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Louise A. Tilly

Structure and Action in the Making of Milan's Working Class

Andrea Costa, a contemporary observer and sometime participant in Italian socialist politics, spoke in 1886 in defense of the Lombardy-based Partito operaio, whose leaders had been arrested and its newspaper muzzled. He offered a classic Marxist interpretation of the party's emergence as a "natural product of . . . our economic and social conditions . . . the concentration of the means of production in few hands, distancing the worker more and more from his tools . . . and likewise a product of our political conditions . . .

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electoral reform, by means of which the working class . . . can affirm itself as a class apart.” Further, this party had been founded in Milan, “where modern industry has penetrated more than elsewhere,” and closely following the expansion of the suffrage in 1881 (Italy 1886: 419).

The empirical questions that arise from this formulation (echoing the well-known lines in Marx’s *Poverty of Philosophy*) may be stated as follows: To what extent did (and does) the growth of large-scale industry cause the formation of a connected and self-aware working class? Under what conditions and how strongly did the variation in origins, living conditions, relations to the organization of production, and ideological dispositions foster corresponding variations in political position and collective action? And how and how much did the action of the state, of political parties, and of other organizations shape the formation and transformation of working classes?

The goal of social history is to go beyond structure, to study as well the connections between and among structures, processes of change, and the actions of groups and individuals. There is an interdependence of structure and action—human agents produce structures, intentionally or not, even as structures facilitate or constrain human action.¹ Individual actors (or groups) build structures and in turn are affected by structure through institutions such as courts, legislatures, churches, schools, families, firms, employers’ associations, labor markets, unions, and the press. And all of these institutions operate within cultural contexts of shared understandings. Social, economic, and political processes of change take time to unfold. Strategies chosen by collective actors and the outcomes reached at one point in time close off alternatives and constrain or facilitate outcomes at a later time. Thus, as Philip Abrams (1982: 16) writes, the “relationship of personal activity and experience on the one hand and social organization on the other . . . is continuously constructed in time.”

I define class formation as the process by which any class (defined as a group sharing relations to production) in response to economic structural change increases its capacity for collective action, i.e., organizes, builds institutions, and becomes a political actor. To this I would add that class *transformation* is the ongoing process in which changing economic and political relationships in both region and nation affect a class, altering and sometimes destroying its ability to maintain its institutions, mobilize and act collectively. In this ongoing dual process—period- and place-specific, not

“natural” or unmediated—some version of a class for itself evolves and joins a national political process as a collective actor. This dual formulation emphasizes causal relations rather than outcome, theorizing working-class formation to be historically contingent. It posits continuing class outcomes (positive and negative) from ongoing economic structural change and political struggle. Either economic restructuring or lost political battles, or both together, may force class decomposition. It avoids a before-and-after linear explanation, but it runs the risk of indeterminacy. (Such indeterminacy is inherent to concepts of process such as class “formation” or the “making” of the working class.)

Here I take exception with Tony Judt (1986: 112) who argues that because of both their demobilization during the Second Empire and repression in the Paris Commune of 1871, French workers were concerned primarily with politics and control at the center and uninterested in intermediary institutions; and that the relatively few “general patterns” in the nineteenth-century French labor movement “derive not from economic change, nor from occupational variations, but from the opportunities and constraints born of political experience.” If we take account of regional developments in France, it is clear that this is a misleading interpretation of the French experience; *a fortiori*, it does not fit the Italian case, where regional patterns of economic development and class activism were even more marked than in France. I argue rather that both economic and occupational change *and* political opportunities are prerequisites to working class mobilization and collective action on the level of the national state. Indeed, in the case of Milan, local economic and occupational changes positioned particular groups of workers to take advantage of political opportunity.

Judt leaps too quickly to the national level, as have many working-class historians. In order to understand class formation, systematic attention must be paid to changing economic structures, political opportunity, organization, mobilization, and collective action in both local and national arenas. For industrialization does not happen to whole countries, nor does it happen to individual cities. Rather, industrialization almost always occurs regionally. In the typical European experience, the expansion of manufacturing in large units of production—a simple working definition of industrialization—came about through an interaction of one or more cities and a contiguous region. In the course of that interaction, not only capital but also labor, entrepreneurs,

technology, markets, and locations of production moved back and forth between a dominant city and its hinterland. The dominant cities usually served as centers of markets, capital accumulation, entrepreneurship, communication, and consumption (C. Tilly 1983). The role of cities in industrialization, however, has varied historically; obviously, only some of them industrialized, and even fewer gave birth to an active workers' mobilization that had a national impact.

