Italian Feminism

Women's Movements in the "Red Belt" of Italy

By Judith Adler Hellman

When non-Italians learn that a vigorous women's movement developed in Italy in the 1970s, they often express surprise that feminism could have taken root in a country they imagine to be populated by long-suffering women in black shawls whose public life is limited to a daily appearance at mass. These observers are even more surprised to learn that not only has a militant and highly original women's movement emerged in Italy in the last two decades, but that it has registered some stunning successes. Perhaps the most clear evidence of the impact of the Italian women's movement came in May 1981 when Italians went to the polls in a national referendum and voted by a 70 percent majority to confirm legislation that provided for free abortion for women over age 18.

Once aware that Italy has been the scene of some of the most interesting feminist developments of recent years, those unfamiliar with Italian politics and society often make a logical but misleading assumption. They imagine that Italian feminism basically grew out of Italian women's rejection of the narrow role dictated to them by the Vatican and its model of the "Catholic family," a patriarchal structure in which women are largely confined to the home and roles of child bearing and rearing. Of course it would be foolish to argue that the influence of the Church has *nothing* to do with the rise of Italian feminism, any more than one would want to argue that the development of women's movements in Muslim countries or in Israel has nothing to do with the restrictive roles dictated to women by the teachings of Islam or Orthodox Judaism. However, in the Italian case, another influence has shaped the development of feminism as much or even more than the presence of the Vatican in Rome. And that influence is the weight of the mass parties of the Left, particularly the Italian Communist Party (the PCI).

For Italy is not only a Catholic country. It is a country with the largest non-ruling Communist Party in the world, where 1.5 million Italians are Communist Party members and, at the height of feminist activities in the 1970s, the PCI was capturing over a third of the vote in national elections and governing every major city (Rome, Naples, Florence, Bologna, Venice, Turin, and in coalition with the Socialists, Genoa and Milan). Thus Italian politics are shaped by the presence of the Catholic Church, but also by a Communist or "red" tradition. As such, Italy provides a setting very different from the context in which almost every other western feminist movement has grown. Here the organization of dissent and the politics of radical change necessarily take a form different from that of the North American women's movement that provided much of the original inspiration for Italian feminism.

On the face of it, it would seem a great advantage for a protest movement to develop in a situation in which the parties of the Left are strong and the unions and their traditions of struggle deeply embedded in the political culture. Indeed, discussions of the problems faced by feminists in North America are often framed in terms of the overall weakness of the North American Left; the implicit assumption is that if the Left were stronger, or the Right weaker, feminists would stand a better chance of realizing their goals. Ironically, as we shall see, the strength of a leftist culture, in the case of Italian feminism, has represented at times a help, but at other times an impediment to the mobilization of women. For this reason, a study of Italian women's movements provides a chance to consider, in concrete terms, the theoretical questions of the potential contradictions between feminism and marxism.

REGGIO EMILIA: A "RED" CITY

Reggio Emilia is one of the string of cities along the Via Emilia, the Roman road that follows the southern edge of the Po valley from Milan to the Adriatic coast at Rimini. Reggio lies in the Italian "red belt," the zone of central Italy where first the Socialist, and later the Communist Party have traditionally drawn a base of strength. Cutting a swath across the midsection of the Italian boot from the Mediterranean to the Adriatic, the Regions of Tuscany, Umbria and Emilia-Romagna, where Reggio is located — provide the Communist Party with more than a quarter of its votes, and the majority of its functionaries. In the city and province of Reggio 55 percent of the population regularly vote for the Communists and another 10 percent cast their votes for the Socialists. No other city in Italy can boast a more dramatic record of electoral commitment to the Left.

