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Author(s): Maud Anne Bracke

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# Our Bodies, Ourselves: The Transnational Connections of 1970s Italian and Roman Feminism

**Maud Anne Bracke**

University of Glasgow, UK

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## Abstract

This article presents an approach to studying processes of transnational exchange and reception between social movements. It does so by focusing on a locally situated case study: the movement for women's reproductive and sexual health and rights in 1970s Rome. A focal point in 'second-wave' Italian feminism, these groups were profoundly shaped by feminist debates and practices in, notably, the USA and France. The analysis highlights the centrality of local actors in translating, appropriating and re-(and de-)contextualizing transnational sources, thus transforming their meanings. Questioning the often automatic status ascribed to the nation-state as analytical framework, the article illustrates that re-contextualization equally takes place on the local (as distinct from national) level, and that these layered transfer processes are central to understanding the complexity and effectiveness of postwar social movements such as feminism.

## Keywords

1970s, abortion, feminism, Italy, Rome, transnationalism

In 1969, I was a 51-year old divorcee living in Turin. My life had been marked by first-hand experiences of women's inequality, but I had no words with which to talk about it. With a group of friends, women of various ages, we searched for something that could give meaning to our experiences. One of them spoke to me of Women's Liberation in the United States. She also said that there were small groups of women in Turin, Milan and Rome who met in private homes and read American

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## Corresponding author:

Maud Anne Bracke, University of Glasgow, 1 University Gardens Glasgow, G11 8QQ, UK.

Email: [maud.bracke@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:maud.bracke@glasgow.ac.uk)

texts. Meeting some of these women, and reading those texts, has saved me. . . . We didn't tell our male comrades of the radical-left parties that we were reading American feminist texts; they wouldn't have let us. So initially we did this secretly. We felt like the *carbonaie*.<sup>1</sup>

In Angela Miglietti's memory, her encounter with the classic texts of US Women's Liberation – Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, and *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, on which more below – acquires a near-mythical status, enabling a personal transformation that resonated universally but was contingent on a locally situated reading. Non-Italian texts seem to have made it possible to re-invent oneself in a way that ideas closer to home might not have done.

For the historian wishing to go beyond the nostalgic remembrance of global sisterhood that often colours the memories of those active as feminists in this period, the fact remains that many transnational connections and affinities existed in the discourses and practices of feminist groups in Europe and North America during the long 1970s – the movement often referred to as 'second-wave feminism'. In this context, the Italian movement was both strongly transnationally connected, and specific. While the present article points at the specificities of the Italian feminist movement, it highlights the double need to situate it transnationally and differentiate it at the sub-national level. English-language literature has pointed at the uniqueness of Italian second-wave feminism in the international context, noting above all its rejection of the politics of equality and its emphasis on sexual difference.<sup>2</sup> Sexual difference here emerged as a key notion early on (from 1970 – and earlier than for instance in strands of French and US feminist debate where it gained prevalence at the end of the decade) and was more universally accepted as a guiding principle than elsewhere. The reclaiming and celebration of sexual difference were understood as the core of women's liberation. This was contrasted to the politics of equality, rejected as a misguided attempt to universalize male experiences, and negatively associated with what was seen as the historical failure of the Marxist left to really address 'the woman question'.<sup>3</sup>

However, Italian feminism's focus on sexual difference was only part of its specificity. More fundamentally, Italian feminism was specific in its ambition and ability to connect intimate personal transformation with wider socio-political change. To understand this is to grasp the notion of *libertà femminile* (women's liberty). As 'women's liberation' travelled across the Atlantic and was translated into *libertà femminile*, it took on a different, highly specific meaning, establishing a political tradition that was both new to Italy and original in the context of

1 Author's interview with Angela Miglietti (Turin, 6 November 2009, in Italian). The *carboneria* was a nineteenth-century secret society aimed at spreading liberalism and nationalism. Originating in Southern Italy, it spread to the North, then France and Spain.

2 P. Bono and S. Kemp, 'Introduction', in Bono and Kemp, *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader* (Oxford 1991).

3 On the centrality of sexual difference in Italian feminism from the early years on, see for instance, G. Parati and R. West (eds), *Italian Feminist Theory and Practice: Equality and Sexual Difference* (Cranbury, NJ 2002).

transnational feminisms. The key-word of 1970s feminism in Italy, it had little to do with a liberal notion of freedom. It encapsulated the desire for freer ways of standing in the world as a woman, allowing her to explore her sexed identity, unbound by the constraints of established cultural norms and unaffected by sex-based oppression and prejudice. Equally importantly, *libertà femminile* as a personal revolution was to amount to a social mobilization of women, provoking both cultural and political changes. The movement's immediate political impact was reflected above all in the adoption in 1978 of Law 194 regulating abortion: partly resulting from mass mobilization, it allowed for abortion on demand in the first three months of pregnancy. Although medical approval was needed, and despite major problems with implementation and a sense of defeat among feminists themselves, it was, at least on paper, influenced by the feminist principle of women's self-determination and as such remarkably radical.<sup>4</sup> As will be illustrated, the influence stemming from US women's liberation in the early 1970s contributed to the Italian emphasis on the body, while strong connections with France shaped the mass mobilization strategies contributing so acutely to legislative change. Thus, even what may appear quintessentially Italian characteristics of 1970s feminism resulted from the translation of transnationally travelling ideas and approaches.

Focusing on a locally situated case study, namely the feminist campaign for women's reproductive rights and health in 1970s Rome, the article aims to disentangle, and give meaning to, the local, national and transnational elements of discourse, theory and practice that shaped feminism in 1970s Italy. In Rome, reproductive rights and health became the focal point of the feminist movement. The influence stemming from US women's liberation was evident particularly in the adoption of 'self-help', originally developed by women's liberation groups in Los Angeles, Boston and New York. Self-help was a series of practices that allowed women to explore their bodies and sexuality, based on the notion that political liberation was to be rooted in a new relationship to one's body. It involved an explicit challenge to established medicine, as well as the aim to articulate alternative forms of knowledge. Feminist self-help was disseminated across Italy in a specific context: the *consultori autogestiti*. These were women's reproductive health clinics, self-managed by feminist activists and supported by professionals sympathetic to the cause. Many of these carried out illegal abortions (along with a number of other activities), operating as underground organizations up to their institutionalization through a series of regional laws from 1976 and the introduction of abortion legislation in 1978. Although short-lived in their self-managed form, the *consultori* were a central component of Italian 1970s feminism. By spreading ideas of women's sexual liberation, and by carrying out safe illegal abortions and providing free contraception and information, they helped in transforming feminism into a social movement with support across social classes. Moreover,

4 A detailed analysis of the origins of the law in G. Scire, *L'aborto in Italia: Storia di una legge* (Milan 2008).

they played a key role in the mass mobilization for abortion law – an area where the inspiration drawn from French feminist strategies was evident.