Because of the regional character of industrialization, an analysis of occupational and economic change at a regional level can reveal complex patterned outcomes of connected experiences, which, observed at the national level, seem a confused jumble. I agree with Judt that the crucible of class formation is the national political arena, and that class formation may be said to be achieved to the extent that working-class institutions (including socialist parties, national federations of occupation- or industry-based unions, and confederations of workplace institutions, such as union federations and *bourses du travail*) become national political actors. If one traces the paths of worker politics to their origins, one will find them in urban/regional economic change and work-related experiences including migration, the local mix of occupations, workplace organization, and the local and national political-opportunity structures for collective action.

Capitalism, Labor, and Location: Italy, Lombardy, Milan

There was no sudden or sharp discontinuity in economic growth or organizational patterns—no industrial revolution—in Italy. In the 1880s, growth of large-scale manufacturing in textiles and engineering accelerated, most strikingly in Lombardy and Milan; it stalled at the end of the decade, and only resumed growth after 1895. Proto-industry (which had for some time been supplemented by larger rural mills and shops) entered crisis starting in the 1880s, only to disappear by the late 1890s. Capital was redirected cityward, and the later growth period was both more sustained and more vigorous than the earlier.

By 1911 the proportion of the Italian labor force in agriculture had declined as that in manufacturing and services had increased. High coal imports and much greater use of electric and other mechanical motors indicated changes in the organization of production; Italian occupational structure

likewise suggests the spread of wage-earning in Italy as a whole. Although these changes were slower and the increments more modest than elsewhere, the structure of the economy was transformed.²

The spatial redistribution of labor and the concentration of capital in Lombardy involved a reciprocal process of urban and rural industrial changes, and a shifting relationship of the metropolis with smaller cities of its region. The impetus to change was most often not the intentionality of foresightful or innovative capitalists, but rather their reaction to problems of labor supply and control. Milan extruded older industry into regional cities while itself becoming a center of capital formation and concentration—an administrative center with a large consumer industry and (for a limited period) a large-scale, technically advanced machine industry. The urban labor force developed from older urban artisanal elements, migrants from proto-industrial work in the countryside who followed the textile industry into regional cities or the machine industry into the center city, and ex-agricultural migrants who entered service, construction, or unskilled manufacturing jobs in the metropolis.

By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, capitalist decisions about industrial location had suburbanized the machine industry in turn, producing new labor migration, and Milan was populated primarily by a middle class and workers in service or consumer industries, while industrial workers clustered in its suburbs and satellite cities. Milan was distinctive among the cities of the Italian industrial triangle (Milan/Genoa/Turin) as a national service, financial, and commercial center; as space for large new factories disappeared within city limits, the former came more and more to outweigh manufacturing in its economy. Industrial growth took off in Turin at the end of the century, and continued in the twentieth century with a focus on engineering, especially automobiles (see Dewerpe 1984; Cafagna 1973; Castronovo 1975; Weber 1963 [1899]; Moch 1983; Kertzer and Hogan 1989; L. A. Tilly 1986).

Milanese Workers' Institutions and Workplace Collective Action

The formation and transformation of workers' institutions followed a timetable punctuated by the interaction of economic growth patterns and political opportunity (or, conversely, repression). The first step of Italian unifica-

tion in 1859–60 provided an impetus in Milan (and elsewhere in Italy) to the emergence of mutual-benefit societies and the Milanese Consolato operaio (a local federation of workers' associations), organizations in which bourgeois and workers collaborated. The Partito operaio italiano was founded after the expansion of national suffrage in 1881; the Consolato's patron/client form of organization was challenged after the 1889 expansion of suffrage in local elections. In the workplace, organization for "improvement," and then "resistance" leagues accelerated, a development related as well to cyclical unemployment in the period.