The "red tradition" of central Italy can be traced back to the anti-clericism of the Middle Ages when struggles of autonomous communes and republics against the papal state left Tuscans, Umbrians, Emilians, and Romagnoli with a hearty distaste for the Church as an institution. This sentiment was reinforced by the presence of clergy who unswervingly sided with the landlords in their conflicts with the sharecropping population. Given this broad attachment to Left wing movements in central Italy, it was here that fascism showed its most brutal face and that popular revulsion to Mussolini's regime was most widespread. And, in addition to the historical factors accounting for the strength of the antifascist tradition in central Italy, a key geographical factor made this zone the center of the wartime Resistance movement: in 1943 and 1944, the retreating German armies dug in to face the Allied advance through the same central area where popular sup-

port for leftist ideology was already firm. Thus, historical and geographical factors combined to make the "red" regions of central Italy a focal point of Italian resistance to nazism and Italian fascism.

Throughout the red zone, the Resistance effort was directed by the Communists, many of them returned veterans from the Spanish Civil War, with concrete knowledge of guerrilla tactics as well as long term experience in clandestine organization. In Reggio, resistance activities largely took the form of sabotage and the clandestine house by house distribution of the Communist newspaper, *l'Unità* Women partisans, in particular, were involved in the highly dangerous work of propaganda distribution.

In addition to those already firmly tied to the broader socialist culture of the zone, the Resistance drew into political life two other kinds of women who had previously been shut away in their homes. Peasant women and Catholic women (obviously, in many instances, overlapping categories) became active participants in the struggle. Peasant women joined the movement in part because their status was so low that the Resistance offered a way to escape the restricted boundaries of their narrow lives, and in part because fascism objectively made their lot so much worse than before.

Significantly, from the start, the question of women's status was raised by the women's Resistance cells, the so called *gruppi di difesa*, or Defense Groups. Of course, participation in the Resistance politicized women wherever they became involved. But in Emilia-Romagna, and specifically in Reggio, the massive nature of women's participation meant that a huge number of women were ready, upon the end of the war, to continue their public political involvement, rather than to return to the domestic sphere.

UNIONE DONNE ITALIANE

Throughout Italy, the end of fascism had given momentum to the mobilization of women, above all the PCI. Among many other lessons provided to the Communists by their experience with fascism was that non-working women, those shut away in the private sphere of home and family, had provided a base of support — albeit passive — to the fascist mass organizations. Noting the capacity of fascism to draw housewives into mass associations, and the success of the Church in turning bourgeois feminist movements to reactionary purposes, the Communists were determined that non-working women would never again be written off, abandoned to the manipulation of the priests and the appeals of reaction. But how could they be drawn into political activity? How could they become part of the broad social activism that was a critical component of the PCI's challenge to the Catholic Church's dominant presence in civil society?

To do this it was essential to move beyond the classic communist formulations directed exclusively to working women or working mothers, and to develop instead a more complex line on women's condition. To begin with, the Communists needed to broaden their conception of the "woman question" to focus on women in the home, women as wives, mothers, and housewives. Since, in the immediate postwar period, only a small fraction of all Italian women were part of the paid labor force, new ways had to be found to reach women outside of the workplace. Above all, women had to be drawn into mass organizations. Where possible this meant recruitment into active membership in the PCI. But for women who were not yet "ready" for that form of policial activism, for Catholic women, and for Socialists and other women already enrolled in political parties, the Italian Women's Union [Unione Donne Italiane, or UDI] was created by veterans of the Defense Groups.

From the start, UDI's activities were an extension of the wartime initiatives of the Defense Groups. They were, above all, efforts for the reconstruction of the country: aiding veterans, orphans, and abandoned children, feeding the hungry, and housing the homeless. And these activites were pursued by UDI women in Reggio and elsewhere with great enthusiasm and dedication. But the central function of their organization, the one that was to shape its activities over the next twenty years, was as a "flanking" organization of the PCI, designed to carry the influence of the party to those people who may share the goals and vision of a new order promoted by the party but who are not yet ready to commit themselves to partisan political activity.