In disentangling the local, national and transnational contexts of Roman feminism, I focus on two groups: the *consultorio autogestito* in the San Lorenzo neighbourhood, and the *Coordinamento romano per la liberalizzazione dell'aborto e della contraccezione* (CRAC), the body coordinating mass feminist mobilization for legislation around contraception and abortion in 1975–7. Attention is drawn to local, in addition to national and transnational environments, as the re-contextualization of transnationally travelling texts and debates occurs at local levels at least as strongly as it does nationally. This is not to argue that the national context can be un-thought in late-modern European history. Indeed, as this article shows, the national framework remains essential for an understanding of patterns of ideological and discursive transfer. Especially in the ambition to impact on legislation and party-political debates, social movements such as feminism were inevitably focused toward change at the national level. The nation-state as a unit of analysis does, however, need to be de-centred, and its significance measured against both transnational and local contexts. Taking the local context as the analytical starting point allows for an understanding of how *both* nationally and transnationally travelling ideologies are received and re-shaped at the local grassroots of political activism.

The transnational dimension in Roman 1970s feminism is explored here by looking at, firstly, the transfer of texts, discourses and practices; secondly, encounters, travels and transcultural biographies; and, thirdly, the imagination and perception of 'the foreigner' – in particular, the foreign woman. In analysing processes of transcultural encounter and transfer the emphasis is here on agency: the *choice* to adopt certain practices or discourses from outside one's own context, and their strategic appropriation. Appropriation can mean misappropriation, and, to adopt Gayatri Spivak's argument, often requires an element of betrayal.<sup>5</sup> Meant by this is the fact that the local re-contextualization of ideas and practices involves de-contextualization, in which local adaptation processes often involve but little reference to or understanding of the context in which they originated. The Roman activists studied below did not need to fully grasp how and why women's liberation emerged in the US to appropriate elements of it. Nor did those on either side of the debate on abortion legislation in Italy need to present an accurate picture of the debate simultaneously taking place in France, in order to make strategic use of it. The present analysis aims to identify, more precisely than has been done, just how transnational sources were used, and why it made sense to do so in a particular locality.

An approach to cultural encounters and transfers that is fully aware of the geopolitical context in which agents are situated, and of local specificities, may help to question the teleological narrative of globalization that tends to

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5 G.C. Spivak, 'The politics of translation', in L. Venuti (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader* (London and New York, NY 2000), 397–417.

characterize memories of 'second-wave' feminism. Historical analyses, too, have sometimes suffered from a naive interpretation of the 'global sisterhood' that was imagined by the 1970s activists, and that was usually based on a geography centred on the US and to a lesser degree the UK and France.<sup>6</sup> Black US feminists were among the first to denounce the political bias in this narrative, while post-colonial critics have explored visions and strategies of feminist transnational co-operation that are fully cognizant of global relations of power.<sup>7</sup> Recent scholarship has attempted to redress the global sisterhood narrative – not by denying the transnational dimension of 1970s feminism but by more adequately situating it in the context of geopolitical power relations.<sup>8</sup> The 'politics of location', a term first coined by Adrienne Rich in the 1980s, has been used by Caren Kaplan and other feminist theorists to give meaning to transcultural feminist connections, in an approach that is critically aware of one's own place on the world map of cultural hegemonies and contested relationships.<sup>9</sup> The concept proves useful here, as it draws attention to the reasons why, and modalities through which, Roman and Italian feminists found themselves receptive to and influenced by, specifically, French and US feminisms.

The analysis relies on oral history interviews, in addition to unpublished and published texts from feminist groups in Italy, France and the USA. The approach to the written texts is focused on the question of transnationalism in a number of ways: comparing original texts and translations, disentangling the contextual meanings of words and their translation (such as women's liberation and *libertà femminile*), retrieving the patterns of transnational contacts, travels, and debates. Text analysis is integrated with the interpretation of oral history interviews. Interviewing forms an essential component of research into recent feminist movements for a number of reasons, one of which is the fact that they allow, often better than written sources do, assessment of the subjective transformation provoked in the individual. Another is that interviews allow the retrieval not only of discourses, but also everyday practices of which no written traces remain. Finally, it allows to retrieve the individual's self-narration, which was a key practice of 1970s feminism.<sup>10</sup> For the present analysis, I use interviews I have conducted with (former)

6 See for instance the classic anthology: R. Morgan, *Sisterhood is Global* (New York, NY 1996).

7 See for instance, J.W. Scott, C. Kaplan and D. Keated (eds), *Transitions, Environments, Translations: Feminisms in International Politics* (London and New York, NY 1997); C. Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC 2003).

8 For instance, K. Davis, *The Making of 'Our Bodies, Ourselves': How Feminism Travels Across Borders* (Durham, NC 2007); E.C. DuBois and K. Oliviero (eds), 'Circling the Globe: International Feminism Reconsidered, 1920 to 1975', (Special Issue) *Women's Studies International Forum*, 32, 1 (2009); M. Thayer, *Making Transnational Feminism: Rural Women, NGO Activists, and Northern Donors in Brazil* (New York, NY 2009).

9 C. Kaplan, 'The Politics of location as transnational feminist practice', in I. Grewal and C. Kaplan (eds), *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practice* (Minneapolis, MN 1994), 137–52.

10 S. Gluck and D. Patai (eds), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (London 1991); J. Sangster, 'Telling our stories: Feminist debates and the use of oral history', *Women's History Review*, 3, 1 (1994), 5–28.

activists based at the time in Italy, mostly Rome. My approach was semi-structured, focusing on the origins, contexts and key turning points of political mobilization and activism as deeply interconnected with one's individual life story. While the interview narratives were focused on the heyday of activism (which for the women in question was the long 1970s), an element of longer-term life story was included. Interviews, furthermore, allow us to unravel transnational connections and transfers: the interviewees shed light on the subjective and cognitive shifts that occurred through travel and encounters, real or imagined, with 'foreign' ideas, texts, individuals, and on the experience of cultural and linguistic difference within activist networks. Indeed, central themes that emerge are travel and translation. While this seems to lend support to the overall argument that 1970s feminism was strongly transnational, equally clear is that processes of transfer and re-contextualization are never straightforward or predictable.<sup>11</sup>

The case studies presented here offer two distinct patterns of transfer and appropriation, relating respectively to US women's liberation and French feminism. Analysing how US women's liberation helped to shape feminisms in Italy requires, first and foremost, an understanding of the cultural Americanization of Italy during the Cold War. The USA's considerable cultural influence in Italy accompanied systemic political and economic interference. The pattern of cultural transfer between the two countries was largely a matter of asymmetric relations of power – although not entirely so, as Italian actors were often able to control the ways in which US culture influenced the country.<sup>12</sup> At the start of the Cold War the USA invested heavily in creating an image of itself in Italy as the modern, progressive land of opportunity and fulfilment. One of the most powerful cultural forms exported during this period was that of the 'modern' American woman. A contradictory figure, she could take on the guise of the faithful housewife dedicated to the family, the efficient home-manager and double burden carrier, the shrewd seductress, the free spirit, unconstrained by tradition, or the independent, able professional.<sup>13</sup> Feminist encounters across the Atlantic illustrate the pervasiveness of this image, both as a positive and negative point of reference.