A Milanese Chamber of Labor was first proposed by several Partito operaio members, and later introduced by a *operaista*-socialist member in the city council; its mission and functions were designed and implemented by members of autonomous workers' societies. Founded in 1891, the Chamber provided an employment service and mediated disputes between capital and labor. Its activities slowed down with the repression of 1894 (following Sicilian popular mobilization and protest organized by the Fasci), speeded up in the intervening years, and came to a dead halt with the more comprehensive and severe repression of 1898 (following the May events in which workers protested government efforts to repress their mobilization). Chamber leaders then joined the citywide electoral coalition seeking democratic rights, and after the national government extended the right to strike in 1900, its activity expanded even more (Bonaccini and Casero 1975).

An aggregate overview of strikes (conceived as one indicator of class formation) in Italy from 1881 to 1923 demonstrates that their timing paralleled that of the organization of both urban and rural workers in the 1880s and 1890s and was punctuated by a sharp peak in 1901 related to the legalization of strikes, marking a notable improvement in political opportunity. As are the Italian, so also are Milanese strike patterns most effectively explained on the aggregate level by a political-organizational hypothesis. The annual number of strikes was related to increased political opportunity, such as the extension of suffrage and economic rights (to organize, to strike) (Bordogna et al. 1989).

Once strikes are disaggregated and compared across industries and urban/regional labor markets, however, it is clear that other conditions strongly influenced the timing of *specific industries'* workers' organization, mobilization, and collective action in support of their perceived interests, *and* the chances for success or failure in strikes in these industries. Case studies for Milan and Lombardy illustrate this point.³

The landmark strikes in both the publishing and construction industries were the outcomes of long organization and planning, intensive mobilization, and, finally, employers who either reneged on earlier informal understandings, or peremptorily rejected workers' demands. In these industries, it was changes in the organization of production and employers' attempts to downgrade workers' skills and autonomy that first prompted organization and preparation for collective action. The timing of strikes was often linked to the business cycle, while outcomes were shaped by employers' forms of capital and dependence on workers' regular supply of labor balanced against employers' power to change the labor process, move their plants, and organize their own single-industry-wide organizations. The resources that workers could deploy to build solidarity and hold out, including worker leaders with connections outside the working class, were thus only one side of the equation. Further, divisions among workers based on skill or gender or place of origin and abundance of available labor (in the city or without) had negative effects on strike outcomes.

The printers, with substantial resources (a large proportion of workers who were highly skilled and well-paid, plus allies outside the working class) and solidarity, and employers with a good deal of fixed capital, were more successful in these early strikes than were construction workers. The latter were more easily replaced, and divided between native, more-skilled workers and their in-migrant unskilled fellows (the latter a majority); their employers had little fixed capital and often hired workers on a daily basis (thus avoiding any obligations toward them) (Marchetti, 1972; Mereu 1972).

In contrast, increasingly marginalized Milanese textile workers were under severe pressure from their bosses to work longer hours for lower wages; otherwise, harsher steps, such as substituting poorly paid women for male workers or moving the business to rural locations where labor was cheap, would be taken to cut costs. Both the more-skilled men workers in silk and ribbon-weaving, and the less-skilled women in other specialties struck in defense of their wages or jobs—but usually lost their struggles. This was despite the fact that the skilled male workers had an old organization that broadened its goals and organizational strategies in order to face new challenges.

Until 1887, metal and machine workers were divided by craft specialties and disciplined in their workplace but relatively favored in terms of autonomy and wages. Then employers strove to increase productivity and chal-

lenged workers' self-governed work customs; in their struggle against their bosses, these workers organized broad-based resistance leagues. The leagues were transitory, however, as industrialists counterorganized among themselves, redesigned the labor process, and promoted productivity through specialization, and machine shop workers remained divided by specialty. In engineering, employers' fixed capital and dependence on their workers' skill were high, as in printing. But because their industry was highly cyclical there was uneven demand for skilled workers compared to publishing. The engineering firms, seeking to promote productivity in their competitive industry, kept workers divided by specialty, undermined industry-wide solidarity, and hindered organization. It was only after 1900, and then mainly in Turin, that engineering workers organized effectively, struck, and became a powerful force. In the same decade, Milan's engineering employers moved their plants to suburban areas, at least in part to find workers who were less likely to be organized (Davite 1972; Bigazzi 1978; Carotti 1973).