Logically enough, the UDI that grew out of the Gruppi di Difesa in a place like Reggio where the Resistance had been a mass popular effort, was a genuinely massive organization with 27,000 members in the city and province. In the early years it perfectly fulfilled the role of a flanking organization, incorporating non-Communist women into its post-war reconstructive efforts, and cooperating with the Christian Democratic women's organization in distributing food, fuel, and clothing in municipally sponsored relief efforts like the Women's Committee for Winter Assistance.

Nowhere in Italy can we find a better example of all that the PCI had meant UDI to be than in the postwar organization in Reggio. Every major initiative of the period — the mobilizations for peace, the drive for parity in the workplace, and the campaigns for day care centers, nursery schools, and the extension of social services — all received the massive, and apparently sincerely enthusiastic support of the *reggiane*, the vast majority of whom were also Communist Party members or sympathizers. And UDI women took seriously as well the task of drawing non-communists into these efforts. As one former partisan, an UDI activist explained,

> *I understood my role as an obligation, in part, to go around persuading non-communist women of the validity of marxist ideology. When it came to the demonstrations for peace, we even went to the priests to ask for their support.*

Of course the problem of defining a line or program of initiatives for UDI that would be distinct from the activities of the women's committees of the Communist Party was particularly acute in a place like Reggio where the hegemony of the PCI was so total. In red belt cities like Reggio, UDI activists had great difficulty in defining the form such independence might take. They were too deeply immersed in a red culture to be capable of determining an autonomous line for UDI. Their overlapping identities as PCI members of sympathizers, and as members of the cooperatives or the partisans' association, or the Communist-run federation of agricultural workers, or the federation of small producers, and so on, provided them with a view of the world in which people like themselves, people of good will, quite naturally join in common efforts to achieve certain broad goals. And those goals were — very simply — the ones defined and articulated by the Communist Party.

Thus a *reggiana* might attend a women's meeting at the party section on a Monday night, pass the better part of Wednesday involved as "a concerned neighborhood figure" in a community effort to establish a day care center in the *quartiere*, and spend all of Friday with other women from the UDI *circolo* mincing up the chicken, cheese and pork, and rolling and twisting dough to form *tortellini* for sale to raise funds for the

organization. When the annual *Festival d'Unità* would roll around, such women might suspend their UDI activities for weeks to devote themselves full time to cleaning and preparing the rabbits and other delicacies that are served at this fundraising fair for the Communist Party press.

Whatever the strains imposed by these multiple demands on women's time, this was clearly the pattern that female activism through the late 1970s in the 116 UDI *circoli* in the city and province of Reggio. Although by the 1970s this type of participation was criticized, indeed, even ridiculed, by feminists who compared it to the activities of the women's auxiliaries run by parish priests in the Catholic areas of Italy, in fact whole wards of hospitals in revolutionary Mozambique were constructed with the proceeds of the *tortellini* rolled and twisted by UDI women every Friday afternoon in kitchens throughout Reggio. From Sacco and Vanzetti Street in the old core of the city to the new subdivisions on the outskirts of Reggio where the boulevards are named for Che Guevara and Patrice Lumumba and the elementary school for Pablo Neruda, and beyond in the small towns of the province, for more than three decades, UDI women would meet weekly to pursue such activities.

Not only did these common efforts pay to bring wounded African revolutionaries to Reggio for treatment, but the sale of *tortellini* and similar fund raising projects, together with the annual membership and subscriptions drives and cooperative ownership of a retail store gave UDI in Reggio complete financial autonomy. Moreover, it was UDI in Reggio, together with the UDI women of the other red belt *circoli*, who financially sustained the national organization and branches of UDI in all the zones of Italy where the organization was weak.

