women, terrorism and trauma in Italian culture

Ruth Glynn, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2013, 288pp., ISBN: 978-1-137-29406-7, \$90 (Hbk)

Women, Terrorism and Trauma in Italian Culture, by Ruth Glynn, provides a sustained analysis of the impact of women's participation in the armed terrorist violence in Italy during the so-called *Anni di piombo* ('Years of Lead').¹ Through the prism of trauma theory and cultural studies, Glynn identifies the diverse ways in which during the 1970s and 1990s women denoted as terrorists have been portrayed in different media. Working diachronically and synchronically, the author takes into consideration a broad range of cultural products (press reporting, memoirs, literary fiction and films) and their transformations from the 1970s to the present. Specifically, she examines how gendered stereotypes are used in the elaboration of social anxieties and trauma and how cultural products have been used in this elaboration.

1 The groups the author analyses are from both sides of the political divide: the Red Brigades and Prima Linea from the left; Avanguardia Nazionale, Ordine Nuovo, Nuclei Armati Proletari from the right.

Chapter 1 (Approaching women, terror, and trauma in cultural perspective) provides an overview of the approaches adopted to study the involvement of women in political violence and terrorism. Chapters 2 (Press representation of Italian women terrorists) and 3 (Feminizing terror: *pentitismo* and the cinema of containment) provide a synchronic analysis of different media from the 1970s to the 1990s, from the representation of Italian women terrorists in the press to the cinematic representations of the mid-1980s when terrorism escalated and at the same time various films were produced on the subject (a 'cinematic feminization of terrorism' emerged). Chapter 4 (Writing the terrorist self) collects a corpus of autobiographical writings published by Italian former women terrorists in the 1990s, characterised, according to the author, by the spirit and need for reconciliation and social rehabilitation. Chapters 5 (Refeminizing the female terrorist) and 6 (Romancing the female terrorist) deepen the diachronic approach, focusing on texts concerned with encounters between female terrorists and male victims or survivors, showing how gender relations may shape traumatic responses and their legacies in individuals of both sexes. Chapter 7 (Between myth and maternity: the women of the 'New Red Brigades') deals with continuities and differences between 1980s and present-day representations of terrorism and of women in terrorism.

Glynn conceptualises the experience of the 'Years of Lead' in Italy as a form of collective trauma. According to this conceptual framework, central figures are the perpetrators, the victims, the survivors and a wounded social body in need of healing. In this context the main effort is one of dealing with/remembering/

overcoming the social anxieties inspired by terrorism. Gender plays a crucial role in this. Glynn shows how gendered narratives are used in different contexts and identifies the constant renewal of the same gender paradigm. Female violence, Glynn argues, threatens the deeply gendered nature of the social organisation: it attacks the laws of the state but also the social order itself. Refusing the historical feminine and maternal role imposed on them, women who embrace violence are responsible for a double wound against society. As societal organisations are based and rely on fixed symbolic roles assigned to women and therefore on implicit assumptions about women and violence, they add to the trauma of terrorism, itself another trauma in the symbolic order. In the case of Italy, terrorism appeared shortly after the rise of feminist movements, and thus female participation in it, in its violence, challenged at the same time not only the nation-state, but also the traditionally and extremely gendered culture of the country. Therefore, female terrorists' role was seen as even more contradictory: as terrorists they represented an element of destabilisation and at the same time, as women, they had to answer the social need of being used to reestablish the deep sense of internal cohesion of the society itself. This is why male violence is seen as a continuum (as violence can normally be seen as part of male identity), while feminine violence is strongly polarised: if you are a woman you are not a terrorist, if you become a terrorist you are no longer a woman.

Glynn's analysis of books, press material and movies from the 1970s to the 1990s both articulates and shows the variation and the continuity in the positions taken by and available to women in those years. Glynn sees an evolution though: from women seen as only implicated in terrorism as wives and fiancées of male terrorists to their representation as more independent and autonomous actors. This shift in representation, which Glynn calls the 'feminization of terrorism', has been ongoing since the 2000s. This change is due to a general opening up of Italian society to less traditional values and to the circulation of a feminist culture that started to challenge the traditional social order. However, it did not change much the polarising symbolisms in which women were caught as guarantors of a certain social order, and even more so in a traumatised society.

Although the objective of the study is the analysis of the critical role of gender in a traumatised society, the ways in which the author combines cultural studies and trauma theory produce a number of tensions. Approaching a society like the Italian society of those years exclusively through trauma and cultural studies theory conceived within very different historical contexts and in very different times runs the risk of producing historical simplification. Although the analysis describes society as a whole, and depicts thoroughly the image of this society given in the media, it is not accurately framed in the historical phases of Italian society and terrorism, which are not properly accounted for. There was in those years in Italy a 'zeitgeist' that is difficult to grasp. For example, in the 1970s the 'boundaries' between those who would become the first Red Brigades and the social movements,

feminism included, were very fuzzy. In Italy feminism was born not from a civil or individual rights movement, but from a split from the social movements from the 'extreme' left. In a way feminism gave continuity to a struggle that could have attracted more women to the extremism of the Red Brigades. From there on, the phases of terrorism evolved very differently. In Glynn's book not enough distinction is made between what was called (and discovered as) state terrorism, the groups from the right and the Red Brigades, that is, between the terrorism coming from groups on the right and the terrorism coming from groups on the left. The two terrorisms had very different targets, or victims, in quality and in numbers. In addition, no mention is made, with regard to the targets of the Red Brigades, of how the targets changed over the years. From the early Red Brigades to the new Red Brigades, the targets shifted from state representatives to figures known to be mediators of the social conflict and nearer to the Trade Unions and the ex-Communist Party. Those changes marked perhaps an even stronger social trauma. I have the same reservations with regards to the application of trauma theory as such to Italian society. For example, the 'new' terrorist wave of the 2000s is interpreted as primarily a return of a 'repressed trauma' of a society that has not yet been able to heal from the trauma of the 1970s. There is no analysis or mention of other elements, such as internal economic, political and social developments. Healing from the trauma of the Holocaust or of other societies such as ex-Yugoslavia and Cambodia is very different to healing from trauma in a society such as 1970s Italy or Germany. Italian society was not *primarily* a traumatised society. In this sense, yes, this study is a beginning: it provides a valuable, useful *and partial* analysis of those times. However, to fully understand those years and their protagonists we need more categories of analysis, more differentiations and more in-depth historical knowledge, which is perhaps becoming available only now.

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