, agitators, and, above all, those seen to not belong there, with an unmistakable labor of racialization. The *Gazzetta del popolo*, for instance, noted that “three quarters of the detained were southerners” and “many had the look of bullies from the periphery,” while *La Stampa* seized on the presence of “robust, rather dark guys”—many of whom were, according to witnesses, carpenters from Turin’s slums—to read them as anything other than responsible factory workers, convinced that they were either Genovese port workers covertly imported by the PCI to rage or, of course, “Southerners” (Lanzardo 1979: 63, 121). The historical torsion of trying and failing to assert a coherent account of political development assumed absurd proportions, as the socialist deputy of Turin deemed the impoverished zones of central Turin itself “a veritable *suburra*,” a term derived from a crowded, poor zone of ancient Rome, especially known for being a red-light district. He was, in short, defining pockets of proletarian life inside Turin as not only geographically but also temporally extrinsic, an atavism displaced from Rome, come unstuck from millennia ago and still cursing the present.

In the face of this, a well-intentioned and partially correct response was to insist that of course many of the rioters were those supposedly organized and respectable factory workers. Yet it would be a mistake to plow the real heterochrony and displacement of

Southern populations into a smoother story about general rising militancy and the surpassing of institutional constraints. For, as Dario Lanzardo's meticulous reconstruction of the Piazza Statuto riot revealed, those lines of clarity were tangled: many of the factory workers were themselves migrants from a few years prior, many of the slum dwellers were "native" Turinese, and, above all, the force of the riot lay not in a singular eventual boiling over of growing industrial tension but in how it radically opened a terrain of contestation beyond a site of production to a far messier terrain of social reproduction writ large, including sex work, slum construction, theft, child care, waged labor, and a basic ability to assert one's collective presence in that most Southern of Northern cities.

If the creeping May assembles together the texture of a period spark by spark across time, it also spills out synchronically, erasing the centrality of any single mode of appearance or form of life as the adequate one to follow. In some of the most haunting lines from *Spartakus*, a text that excavates the mythology and symbolism of the 1919 Berlin uprising through the author's own experience of '68, Furio Jesi (2014: 54–55) writes, "Only in the hour of revolt is the city really felt as your own city—your own because it belongs to the I but at the same time to the 'others.' . . . In the hour of revolt, one is no longer alone in the city." From the vantage of a May that creeps along, though, such a moment doesn't signify the antihistorical singularity of *that* hour. It points instead to the already syncopated dislocation of the city, the country, the decade, and the year itself from any self-same identity to be fêted, defended, and propagated against what is seen as irrecoverably other.

Notes

¹ For an effort at such a reflection written for the fortieth anniversary, see Toscano 2008.

² A brief survey of approaches specifically relevant for our inquiry would include not only Henri Lefebvre's "rhythmanalysis" but, among others, Fernand Braudel's (2005) work on the interference between ecological, quotidian, and political rhythms (generating his sense that

“‘current reality’ is the conjoining together of movements with different origins and rhythms” [21]); Reinhart Koselleck’s (2004: 2) account of historical time as “bound up with social and political actions,” all with “definite, internalized forms of conduct, each with a peculiar temporal rhythm”; C. L. R. James’s ([1938] 1989: 391) diagnosis of Caribbean colonial history as “a series of uncoordinated periods of drift, punctuated by spurts, leaps and catastrophes,” which Sandro Mezzadra (2006: 79) aptly describes as the “syncopated rhythm” of James’s historiography; Charles Tilly’s (1995: 23) account of the two rhythms—“jagged short-term” and “smoother long-term”—of collective action; and Hayden White’s (1980: 10–13) precise grasp of the relation between the intervals prescribed by historiographic form (like the annal) and the social world it refracts.

³ A deadline in union-employer negotiations.

⁴ The term *events*, as affixed to May, has multiple valences. A disavowal or obfuscation in the mouths of contemporary politicians, it could also be seen as a recognition of an enigmatic novelty. See Badiou 2001: 126–27.

⁵ For a compelling corrective to Jameson’s terminology that rightly presents *liberation* and not *identity* as the linchpin of the global social movements of ’68, see Denning 2004: 42.

⁶ All translations are our own.

⁷ For an astute and extremely informative exploration of the PCI’s conflicted relationship with the Neapolitan popular classes, framed by Macciocchi’s letters to Althusser, and also touching on the turning point of ’68, see Dines 2014. For an account of the student movement in Naples in ’68, see Marino 2016.

⁸ The term’s first appearance in more scholarly literature is in Reyneri 1978: 17. For a longer effort to develop a historiographic framework of “the creeping,” see Williams 2013.

⁹ See also *Lotta continua* 1970b, for the letters by migrant Southern workers in Northern factories, under the heading “One Struggle.” For more on the articulation of these dynamics in Italian militant cinema more generally in these years, see Williams 2016.

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