THE "NEW" AND "OLD" UDI

At the time this study began in 1977, UDI in Reggio was already deeply affected by the changes underway in the organization as a whole, and particularly by the personal and collective transformations undergone in the 1970s by the leadership of UDI in Rome. Interviewed in this period, the women who had run UDI in its earliest years in Reggio reflected this change in consciousness, speaking frankly about the organization's previous lack of autonomy from the PCI and rejecting the "transmission belt" role that UDI had played until 1956. The central problem for UDI in Reggio was that it was one thing to reject the outdated forms of the past, but it was quite another thing for the older *compagne* to accept the feminist organization that UDI was rapidly becoming in the national headquarters in Rome, in areas of Italy where the red tradition was not strong, and in the South where small branches of UDI were springing to life in towns and cities that historically had never known any women's organization other than the "women's committees" of the various political parties. In these places a "new" and feminist UDI had developed that was almost unrecognizable to many older UDI activists in Reggio.

These ex-partisans, all women socialized in the culture of the red zones, had great difficulty in accepting a model of UDI that was not merely autonomous of the PCI on the level of finances or formulation of goals, but which was actually critical of the party as an impediment to women's progress. To be sure, they themselves often felt angry at the Communist administrators of their city, or at the comrades in the party offices for their unwillingness to give high priority to women's needs or to actively support women's demands, like abortion reform. But public criticism of the party, its leadership, or of party figures in public administration was absolutely outside the experience of these old PCI militants. As the woman who had served as Secretary of UDI in Reggio from 1949 to 1956 explained,

The VII National Congress of UDI in 1964 was an historic moment for us. The proposals were very open and very advanced. Recognition of the sexism of the parties of the Left, and of the fact that the red administrations did not support our struggles all came out at that Congress. But this critique was not accepted by the women at the base.

Disgusted and discouraged as they often were by the party's lack of sensitivity to women's issues, most of the older UDI women were reluctant to antagonize the PCI comrades, and many were ready to concede greater wisdom to the party. A long time party member in her mid-fifties asserted,

Sometimes it is more appropriate for us to shut up about ourselves and focus on other issues. The party treats all problems. For example, on abortion, the UDI position is correct, but the party must mediate between women and society. We must compromise in the political process in order to have some kind of legal provisions on the books. This is where the party comes in.

Quite apart from this discomfort induced by the widening public breach between UDI and the PCI on such issues as abortion reform and proposed legislation on sexual violence, older *reggiane* were simply bewildered by the demands, the activities, the language, and the style of the young feminists who were joining UDI in increasing numbers. While the young *compagne* who staffed the UDI headquarters in Reggio had the knowledge and tact to explain new issues in a manner and a language comprehensible and acceptable to the older women, this was not the case for the new UDI women whom the *reggiane* encountered when they traveled to Rome for national meetings or when they thumbed through the pages of *Noi Donne*, UDI's magazine. As one older militant declared,

We were shocked when we first saw the feminists, with their crude gestures and their rude language. When we saw that UDI was associating with such women, many of the old compagne *wanted to separate themselves even from UDI.*

One of the youthful functionaries at the provincial headquarters described the problem in this way:

The older compagne *are prepared to discuss work, social services and schools, but when you begin to talk about the relations between husbands and wives, or a woman's relationship to her own body, they just don't want to know about it. At Reggio these discussions have taken place, but there are many women who think that socialism and sacrifice come first and women's problems come later.*

But, despite many initial and persistent reservations about feminism, older women who had begun their political life in a Resistance movement that broadly recruited participants from various social classes, age groups, political parties, and religious orientations, and who had continued to press to incorporate non-Communist women in the years when UDI served as a flanking organization to the PCI, were pleased, at least, on some level, to see an influx of new members into their organization. Rigid, indeed, would have been the ex-partisan who did not see in the fresh and enthusiastic faces of the young *compagne*, the realization of many of her hopes for continuity in the struggle for women's emancipation. And, accordingly, many of the responses of the older women were wholly positive and appreciative. One former partisan asserted:

The older women claim that Noi Donne *now talks too much about sex, but to me*

it seems important to talk about these things. We were badly educated and we have to learn to read and speak about these things without getting embarrassed.