In the few industries with jobs for women in the increasingly rigid gender segregation which came with industrialization, workers were severely handicapped in their efforts to act collectively in their own interests. They were active participants in workplace struggle, but with little success except in the tobacco manufactory, a single large plant in which women did skilled labor for the government monopoly. Elsewhere, they had few resources and only occasional support from unionists or feminist well-wishers; women workers were unable to build lasting organizations and unlikely to win their struggles, given the industries and occupations to which they were limited and their relative lack of allies.

In all industries, organizational success meant more effective strikes, and successful strikes favored the winner in the next period of struggle. Similarly, failure fed on itself, disadvantaging the loser's later efforts. There was also a crossover from economic to political arenas in Milan as elsewhere: it was those workers with experience in workplace struggle, such as the printers and construction workers, who first developed autonomous workers' organizations. In the same period, Milan's position as a node for the exchange of ideas between and among those workers who were developing ambitions in the political arena and bourgeois intellectuals facilitated the efforts of those groups to build socialist organizations for electoral politics.

From the Workers' Party to a Socialist Party, 1875–94

Let us look now at the development of a distinctive Milanese framework upon which the worker and intellectual cooperation was grafted, culminating in the formation of a socialist party.

Two groups of workers—first, those associated with the Consolato operaio, and second, those who were active in socialist study groups, the editorial board of the proto-socialist newspaper *La Plebe*, and certain unions, particularly the printers' resistance league; in short, groups already thinking politically—were spurred to action by the suffrage extension of 1881. The first group, with their democratic radical patrons, nominated a worker who ran—successfully—for parliament. The second fought first for control of the congresses of the Lombard Workers' Confederation, then founded the Partito operaio italiano (POI) and developed its workerist ideology and practice. The disagreements about theory and strategy between these two groups underlay the dynamic of worker politics in the region and city in the period up to 1892.

The *operaisti* rejected patron-client relations, whether in the local arena with the Consolato operaio and the democratic radical party, or in the national arena through government-granted social legislation. The POI sought to build exclusively workers' institutions to extend its influence. Its activists, many of them artisans or skilled workers who themselves were fighting proletarianization, retained a strong class outlook; they rejected alliances with bourgeois parties, but did not reject electoral efforts altogether, for they ran worker candidates in *local* elections. They initiated the drive for a chamber of labor, carried their program to all workers, including agricultural proletarians, and enjoyed modest success (M. G. Meriggi 1985; Perli 1972; Manacorda 1953).

The party's weakness lay in the very ambition of its challenge. Although it focused on workplace issues and led workers' struggles for their rights, its resources were very limited. In particular, its rejection of alliances and bourgeois members limited it financially, politically, and strategically. Although its rhetoric offered little political danger to conservatives, it provided an excuse for repression by the authoritarian Italian state. In 1886, the Partito operaio was dissolved, its newspaper muzzled, and its leaders arrested. A

group of democratic radicals split from their party and joined republicans and other progressives in supporting the civil liberties of the *operaisti*.

Not a “natural” outgrowth of economic structural change in Lombardy and Milan, the Partito operaio was constructed by workers who shared some experiences and developed original practices, hammered out in its struggle with the democratic radicals and their clients. The Italian Partito operaio’s success in defining issues which the more Marxist-oriented Socialist party later faced, and in providing a political training ground for both workers and intellectuals gave it long-lasting influence. Party independence of bourgeois patrons and the relationship of workplace and electoral politics continued to be central issues long after the Partito operaio was gone.

The formation of the Partito dei lavoratori italiani (as the socialist party was called in its first year) grew out of the Milan-based politics of some of the Partito operaio’s members, with and against anarchists and bourgeois socialists, democratic radicals, republicans from Milan and elsewhere (Manacorda 1953; Cervo 1981; Briguglio 1972; Punzo 1978; Michels 1908). Filippo Turati, a Milanese lawyer who defended the *operaisti* leaders after their arrest in 1886, began then to explore socialist theory, and combine it with his already-formed democratic ideas. His goal, influenced by the Marxist philosopher Antonio Labriola, became that of building a socialist party of conscious workers that could turn Italy toward a more democratic and just political path.