Italian feminism was at the start of the decade influenced more strongly by US women's liberation than by British, French, or other feminisms. This was related to the fact that those women forming the first women-only collectives, often though not always student and far-left activists, moved in activist networks in which US counterculture texts – above all by the Civil Rights and Black Power

11 My own position as a researcher and interviewer is one that is equally situated between localities and languages: neither Italian (in which most interviews were conducted) or English (the language in which I write) are my mother tongue. On interviewing and translation, see B. Temple and A. Young, 'Qualitative research and translation dilemmas', *Qualitative Research*, 4 (2004), 161–78.

12 For instance, D.E. Ellwood, 'Containing modernity, domesticating America in Italy', in A. Stephen (ed.), *The Americanization of Europe: Culture, Diplomacy and Anti-Americanism after 1945* (New York, NY 2008).

13 V. De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance Through 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe* (New York, NY 2005), 428–38.



movements – were avidly read. The reading and translation of texts by, for instance, Malcolm X, Angela Davies and Herbert Marcuse had from the mid-1960s become established practice in new left circles and student groups.<sup>14</sup> Italian activists used these texts to mark a breakthrough in two particular areas: firstly, to create a new type of social movement, autonomous from political parties and trade unions, and secondly, to allow for the imagining of forms of social conflict not based primarily on class – although class context was often at the forefront of Italian feminists' actions and analyses. Both of these were new approaches in Italian politics, breaking sharply with the domestic Cold War set-up by which any social conflict was aligned with the ubiquitous antagonism between the communist party (*Partito comunista italiano*, PCI) and the Christian Democratic Party (*Democrazia cristiana*, DC). The first separatist feminist groups in Italy were influenced by US texts specifically in their adoption of identity-based separatism, inspired by both Black Power and the US feminist collectives. A tradition of women-only political organizing existed in Italy, notably within the Marxist left (the unions' 'women's commissions', and most notably the women's organization connected to the PCI, *Unione donne italiane*). But the Italian feminist collectives adopted a separatism that was newly theorized, confrontational, explicitly aimed to be an attack on male privilege. While such new practices might have been introduced without transnational support, the latter was crucial in providing them with legitimacy, specifically among the post-1968 social movements and new left. At the same time, there were instances of non-transfer or rejection: Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*, although initially widely read, was strongly criticized in Italian feminist collectives and on the occasion of her visit to Rome in 1972, for being a 'middle-class' account written from the perspective of a woman not in waged labour. In Florence, *Rosa*, a collective of intellectual women close to the PCI, was interested in French, British and German feminisms, but rejected US Women's Liberation as 'liberal'.<sup>15</sup> And the particular silence in Italian feminism around the question of cultural difference and race was revealed in the fact that articles relating to Black feminism were omitted from the Italian translation of the classic anthology of 1971, 'Notes from the Third Year'.<sup>16</sup>

'Self-help' emerged as a set of practices and discourses in the US women's liberation movement around 1970. It was aimed at critically understanding and reclaiming one's health, sexuality and reproductive power, thus laying the

14 As put in a 1969 manifesto by one of the first feminist collectives in Italy, the Trento-based *Cerchio spezzato*: 'The process of Black Liberation has made us aware of own situation'. This, and various translations of US-originating texts in: Anabasi, *Donna è bello* (Milan 1972).

15 See the periodical: *Rosa: Quaderno di studio e di movimento sulla condizione della donna* (Florence 1974–6).

16 L. Passerini 'Corpi e corpo collettivo: Rapporti internazionali del primo femminismo radical italiano', in T. Bertilotti and A. Scattigno (eds), *Il femminismo degli anni settanta* (Rome 2005), 181–98 at 192. While this silence remains understudied, some comments can be found in: V. Perilli, "'Sexe" et "race" dans les féminismes italiens. Jalons d'une généalogie', in J. Falquet (ed.), *(Ré)articulation des rapports sociaux de sexe, classe et 'race'. Repères historiques et contemporains. Mémoires du séminaire du Cedref 2005–2006* (Paris 2006), 105–43.



foundations for women's liberation in a new relationship with the body.<sup>17</sup> Crucial to the spread in Italy of self-help practice was *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, published by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective in 1973 and first translated into Italian by Angela Miglietti, quoted above.<sup>18</sup> Self-help started to be practised in the small feminist collectives in Rome and other Italian cities from 1972. Important in Rome were two demonstrations in 1972 and 1973 by Debra Law and Carol Downer, leading figures of one of the foremost self-help clinics in the USA, the Los Angeles Feminist Women's Health Center. Downer and Law visited Rome in 1975 again for a series of workshops, as did Judy Norsigian and Norma Swenson from the Boston Women's Health Book Collective.<sup>19</sup> The exploration of one's body and sexuality in an uninhibited way provoked a cultural revolution among Italian women. The breaking of deeply-entrenched taboos around women's bodies was facilitated by interventions by women who were perceived as culturally different and freer than Italian women. The stereotypical image of the modern and liberated North American woman was at work here, as was Italian women's self-perception as being culturally inhibited, even backward, when compared to North American and North European women. One attendee at the second meeting was Livia Geloso, a young student who was to become very active in one of the feminist women's health groups in Rome, the *Gruppo femminista per la salute della donna*. To her, the encounter with the women from LA marked a turning point:

It was a revelation. I was amazed to observe the simplicity and calmness with which these women demonstrated their bodies and self-help practices to us. I immediately wanted to take part. I soon discovered that to do the demonstrations yourself, you needed be extremely comfortable with your body; it wasn't easy, there were so many taboos, especially among us Italians.<sup>20</sup>

The approaches developed to women's sexual liberation by the feminist clinics in Rome combined US-inspired self-help with a strong sense of social engagement and an anti-capitalist discourse, typical of social movements in 1970s Italy. Specific to the Italian interpretation was the fact that the exploration of one's body (the *auto-visita* or self-visit) occurred as collective process, and was narrated and reflected on as such, for instance through consciousness-raising and collective diaries. Central to the local application of self help, further, was that it was part of a much broader exploration that was existential, cultural, and political: to re-think what it meant to be a woman in the social world. The re-appropriation of one's body was only a starting point, forming the foundation of feminist politics for many years to come,

17 On the first stages of self-help in the US women's liberation movement, see S. Brownmiller, *In our time: Memoir of a revolution* (New York, NY 2000), 124–7.

18 S. Voli and A. Miglietti, 'Noi e il nostro corpo: storia di una traduzione', *Zapruder*, 2 (2007), 108–15.

19 Author's email interview with Judy Norsigian, 25 October 2012 (hereafter JN). See also L. Percovich, *La coscienza nel corpo: donna, salute e medicina negli anni settanta* (Milan 2005), 52.