Another described the transformation of consciousness in this way:

Our ideas were limited by our experience, but, by 1968 UDI had grown old. When the younger women came along, they scandalized us at first, but we eventually came to see that what they said was true, even if they were often too exuberant and frank. For example, in the old UDI we would never speak of the need to abort or mention that we didn't know where to get or how to use contraceptives, let alone admit that our children were a problem to us in any way. The younger women taught us to open up about these things. These younger women are very sincere and open and they offer us the chance to be the same.

And, again, one of the earliest leaders of UDI in Reggio summarized:

In 1945 we had 27,000 members while now we are down to 10,000. But we have a different attitude toward activism today. Were it not for feminism in the 1970s, we wouldn't have the 30 day care centers, the schools and other services we have today because to win these things we had to clash with red administrations, and that was something we could not seriously think about doing before feminism showed us the way.

Many of these changes, as we have noted, came in response to the radical transformation of UDI as a national organization. The incorporation and propagation of feminist ideals in the discussions and resolutions at the national congresses (particularly the congress held in 1978), and in the information and attitudes communicated in *Noi Donne*, profoundly effected the mass membership of UDI in Reggio. The fact that women of long standing prestige in UDI had accepted feminism, that they were willing and even eager to work with feminist militants in jointly sponsored initiatives, and to march with feminists through the streets of Rome and appear with them "in Piazza," deeply impressed the activists at the base, even in Reggio.

THE CONTRADICTIONS OF THE "NEW UDI"

Notwithstanding the increasing acceptance of the "new" UDI by the old *compagne*, critical problems remained. The problems were of two kinds. After 1968, many feminists joined UDI in Reggio, as elsewhere in Italy, because they wished to be part of a more structured organization. For the first time in Reggio there were new avenues of entry into UDI, as in the case of young women who came to UDI not through PCI membership, but through neighborhood struggles for *consultori*, that is, women's clinics. However, while the old militants faithfully renewed their membership, but often did little else, the young women who were active frequently did not even take out an UDI card. As one long time militant lamented:

The old compagne will happily work on subscription and membership drives, or pass out flyers, but if we say "let's talk *about the issues," they are not interested. Many of the* compagne *are involved only for the "social victories" like the day care centers and there is a very low level of activism in proportion to membership cards. On the other hand, the young don't involve themselves in the work of maintaining the organization. The young women have a thousand excellent ideas, but they don't know how to work for them. They don't understand, that in the end, to involve oneself implies sacrifice.*

The other type of problem was identified by the new UDI women as the dilemma of "delegation" or a lack of "protagonism." The young women who hoped to renovate UDI wanted to do away with the mediated relationship whereby members of the organization sought leaders who would speak for them, formulate the issues for them, and act on their behalf. They wished to replace this form with a commitment to what they called "protagonism," that is, the right and obligation of each woman to speak for herself and act for herself on the basis of her own experience and at her own level of consciousness. In short, the feminists in UDI sought to promote a situation in which each woman would be a protagonist in the struggle in her own right.

To be sure, some of the tendency toward delegation was built into the structure of the organization. At the time of this study, UDI in Reggio was structured hierarchically with six full and part time paid functionaries in the provincial headquarters in the center of the city. The province was divided into seven zones, with 116 *circoli*, each with a voluntary secretary recognized as the point of contact for the circle.

However, in this period, despite the hierarchical structures in place, a genuine effort was underway to bring the organization into line with the more feminist principles that had been embraced by the young women who served as functionaries in the provincial headquarters. The leadership group in these central offices played a pivotal part in the changes underway in UDI, not only in Reggio, but — given the importance of this branch to the national organization — in Rome as well. They were generally described by long time members as "young but dedicated" in that they combined the exuberance of the young members with the dedication and work capacity of the old. These leaders had been socialized in the old traditions of the Left, and could even discuss new issues with the old members in the local dialect which is still very much in use among older people and among all people in the countryside. In short, while responsive to the new feminist influences in their organization, the Reggio leaders did manage to communicate with the older *compagne*.