The Milanese *operaisti* who joined Turati in its formation agreed that a socialist party ought to be firmly linked to the workers’ movement. Others allied with the anarchists in at least temporary opposition, and still others, although “in,” were regularly on the “outs” with socialist leadership. Some workers connected with the Consolato operaio also supported the progressive coalition on economic issues, municipal socialism, and decentralized reform, took part in the committee that wrote the proposed constitution of the Socialist party, and—although much of their conceptualization fell by the wayside in the final version of the party’s constitution—persuaded the founding congress not to call the party “socialist.”

Worker leaders’ collective experience of (1) changing organization of production and proletarianization; (2) political opportunities (such as the expansion of suffrage and the legalization of strikes); and (3) capitalist employers’ strategic opposition to and state repression of their attempts to

build an autonomous workers' politics led them to ally with bourgeois intellectuals already committed to a constitutional democratic parliamentarism. This coalition was a viable alternative to both the failed economic and autonomy-focused strategy of the Partito operaio and the clientage relationship of reformist workers to the bourgeois democratic parties. Indeed, all the members of the first central committee of the PLI were Milanese.

The adjective "socialist" was grafted to the party's name at its second annual congress, which also debated the role of its parliamentary deputies, and their relationship to other parties' proposed legislation. The party's nominal membership had expanded enormously because of the rapid growth of the Sicilian Fasci dei lavoratori (rural and urban organizations of workers and peasants), frequently led by converts to socialism. In 1894, the Crispi government first repressed the Fasci in Sicily and later dissolved the Socialist party and all organizations associated with it. Milanese progressives joined again to defend "civil society" and political liberties. The Milan Chamber of Labor pursued a double strategy, participating in the democratic coalition to defend rights, but cutting its ties to the party in order to resume its own organizing and making claims.

The Socialist Party Redux and the Fatti di maggio, 1894–98

The 1894 repression heralded new party debate over its appropriate electoral tactics, accompanied by sporadic repression; it resumed legal activity later that year. Despite its continuing close connections to Milan, the party aspired to be a national institution, strengthening its parliamentary delegation's role in party decision-making and founding a national newspaper published in Rome. Local experience led Filippo Turati to support (against a majority of his Milanese and Italian colleagues), not "coalitions or alliances," but flexible electoral tactics depending on local conditions. This would include not running socialist candidates against democrats in districts in which the latter were strong.

In local Milanese politics the socialists opposed efforts to extend to the outer ring of the city the high duty on incoming consumer products, a position which they partially shared with the democratic radicals, especially that party's shopkeeper element. On the national and local level the two parties

also shared opposition to the colonial war in Ethiopia, although the radicals supported the conservative government that succeeded Crispi when he was forced out as premier after a major military defeat (Fonzi 1972; Canavero 1978; Levra 1975). Turati was elected to parliament in June 1896 to carry his unequivocal opposition to the government to Rome. Re-elected in 1897, he called for more workplace organizing and continued to fight the party majority for limited-coalition electoral tactics.

Socialists sponsored protest meetings against the high cost of bread at the end of 1897, as grain prices were rising steeply, but muted their rhetoric, focusing on workers' rights to organize instead of class struggle. Early in 1898 a wave of strikes and demonstrations, most of them repressed militarily, began to sweep the country, carried forward by a contagion process. Matters in Milan came to a head in the first days of May, when a noisy demonstration outside the Pirelli factory was attacked by police and soldiers. The following day, a march to the center of the city was also met with force, as was all protest (or perceived protest) in the next two days. Milan's reactionary ruling elite and the authoritarian national government both saw the Milanese workers' demonstrations as a threat to social and political order (L. Tilly 1972).

The ferocity of the repression led organized shopkeepers and businessmen—members of the democratic radical and republican parties—to join with the socialists to unseat the moderate Milanese *consorteria* in the election of 1899 (Meriggi and Morris, this issue). On the national level a liberal coalition was constructed following a period of parliamentary obstructionism mounted against the government's continued illiberal policy. New governments in 1900 and 1901 expanded workers' economic and political rights, setting the scene for a broader-based workers' movement and socialist politics, in which both a socialist party (factionalized and split as it often was) and labor were national political actors. Despite more rapid industrialization in the first decade of the twentieth century and the First World War, national political regimes continued to attack the capacity of working-class institutions and actors for collective action.