20 Author's interview with Livia Geloso, Rome, 14 December 2011, in Italian (hereafter LG).

and leading to ambitions to transform public discourses and cultural representations of gender relations, the practices and spaces of the political, and the law. In Geloso's words:

Our desire was to acquire a completely new understanding of our bodies. And to base our search for new ways of being a woman on the exploration of the body and sexuality. It was impossible to even starting thinking about politics without addressing this first – this is how we saw it. We felt that what hindered us in our *libertà* was in a first instance located in the relationship with our body.<sup>21</sup>

The presence of women with transnational trajectories facilitated these breakthroughs and seemed to make them acceptable. Militants with a transcultural life trajectory included Yasmine Ergas, a CRAC activist who had been born in Switzerland and whose family originated from Iran, Egypt and Turkey. As she puts it:

Looking back, my hybrid background perhaps allowed me to take on particular roles and open doors: I was multilingual, so I translated texts – for instance Sheila Rowbotham – and met with international speakers, like Juliet Mitchell when she came to Rome.<sup>22</sup>

Ulla Tanenbaum, a trained midwife and leading figure of the San Lorenzo collective, was born into a Jewish-German family in Berlin during the War, and educated at the renowned anti-authoritarian *Odenwaldschule* in Southern Germany before moving to Rome with her family as a teenager. According to Silvia Tozzi, a university researcher who had studied in the USA and Switzerland, and was to play a key role in the San Lorenzo clinic:

There were in the Roman feminist groups quite a few women like Ulla. By this I mean women with a sort of hybrid identity – on the one hand, not shaped by an Italian upbringing, and therefore in some sense freer than we were. Ulla was really a free woman, no-one told her what to do. On the other hand, she was also very Italian – close to the PCI and UDI [Unione donne italiane], and with the loyalties that come with this. And then there were women like me – very much shaped by our Italian political culture and education, but also by our travels abroad.<sup>23</sup>

Assumptions around non-Italian women and women with a mixed cultural background being 'freer' than women with a more exclusively Italian education are a recurring theme in oral testimony, revealing that Italianness and womanhood were understood by feminists at the time as existing in a problematic relationship.

21 LG.

22 Yasmine Ergas, interview with the author in English, 2 November 2012 (hereafter YE).

23 Interview by the author with Silvia Tozzi, Rome, 9 December 2011.

The partly real, partly imagined ‘foreign’ intervention served to create a possible image of and path towards liberation.

Roman feminism was shaped by a contradictory set of local factors: cosmopolitanism, rapid cultural modernization, a sudden political shift to the left mid-decade, and stark social inequality. Italy’s capital had since the years of the ‘economic miracle’ (1958–63) become a site of international encounters. It hosted embassies, international organizations (including the UN’s World Food Programme), and a number of major international cultural events. The Summer Olympics of 1960 symbolized to the world the city’s rebirth, after having been tainted by Fascism and scarred by the War. Feminist transnational connections were more varied here than in any other Italian city – including Milan, which was more strictly focused on France. In Cold War Rome the presence of North American culture was felt strongly, due partly to the status Rome had acquired in transatlantic culture as a new capital of cinema. The image created by films such as those of Federico Fellini was one of a city of *dolce vita*, hedonism, and free sexuality only flimsily disguised by Catholic morality.<sup>24</sup> Transnational encounters and rapid urbanization contributed to the weakening of the Church’s social, cultural and political role in the city that had long been dominated by it. The 1970s were a low point for the Church’s societal influence in Italy generally and Rome specifically. Local politics were characterized by a struggle between the internally divided Christian Democrats and the main parties of the left (PCI and the *Partito socialista italiano*, PSI) – a struggle which was won by the latter, as reflected in the divorce referendum of 1974 (won, in Rome as nationally, by the left coalition in favour of keeping no-fault divorce legal), the regional elections of 1975 (which brought a PCI-PSI regional council to power in Lazio) and the national elections the following year (which marked the high point of PCI influence here as in other major cities). The left ascent in Roman politics may not have lasted long, but it was a key local factor allowing feminism to become a mass movement, with links to all political parties of the left and an immediate impact on local and national political debate.

Paradoxically, Catholicism mattered less to Roman feminists than it did to feminist groups elsewhere in the country. Unequivocally anti-religious, Roman feminists viewed Catholic culture and the Vatican’s local and national power as the prevailing cause of women’s oppression. Here, feminists were fully in agreement that the Catholic Church was women’s greatest enemy. In northern cities such as Milan, Trento and Turin, left-Catholicism, emerging from a radical interpretation of the Second Vatican Council and transnationally shaped by Liberation Theology, was more strongly embedded. In Rome it was a difficult position to hold, due to the vicinity of the Vatican. In the South, on the other hand, Catholicism, or at least elements of Catholic culture, were harder to reject – even for feminists.

As evocatively portrayed in Pierpaolo Pasolini’s *Ragazzi di vita*, many Roman neighbourhoods suffered from social deprivation and the absence of basic public

24 R. Wrigley (ed.), *Cinematic Rome* (Leicester 2008).

services. Tens of thousands of inhabitants were deprived of transport, adequate housing or clean water. This was the case in the newly constructed tower flats in the periphery, the infamous *borgate romane* such as Centocelle and Tor di Quinto, and, though to a lesser degree, in inner-city working-class districts such as San Lorenzo, on which more below.<sup>25</sup> Connecting with women of lower education and income, who might otherwise not have encountered feminism, was an ambition central to Roman feminism. Questions around the relation between women's liberation and class politics formed the main fault-line in Italian feminism throughout the decade. While there was little in the way of a conversation with US groups in this area, encounters with French and especially British feminisms reinforced class-based arguments; in particular, Juliet Mitchell's socialist-feminist classic *Women: The Longest Revolution* was influential. For instance, at a 1973 public meeting on abortion held in Rome with the latter and French feminist lawyer Gisele Halimi, the consensus on abortion as a class problem was not put into question by either speakers or audience.<sup>26</sup>

However, the social approach was not uncontested. Critiquing the student movement of 1968 and the radical-left parties, a number of Italian feminist groups came to reject what they understood as the vanguardist methods of the (neo-)Marxist left, seeing these as patronizing, and as bestowing power on select groups of people instead of more fundamentally questioning power relations also within social and political movements. The influential group *Rivolta femminile* – usually considered Italy's first separatist collective – and the Milan-based *Collettivo di via Cherubini* criticized the Roman feminists for what they saw as an old-fashioned 'missionary' approach to politicizing the less educated. These, they argued, hindered rather than facilitated a deep understanding of feminist consciousness, while naive discourses around class solidarity concealed informal relations of power and hierarchy.<sup>27</sup>

Nonetheless, in the traditionally conservative city of Rome the sense of a tidal wave of change was very strong on the left. More than elsewhere, feminists here understood themselves as taking part in (and even being protagonists of) a historical shift marking the decline of the Church and other conservative forces. A broad consensus existed in the Roman feminist groups that alliances with social movements of the left were needed – however problematic this was sometimes felt to be, due to the male-centred perspectives that pervaded here too. The conflict between feminist groups and the left was fought here less fiercely than in Milan or Bologna, although it certainly existed.<sup>28</sup>

25 A. Portelli, B. Bonomo, A. Sotgia and U. Viccardo, *Citta' di parole: Storia orale di una periferia romana* (Rome 2007).

26 Report in the periodical of the Roman feminist movement: *Donnità: cronache del movimento femminista romano* (Rome 1976), 130.