By the late 1970s, UDI in Reggio had become a true hybrid of the old and new models. Not only the themes, but the style of the meetings had changed under the influence of feminism. As the Secretary described the new format,

Here we do a brief introduction to set the topic, but we no longer give the long speech to provide a set line for the faithful. Of course many older compagne *are disconcerted when they don't get the "orientation" they were accustomed to receive. But we do what we can to move away from this model and to change these expectations on their part.*

Although these efforts to transform UDI were largely successful in Reggio, unfortunately, this was not a situation that was possible to sustain for many years. The younger women who had taken on the role of reaching out to the mass membership found themselves in a position that closely resembled the plight of the early feminist founders of consciousness-raising groups. After years of enthusiastically campaigning for a new, more feminist perspective for UDI in Reggio, the leaders of the organization could no longer carry on activities that required a boundless capacity to repeat the same feminist lessons over and over again to literally thousands of dubious women.

Thus, the younger women were unwilling to carry on in this role. They felt that to do so meant that they themselves would not develop beyond a fixed level of consciousness because the pace of their work left little time for reflection and personal growth. Soon the younger, more feminist women in the organization came to feel

stifled by the demands of this kind of political life. For, although the model of militancy in organizations of the traditional Left was, by now, considerably altered, even in this period the notion still prevailed that the best way to reach the members of the organization was through the greatest possible face-to-face contact between the leaders and members. Apart from the frenetic pace dictated by the six functionaries' obligation to encounter more than 10,000 women in 116 *circoli*, the whole notion of "bringing new ideas to the base" ran against the grain of everything these women were trying to do to overcome the tendency toward "delegation" and the lack of "protagonism" in the older *compagne*.

CONCLUSIONS

It proved impossible for women in UDI to resolve the contradictions between the participatory democratic models of the Italian feminist movement and the traditional patterns of representation common to mass organizations of the Left like the PCI. UDI's XI National Congress in 1982 witnessed the mass resignation of the leadership corps in Rome. Following this initiative, in the larger UDI branches in the red belt where leadership was provided by paid functionaries, these women, too, gave up their formal positions. In most cases the former functionaries remained active in "the women's movement" — generically understood. But their consciousness had been transformed to the point that they could no longer serve in the name and interests of a broader membership of largely passive women.

The resignations of 1982 spelled the end of UDI as a mass organization. Close to forty years of women's activism, in the Resistance, in postwar reconstruction, in the legislative battles of the 1950s and 1960s, and in the struggles around divorce, abortion reform and the other neofeminist issues of the 1970s came to a close with the collective decision of the core leadership group. At this point, a broadly structured organization with a network of contacts in every region, province, and city of Italy essentially disappeared. Women who remained in UDI in Reggio, as elsewhere, ran their affairs as if in a small feminist collective or consciousness-raising group. But the functions of dues collection, sale of subscriptions and the semi-official presence in local and national political arenas ended.

In Reggio, the disappearance of UDI as a formal organization cast its many members adrift. Some of the younger women, as noted above, continued to explore and deepen their feminist consciousness. They pursued a variety of women's activities corresponding to the most advanced feminist theory of the day. Others among the younger women gave up any semblance of activism "returning," and they put it, "to the private sphere." Finally, the greatest part of the 10,000 UDI members who had been active in any real sense in UDI, found an old, but time-tested outlet for their energies and the expression of their social concern. They simply returned to party work. In most cases they had never abandoned this commitment, even in the days of when UDI had formulated its sharpest critique of the traditional Left. Now, with the demise of the organization in which these older women had invested so much of themselves, they found consolation in redirecting their efforts to support of the PCI and its current campaign: the mobilization for Peace. Thus, in the mid-1980s, the older women who once formed the mass membership of UDI in Reggio continued to gather in the neighborhoods of the center city and in the new *quartieri* of the periphery, to roll *tortellini* in the quest for Disarmament and Peace.