Conclusion

The analysis of Milanese working-class agency at the end of the nineteenth century cannot stand alone, however, for workers' efforts were not only for-

warded, as in the formation of the socialist party or the victorious election of 1899, but often countered by other class actors; here I return to their employers, and state and local officials.

Capitalist employers' strategies and organizational efforts were aimed specifically at preventing or countering workers' autonomous efforts to organize. Some examples: Giovanni Battista Pirelli, pioneering founder of the rubber company, claimed that it was his policy to employ recent migrants, in the hope that their rustic innocence would cut down labor militancy in his factories; textile manufacturers did likewise; and construction contractors hired temporary migrants or newcomers to oppose the weight of the unions organized by urban workers. Textile manufacturers threatened to move their plants to rural areas, and indeed did so. In the period after 1900, both major engineering companies and Pirelli moved to the suburbs, where it took years for workers to rebuild organization.

In the same period owners and directors of manufacturing industries formed organizations in printing (the *Associazione tipografico-libreria*) and engineering (the *Consorzio fra industriali meccanici e metallurgici di Milano*) which attempted to engage in industry-wide bargaining with unions and workers. (These efforts sometimes failed, because of competitive forces within industries.) Marco Meriggi notes the *Circolo degli interessi industriali, commerciali, e agricoli*, set up to influence voters when the municipal franchise was broadened in 1889; and Jonathan Morris (1993) documents shopkeepers' associations for producers/sellers of bread and pork products and proprietors of eating and drinking establishments, a shopkeepers' newspaper established in 1886, and in 1888, the *Federazione generale degli Esercenti* (the General Federation of Milanese Shopkeepers, which as often as not found itself in conflict with workers and their organizations). Finally, of course, individual industrialists including building contractors, pharmaceutical manufacturers, shopkeepers, publishers, a manufacturer of combs and buttons, and the owner of a major department store and its workshops were members, some moderates, others democratic radicals, of the municipal council. These men did not necessarily have interests in common, for some headed small shops and others owned large companies, but they demonstrate active participation by men who called themselves industrialists in Milanese local politics.

Local elected officials who, until the 1890s, consisted primarily of the old

agrarian elite and those supporting its interests (Marco Meriggi, this issue) and national appointed officials, like the prefect and the police chief, consistently opposed working-class institutional collective action. The latter officials represented a national state in which industry was less significant than agriculture, except for certain regions like Lombardy and Piedmont. This meant that powerful agrarian elites from other regions who were committed to neither liberal economics nor democratic politics were important national actors, supporting, for example, tariffs against agricultural imports and colonial wars, both of which clashed with northern urban industrial workers' (and capitalists') interests. Unified Italy's conservative constitution did not encourage the electoral parties common in Britain and the United States, the political rights and parliamentary system of France, or the large democratic working-class party of Germany. In Italy, the party system was much less developed, and the constitution permitted highly authoritarian rule. Repressive laws and administrative practices made the formation of Milan's working-class autonomous institutions a more contested process than elsewhere in western or central Europe.

Workers' action, responding to changing organization of production and political opportunities, made a difference, but it was only one factor in the political process; individually and collectively, state and capitalist actors were equally engaged in the highly contingent and contentious processes of class formation and transformation.

Notes

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- 1 As Lloyd (1993: 193–194) explains, once in place “structure is relatively autonomous of individual actions and understandings.”
- 2 Italian industrialization was not historically unique. The process elsewhere was also uneven, with marked regional differences. The pattern in England, France, and Germany was the growth of highly industrialized regions interspersed with agricultural

areas and proto-industrial pockets that disappeared with time. Capital only gradually flowed into larger-scale, often urban industry. Industrialization was slow even in Britain to make its impact on national aggregate statistics, and there was considerable variation in specific regional patterns. In France as well as Italy a high proportion of the labor force remained in agriculture during industrialization.

- 3 Besides the articles concerning specific industries cited in the next paragraphs, the following works provide detail about workers' organization and collective action in most industries in Milan in the period: Società Umanitaria 1904, 1909; Hunecke 1982; Paletta 1981.

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