27 For instance, as put in *Rivolta femminile*'s second manifesto 'Io dico io' (1977): 'The more you occupy yourself with women, you more alien you are to me'.

28 This can be seen from the feminist challenge within the radical-left *Manifesto* group, which was particularly strong in Rome. Testimony to this tension: L. Castellina, 'Il Manifesto e le femministe', *Manifesto* (3 March 1974). A similar point is made here on the relation between feminist groups and the

The *consultori*, in most cases set up in working-class or deprived neighbourhoods, expressed both the social agenda and a feminism centred on sexual difference. Of the Roman clinics, the San Lorenzo clinic was most renowned nationally; it was well-known also in feminist circles in the UK, France, Germany and the USA. San Lorenzo was a working-class district characterized by solid traditions of radicalism. Its pronounced local identity was shaped partly by the wartime past: a target of Allied bombing in 1943 and the site of mass deportation of the Jews, the neighbourhood prided itself in its role in the anti-fascist resistance. During the long 1970s, local radicalism was re-invented in dense youth activism with anarchist and autonomist tendencies.<sup>29</sup> The San Lorenzo *consultorio* was set up following the self-help presentation by Law and Downer,<sup>30</sup> and was inspired by the LA clinics in a number of ways: the clinic's activities were run in small groups, involved door-to-door contact, the provision of free contraception and information packs, and consciousness-raising and *auto-visita* sessions.<sup>31</sup> As was the case in the USA, the self-managed character was seen as a core element of feminist practice, and precluded links with either the state or other political actors such as parties. Self-management carried a particular meaning in 1970s Italy. Drawn from anarchist and autonomist tendencies that were influential on the radical left since the late 1960s, it involved a broad spectrum of new social activism, including, for instance, citizens taking control of local school boards, neighbourhood collectives, and workplace and factory councils out-with trade union control. In this context, it had a radically antagonistic dimension, which the *consultori* too adopted: through civil disobedience, notably in the carrying out of abortion and making available knowledge around contraception, feminist clinic workers aimed to create pockets of counter-hegemony, from which wider cultural and political transformation might emerge.

A key reason why the *consultori* movement mushroomed in Italy generally and in Rome specifically was the urgent need for contraception and for safe abortions on demand. While an accurate picture of illegal abortion is hard to reconstruct, according to estimates in 1974 by the feminist group *Movimento di liberazione della donna* (MLD), around three million terminations of pregnancy were carried out per year, among which around 400,000 were in Rome alone, which included the many women travelling up from the South.<sup>32</sup> Within the SL collective a few women formed a smaller 'underground group' (*nucleo clandestino*) and educated themselves on new abortion methods. Simonetta Tosi, a biologist affiliated with the National Research Council and leading figure of the Italian feminist health movement, along with others travelled to France where they were taught the so-called

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(traditional and new) left in the Southern parts of the country: J. Adler Hellman, *Journeys Among Women: Feminism in Five Italian Cities* (Oxford 1987), 169–70.

29 M. Pazzaglini, et al., *Il quartiere San Lorenzo a Roma: storia e recupero* (Roma 1994); and the film: D. Forgacs, *San Lorenzo: Luoghi e memoria* (2003).

30 LG.

31 'Dal consultorio autogestito San Lorenzo al centro Simonetta Tosi: Cronistoria', in: *Atti del Seminario Donna e salute*, 1989. Archivia, Fondo Simonetta Tosi.

32 MLD, *Contro l'aborto di classe: Conferenza nazionale* (Rome 1975).

Karman method by activists of the *Mouvement pour la liberation de l'avortement et de la contraception* (MLAC).<sup>33</sup> Despite the inspiration drawn from US feminists, the discourses around abortion developed in the Roman clinics were specific. Unlike the approach taken by for instance the New York-based 'Choices Medical Center',<sup>34</sup> the Roman *consultori* did not employ a discourse centred on individual choice. Rather, they aimed at politicizing women employing the notions of 'autonomy' and 'liberty' strongly embedded in radical political discourse at the time. While the notion of women's autonomy here involved the undeniable right to control one's body, *libertà* had a more complex meaning. It was one that refused the naive imagining of equal and free choice for all, but, rather, was cognizant of the socio-economic and cultural contexts that shape and limit one's choice – whether that was the choice to have an abortion or not to have one. As put by Ines Valenzuolo, an activist at the San Lorenzo clinic:

I felt that each of the women whom I worked with at the clinic – even the poorest ones – had her own understanding of what *libertà* meant. *Libertà* was far from being a given thing to Italian women at the time – be this in terms of reproduction, sexuality or work. In our notion of *libertà* we were conscious that having an abortion or not was not always a matter of free choice. Often women were pushed by economic circumstance towards making a decision either way. Or husbands forced their wives to have illegal, unsafe abortions – others denied them this possibility.<sup>35</sup>

In a cultural context around female sexuality and reproduction remained to some degree taboo subjects. The San Lorenzo group played a role in making publically available medical and scientific information, which they obtained from non-Italian sources. The texts included feminist publications, such as those published by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, but, significantly, also articles from non-feminist medical journals, for instance *The Lancet* newsletters.<sup>36</sup> The feminist groups thus aimed to fulfil a broader function of general public education. Many of these were translated and published by a group set up by the above-mentioned Tosi, the *Gruppo femminista per la salute della donna* (GFSD), in its series *Quaderni della salute della donna*.<sup>37</sup> Feminists from the UK, USA, France, and other European countries visited the Italian clinics and articles were published in, for instance, *Spare Rib*, *Feminist Review* and *Radical America*.<sup>38</sup>

33 J. Mossuz-Lavau, *Les lois de l'amour: Les politiques de la sexualite en France, 1950–1990* (Paris 1991), 149.

34 On this clinic, see: M. Hoffman, *Intimate Wars: The Life and Times of the Women who Brought Abortion from the Back Alley to the Boardroom* (New York, NY 2012).

35 Author's interview with Ines Valenzuolo in Italian; Rome, 9 December 2011.

36 LG.

37 These are all kept in Archivia, Fondo Crac. The first of these was reprinted and distributed by a major publishing house: *Anticoncezionali* (Rome 1978).

38 E. Cantarow, 'Abortion and feminism in Italy: Women against Church and State', *Radical America Journal*, 10, 6 (1976); M. Arnold, 'Visit to an Italian Health Center', *Spare Rib* (October 1976); and the special issue on 'Abortion in Italy', *Feminist Review*, 7 (Spring 1981).



Depending on the inclinations of the foreign observers, the feminist dimension, the radical anti-capitalism and anarchism, or the professionalism of the Italian women's health movement was hereby emphasized.

As Italian, and especially Roman, feminists from 1974 returned to a 'politics of the street' – that is to say, mass mobilization aimed at cultural, political and legal change – France became the main point of reference in organizational and discursive terms. French–Italian transfers were qualitatively different from US–Italian transfers: while the latter were based on the fascination for otherness, the former involved elements of closeness and familiarity. French–Italian transfers are situated in the *histoire croisée* that characterizes relations between the two nations in the post-1945 period.<sup>39</sup> Despite the fact that entangled history approaches have tended to focus on France and Germany, it is postwar France and Italy that present a unique example of entangled national histories. While some developments were shared with other West European countries – such as the economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s, and the rise of mass consumption – others were specific to these two nations: the presence of large communist parties and workers' movements, and the strongly political, anti-capitalist nature of the May 1968 protests. More than was the case between Italy and West Germany, for instance, long-standing cultural affinity facilitated the intense transfer of political debate, reinforced by the mass migration of Italians to France between the late 1940s and the early 1970s.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, women's conditions in the two countries during the 1970s differed significantly in a number of respects: not least, women's opportunities in the labour market were more limited in Italy. While broadly stagnant in France, in Italy, contrary to the West European trend, women's share of the labour market between 1959 and 1972 decreased, from 33.3 per cent to 17.7 per cent.<sup>41</sup>

Nonetheless, the strategies and debates adopted by the two feminist movements featured remarkable parallels, as did broader societal debates in the two countries on gender, sexuality and the family. For instance, while the controlled sale of contraception was legalized in France through the *Loi Neuwirth* of 1967, a similar law, following an in some respects similar debate, was passed in Italy in 1971.<sup>42</sup> The overall cultural relation between the two nations was here too to some degree an asymmetric one. Since the time of the French Revolution, large sections of the Italian cultural and political elites had looked with admiration to France,

39 M. Werner and B. Zimmermann (eds), *De la comparaison à l'histoire croisée* (Paris 1999).

40 An example of French–Italian *histoire croisée*: F.d'Almeida, *Histoire et politique en France et en Italie : l'exemple des socialistes, 1945–1983* (Rome 1998).

41 The number of women officially in employment as a share of the total number of adult women in France was at 49.1 per cent in 1950 and 48.3 per cent in 1970. For comparison, in the UK this percentage rose from 40.7 per cent in 1950 to 50.7 per cent in 1970, and in West Germany from 44.3 per cent to 48.1 per cent. P. Willson, *Women in Twentieth-Century Italy* (New York, NY and Basingstoke 2009), 118. Figures for Italy in P. Ginsborg, *Storia dell'Italia repubblicana* (Turin 1989), 599–602.

42 A. Taylor Allen, *Feminism and Motherhood in Europe* (New York, NY and Basingstoke 2005), 219–20.



considering it a more democratic, civic and modern political system.<sup>43</sup> As other political activists of the left tended to do, many Italian feminists perceived their French counterparts as more politically effective than themselves, and as offering a model for other movements. Moreover, postwar European integration created in Italy a discourse around the country's *necessary* modernization and stabilization, and its catching up, in economical, cultural and democratic terms, with EEC countries, especially France and West Germany.<sup>44</sup>

The *Mouvement de Liberation des Femmes* (MLF) was the main platform bringing together feminist collectives and campaigns, operating from 1970. Its publications, notably the periodical *Le torchon brûle*, were among the most avidly read in the small Italian collectives of the early 1970s.<sup>45</sup> There were evident parallels in the ways in which both feminist movements framed abortion – namely, as an urgent political problem requiring state intervention. This was suggested in an influential MLF brochure of 1972, entitled 'Manière pour une reflexion politique sur l'avortement', widely read in Italy.<sup>46</sup> Another shared element was the understanding of abortion as a class issue: MLF and CRAC texts emphasized that while abortion on demand was a universal right, in practice abortion affected women of different social classes differently. Shared also was the insight that abortion on demand was but one aspect of a much wider cultural transformation, in which women would be fully in control of their bodies and their sexuality. As put in an MLF tract of 1972, entitled 'Liberer nos corps ou liberer l'avortement?' and influential in both countries, a *feminist* approach to abortion, as opposed to one based on gender-neutral civil rights discourse, highlighted the sexual oppression of women in society and the fight against it.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the feminist movements in both countries linked the issue of abortion to the struggle to make contraception and information around it freely available. Despite the legislation passed, in neither country did women universally have full access to contraception and adequate information.

Debate in the Italian feminist movement, too, from around 1973 shifted to the question of abortion; it was to dominate the movement's strategies, and transform it from a patchwork of small consciousness-raising groups to a social movement of a new kind with high public visibility. According to the Codice Rocco, the private law regime dating back to the 1920s, abortion was a criminal offence in all circumstances, on the grounds of being a 'crime against the race'. A number of factors pushed Italian feminism towards this focus: the sheer ubiquity of illegal abortion as a social problem, the first proposal for legislative change put forward in the Chamber of representatives by the socialist MP Loris Fortuna in 1973, a landmark

43 A similar point in M. Lazar, *Maisons rouges: Les Partis communistes francais et italiens de la Liberation a nos jours* (Paris 1992), 13–25.

44 M.J. Bull and J.L. Newell, *Italian Politics* (Cambridge 2005), 201–17.

45 Especially: 'Avortement, contraception, sexualite, reformisme', *Le Torchon Brule*, 5 (1972).

46 Quelques militantes, 'Manière pour une reflexion politique sur l'avortement', in *Partisans*, (ed.), *Liberation des femmes* (Paris 1972).

47 MLF, 'L'Alternative: liberer nos corps ou liberer l'avortement?' (1972), quoted in C. Duchon, *Feminism in France: From May '68 to Mitterrand* (London 1986), 55.

sentence by the Constitutional Court in 1975, and the launching of a campaign for a referendum abolishing existing law by the liberal-left *Partito radicale* in the same year.<sup>48</sup> In May 1975 the *Comitato romano per la liberalizzazione dell'aborto e della contraccezione* (CRAC) was set up by women from San Lorenzo and other clinics, with women from the extra-parliamentary left parties, the Pompeo Magno collective, and MLD. Yasmine Ergas and Simonetta Tosi of GFSD played a significant role. CRAC operated as a platform, with approximately 500 activists connected to it. Its initial aims were to coordinate abortion services in the Rome area and through trips abroad, to offer a forum for debate on the future of the *consultori* in the context of imminent regularization, to promote self-help practice, and to develop practice-based expertise on women's reproductive health.<sup>49</sup>

Unique about the situation in the Roman feminist movement, was the clear-cut decision made in this context to take the feminist movement to the streets and to reconstitute it on a mass basis. This was not an obvious strategy. When CRAC called for the first women-only national march for abortion on demand in December 1975, influential feminist groups, notably the *Collettivo di via Cherubini* in Milan and collectives from Florence and Bologna, expressed disagreement.<sup>50</sup> They considered that mass mobilization, the 'politics of the street', and the male-centred charismatic leadership produced by these methods were exactly the traditional left practices that the feminist movement needed to abandon. Indeed, 'lasciate le piazze!' ('leave the squares') was an important slogan in the context of small-group separatist organizing in the early 1970s. The abandoning of the earlier small-group method and shift towards mass-based mobilization in some groups resulted partly from what from the mid-1970s was broadly felt as the crisis, and even failure, of consciousness-raising. There was a widespread feeling that while women might have been able to transform their language and consciousness, deeply-entrenched forms of behaviour, in wider society and also among feminists themselves, had largely remained unaffected. Such reflections provoked not only a shift towards social engagement, but also a turn towards the body. The focus on the body resonated, further, with the emphasis on sexual difference as constitutive of both women's identity and feminist politics. And finally, it allowed, at least momentarily, to hold on to what Ergas has termed the 'utopia of identity' in feminism: the illusion of a stable and shared identity that can form the basis for a new political subject ('woman') and a universalist politics.<sup>51</sup> A shift towards mass mobilization involved the choice to engage with political parties and parliamentary debate, with the eventual aim of impacting on legislation. Again, this was far from an uncontroversial decision, given the anti-institutional discourse that was

48 Scirè, *L'aborto in Italia*, 41–7, 77–84.

49 S. Tozzi, 'Molecolare, creativa, materiale: La vicenda dei gruppi per la salute', *Memoria*, 19–20 (1987), 153–180; YE.

50 Alcune donne del Collettivo di via Cherubini, 'Noi sull'aborto facciamo un lavoro diverso: perché non partecipiamo alle manifestazioni', in *Sottosopra: 'Sessualità', procreazione, maternità, aborto*, (Milan 1975).

51 Y. Ergas, *Nelle maglie della politica: femminismo, istituzioni e politiche sociali nell'Italia degli anni settanta* (Milan 1986), 11.

common to all Italian social movements in this period. Despite taking part in this discourse, Roman feminist groups tended to be more willing to engage with political parties and parliamentary debate than feminists in other parts of the country.<sup>52</sup> The vicinity of national political institutions and party headquarters pushed feminist groups in Rome in this direction, in contrast to developments elsewhere, notably in Milan and smaller northern cities.

It was, however, the interpretation of French events that crucially contributed to this shift. There were parallels not only in terms of discourse, but also with regard to political practices. One of these was 'self-denunciation', practised by feminists and abortion campaigners in France and other European countries, whereby women rendered the private act of having undergone an abortion public, with the aim of drawing attention to the need for legislative change. In 1971, 343 French women, among whom many public figures such as Simone de Beauvoir and film director Agnes Varda, signed the *Manifeste des 343*, declaring that they had had illegal abortions and calling for legalization based on a woman's choice. It was published in all major papers of the left, including *Le Monde* and *Le nouvel observateur*.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, the following year 331 medics turned their illegal carrying out of abortions into a political act by 'self-denouncing'.<sup>54</sup> At the so-called Bobigny trial of 1972, at which 17-year old rape victim Marie Claire Chevalier, her mother, and three women assisting them stood accused of practising abortion, hundreds of women assembled outside the High Court, denouncing themselves.<sup>55</sup> The strategy of turning abortion trials into politically charged media events was applied successfully in Italy too. In June 1973, Gigliola Pierobon stood accused of abortion at the High Court in Padua along with two friends who had helped her. Feminists had campaigned for the trial be open to the public, while rallies were held across the country. Simonetta Tosi and others volunteered as witnesses for the defence, and during the sessions tens of women self-denounced – which contributed to the intense media coverage of the trial.<sup>56</sup>

However, as these practices existed in distinct political contexts, their meaning diverged. Self-denunciation in Italy retained a more radical, even subversive cachet rather than becoming a tactic employed by public intellectuals, as was the case in France. Public support from cultural and professional elites was significantly weaker in Italy; for instance, in France, the group *Choisir* was set up in 1972 in support of the 343 signatories and to campaign around the Bobigny trial. Renowned lawyer Gisèle Halimi played a prominent role in the group, as did de Beauvoir, and the scientist and Nobel Prize recipient Jacques Monod. While its

52 Although there certainly was no unanimity; see for instance the discussion in CRAC reported in: Archivia, Fondo CRAC, 1, fasc. 1976, 2 October 1976.

53 U. Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir* (London and New York, NY 2004), 75.

54 Duchon, *Feminism in France*, 52.

55 B. Pavard, 'Genre et militantisme dans le Mouvement pur la liberte de l'avortement et de la contraception. Pratique des avortements (1973–76)', *Clio*, 29, 1 (2009), 79–96.

56 'Abbiamo abortito tutte, gridano le femministe a Padova', *Corriere della Sera* (6 June 1973). A comparison of the two trials in: L. Perini, 'Il corpo della cittadina: La costruzione del discorso pubblico sulla legge 194/1978 in Italia negli anni settanta', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Bologna (2011).

'elite' approach was not without controversy and provoked criticism from the more grassroots MLF, *Choisir* had a visible impact on public and political debate, and notably on the positions held by the *Parti socialiste* (PS) in the early 1980s.<sup>57</sup> The difference may be related to the fact that while in the case of France the diffusion of a progressive politics and culture among professional elites was one of the key consequences of 1968, in Italy traditionally elite professions such as medicine and the law remained more immune to the spread of the post-1968 progressive culture. In France the *Groupe Information Sante*, modelled on Michel Foucault's *Groupe Information Prisons*, was set up in 1972 as a network of medical professionals and students.<sup>58</sup> Refusing to adhere to the line taken by the *Ordre des médecins*, which was opposed to any change in abortion law, they started to practice illegal abortions and coordinate travels abroad. Abortion campaigning in Italy was located more firmly in the grass-roots activism and direct action of thousands of ordinary women and some men. Elite support was reluctant, and limited to a handful of lukewarm public interventions. For instance, renowned writer Natalia Ginzburg, while being one of only two public figures to sign a press statement released by the Roman feminist movement in 1973 objecting to the Fortuna bill, publically declared that although supportive of most issues put forward by the feminists, she '[did] not like' the movement.<sup>59</sup> The weakness of elite and professional support in Italy for this and other feminist issues may help to explain why Law 194, once passed, remained largely dead letter: legal change did not necessarily produce support among those having to implement it.

As the *Partito radicale* in January 1975 launched a high-profile campaign for the collection of the signatures required to request the holding of a referendum, a left and feminist grassroots coalition in favour of some form of legalization took shape. CRAC was one of its centres of gravity. The events coincided with the passing of the *Loi Veil* in France, which legalized abortion up to ten weeks of pregnancy on the basis of the woman's demand and a medical certificate claiming health risks. The *Loi Veil*, I argue, significantly contributed to creating the pro-legalization platform in Italy. For instance, Gisele Halimi was interviewed by virtually all Italian left-wing dailies and periodicals.<sup>60</sup> The liberal-left weekly *L'Espresso*, one of the initiators of the referendum campaign, now couched its arguments for a permissive law in terms of Italy's need to become more 'European', indeed, 'as modern as France'. It was the adoption of the *Loi Veil* which provoked in the *Espresso* editors the courage to headline their January 1975 issue cover with 'Abortion: an Italian tragedy: We accuse the state of murdering women'. The cover featured a controversial, but highly effective image of a

57 Duchon, *Feminism in France*, 54 and 115.

58 M. Zancarini-Fournel, 'Histoire(s) du MLAC 1973-1975', *CLIO: Histoires, femmes, et sociétés*, 18 (2003).

59 Archivia, Serie Movimento femminista, fasc. 1973; N. Ginzburg, 'La condizione femminile', in *Vita immaginaria* (Milan 1974), 182-4.

60 For instance, *Il Manifesto* (23 February 1975).

pregnant woman dying on the cross.<sup>61</sup> The *Espresso* feature marked a tipping point in public and parliamentary debate: the pro-legalization camp now presented the thousands of women annually dying from backstreet abortions as a problem that placed Italy in a negative light *vis-a-vis* its European partners, and framed it as an anomaly.

It was in Rome, more unambiguously so than elsewhere in Italy, that the feminist movement was inspired by the strategies of French groups for mass mobilization in favour of abortion on demand.<sup>62</sup> Exchanges with French feminisms occurred also in other parts of Italy; notably, strong mutual influences existed between Milanese, Turinese and Parisian women in the context of the 'psychoanalytical' turn in feminism in the second half of the 1970s. Notably, the works by Luce Irigaray were a key point of reference shaping feminist debate in the North Italian cities from the mid-1970s. The fact that in Rome a very different strand of French feminism resonated, thus demonstrates the need for a locally differentiated approach to the study of transnational transfer. Roman feminists drew inspiration mainly from the methods developed by the MLF and the MLAC, which was operative from 1973 to the passing of the *Loi Veil*. CRAC had first established a connection with the latter as it wished to send activists to Paris to be taught safe abortion practices. Set up by feminist, leftist and professional activists, MLAC's initial aims, namely to offer public and legal support to self-denouncers, developed into a wider programme, as the organization started to arrange illegal abortions at abortion centres across the country and coordinate trips abroad. Not a women-only organization, it attracted activists from all parties of the left, the trade unions, as well as engaged individuals in the professions, up to a total of around 15000 adherents. Political support came from the new-left trade union *Confédération française démocratique du travail* (CFDT) and from the PS.<sup>63</sup> As MLAC, CRAC soon shifted its attention from underground abortion work to public campaigning for legislation based on women's self-determination. As put by Orietta Rossi, a feminist activist and member of the radical-left *Avanguardia operaia*, at a national feminist conference on abortion organized by the MLD in 1975, 'MLAC [is] the example for mass initiatives'. Majority opinion at this meeting was that while autonomist methods and self-help practice had been key in spreading feminist consciousness at the grassroots, it presented a dead end ('we are self-managing our own poverty'), and it was time for institutional change.<sup>64</sup>

In its coordination of series of national rallies in 1975–7, CRAC had greater difficulties than MLAC in establishing support across the country. Only some sections of the Italian feminist movement showed support, those which supported mass mobilization around abortion: Roman and southern, rather than northern groups, and Marxist-oriented groups, such as the communist-feminist collectives, rather

61 'Aborto: una tragedia italiana: Accusiamo lo stato di donnicidio', *L'Espresso* (20 January 1975).

62 Much documentation on MLAC was collected, see for instance: Archivia, Fondo CRAC, UA16, fasc. 1: 'MLAC: cronistoria'.

63 Zancarini-Fournel, 'Histoire(s) du MLAC'.

64 MLD, *Contro l'aborto di classe*.

than psychoanalysis-oriented groups, such as the *Libreria delle donne* in Milan. Partly, this was to do with the contested status of Rome as a capital city, and the fact that the Roman groups were at no point universally recognized as the centre of the movement nationally defined. Admittedly, in France too there were local challenges to MLAC's 'Parisian' leadership, as well as autonomist critiques of its institutions-oriented politics.<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, MLAC was able to build greater consensus around the need for mass mobilization among the feminist movement and the militant left, which, as a result, more easily inserted itself in new political cultures established since 1968.

Despite being strongly integrated with transnational activist networks, Italian feminists during the 1970s had a sharp sense of their distinct national context, which was characterized by a more profound socio-cultural and political crisis in the wake of 1968 than elsewhere in the industrialized world.<sup>66</sup> As Ergas reflects:

Something specific happened in Italy. Of course, there was also feminist awakening in France, the US, elsewhere. But in Italy, we were re-negotiating the very meaning of a normal life – everything was put into question.<sup>67</sup>

If the very notion of women's liberation was inspired by English-language feminists, *libertà femminile* took on a different meaning in and across the Italian context. Intimately connected to other forms of political conflict, women's liberation was understood as a collective rather than an individual process, aimed at broader change for social justice and against privilege and inequality. At the same time, it was understood as creating a fundamentally new sense of self at the most intimate level. Through it, women would uncover a new, less constrained, more 'authentic', and *deeply sexed* self. Italian feminism's politics of local reception consisted of appropriating elements of US and French feminism in support of this double notion of liberation. In very different ways, the inspiration drawn from US self-help and body-centred inquiry, and the perception of a French success story in the area of legislative change, contributed to shaping a movement that was concerned both with intimate transformation and legal-political change.

Within this national context, Roman feminists, with the dense transnational connections, occupied a particular position. They were instrumental in building the mass campaign that contributed to the passing of a law on abortion that was, although certainly ambiguous in its wording in some regards, radical for a predominantly Catholic country. At the same time, their approaches were always contested in the wider feminist movement. Ironically, around 1976, at precisely the moment when public opinion and parliamentary debate 'discovered' feminism as a force to be reckoned with, the feminist coalition disintegrated over difficult

65 Zancarini-Fournel, 'Histoire(s) du MLAC'; Duchén, *Feminism in France*, 54.

66 A similar point is made in G.-R. Horn, *The Spirit of 1968: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America* (Oxford 2008).

67 YE.



questions of how to relate to the state, the law, and political parties, without compromising oneself or being co-opted by other actors. By 1977 CRAC ceased to operate as a platform. Many of the debates within Italian feminist groups were shaped, thus, by tensions and disagreements between and within Italian groups. In some instances, feminists considered groups operating in other parts of the country to be as 'foreign', or even more so, than French or North American groups. Transfer from abroad, however, did have a distinct status. Archives show that the texts by MLAC, the MLF, the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, Kate Millett, and other foreign authors were treated by the Roman feminists as 'counter-information': an almost clandestine and for this reason very valuable source of information, as suggested in Miglietti's story at the start of this article.<sup>68</sup> Such texts were bearers of a particular truth *because* they were foreign. Despite misinterpretation and in some cases 'betrayal' (and, in a sense, exactly because of the possibilities that such processes create), their very foreignness was invoked to legitimate one's position, and allowed to mark the cognitive and discursive breakthroughs needed for the re-invention of political agendas.

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### Biographical Note

**Maud Anne Bracke** is a Senior Lecturer in Modern European History at the University of Glasgow. She has published books and articles on West European communism during the Cold War, 1968 in Italy, France and Czechoslovakia, the history of feminist movements and thought, women and work, and collective memory of the Second World War. Her work has appeared in *European History Quarterly*, *Contemporary European History*, *Modern Italy* and *Women's History Review*, among others. Her monograph, *Women and the re-invention of the political: Feminism in Italy (1968–1983)*, was published by Routledge in 2014.

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68 See for instance the classifying of French and US feminist texts under 'Contrainformazione' in: Archivia, Serie Movimento femminista, fasc. 1973.