

**Pushed
by the
Violence
of Our
Desires**

This piece was written
anonymously.

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Thanks & love to Yadira and “the
team”.



You're asking me about woman today as a militant in fighting units.

I can't tell you anything based on personal experience, because I have never belonged to any armed organizations. But I can tell you about some of the things I've thought about over the past few years, starting with my work in prison, relationships I developed inside, my knowledge of some fighting units right from their very beginnings, and my being a little more aware as a woman.

Are men and women driven differently to take up arms in order to change the world? Put like that the question is ridiculous. It depends what level of motivation we are talking about. The conscious motives are the same, obviously, the political analysis, revolutionary perspective and so on. The individual motives of character and personal history are infinite, and naturally have nothing to do with the sex of the person. And yet a collective female unconscious exists, and so perhaps there are profound motivations specific to the fact of our being women, which can become channeled into the armed struggle.

Perhaps it's our relationship with reality. We have a relationship with reality that is simultaneously concrete and fantastic. Men have a relationship which is abstract and rational. I'm not speaking about any man or any woman in particular, but things which have settled into our unconscious down the ages and which we have to get to grips with, even if to rebel against them. Man organizes reality into rational patterns, and superimposes a whole lot of other ideal patterns by which he can modify reality. So he chooses a strategy for struggle based on abstract but precise political considerations. Women on the other hand have always been used to being practical and, the other side of the coin, to creating fantasies. We are used to small, daily, concrete acts which visibly and immediately modify reality. At home we wash, iron, clean up, cook. But even in areas of work which are traditionally our preserve we are not the ones to produce ideas or plans; rather, we carry them out,

4 we translate male plans into concrete terms. It is precisely this ant-like concreteness which brings into being our grasshopper-like imagination, our dimension of fantasy. It's a reaction, a secret and private revenge, proof of our own worth. We don't think the transformation of the world comes about by synthesis, by rational analysis of forces or whatever. We actually imagine the new world in a fundamentally analytical way, and we start with the particular: it means not being afraid to go out at night, it means discovering a new dignity, it means being able to contemplate the future of our handicapped child without terror . . . We are talking here about a different mental process.

The duality of our relationship with reality can also carry us towards armed struggle, especially after so many years of disorientation. We want to see practical results, we think it's possible to go beyond the abstraction of round-table politics, we want to see some concrete action. The urge to construct forms of action for ourselves is sometimes very strong, since we've had to put up with so many years of empty speeches. And imagination? It helps us to bear the clash with reality; in this case it helps us to avoid seeing what we don't want to see. Certainly it slips into and supports fanaticism. But men become fanatical under the yoke of their ideological schemas while we, more often than not, are driven by the violence of our dreams.

Assuming that everything I've said so far hasn't been completely wide of the mark, perhaps we can begin to see why it is that when there is an armed struggle going on women, both past and present, have always proved such good material to work with, have been so invaluable as organizers, providing an irreplaceable, concrete network of support.

I'll say it again; I'm not talking about individual choices or circumstances, but about something inside us which sooner or later, in one way or another, will always come out; it is something very ancient which comes from way back, even beyond our lives, something that you feel as a memory, even as a child.

I remember when I worked a number of years ago in a support group for the Algerian National Liberation Front. I remember feeling useful and important because I worked as driver, interpreter, secretary to the comrades, or because they sent me to buy a car or pick up a cache of rifles. I was satisfied because I was doing things, even if it was never me who took decisions, even if I barely knew what was going on. The Algerian revolution was round the corner, and that was enough for me. I just imagined the revolution, when it would happen, and I thought of it as a big party, a little sad maybe but wonderful, and at the end of it the comrades would invite me too, because after all I too . . . and I would go to Algeria with all its red flags and music, the hugs and the frenzy to begin building up again, and love which would find its place

there . . . how often did I lovingly imagine the scene . . . and instead what happened? After the revolution, which found itself somewhat betrayed, our comrades all went off to Cabilia to wage a bit of civil war; all in the nick or killed; no party. I never got to Algeria and who knows what is left inside me from that period of my life; something is left, certainly, but not what I imagined then.

Certainly, I saw the birth of the NAP*. Since I took part in the prisoners' movement, I could see it coming. A long time ago it was possible to talk to some comrades from NAP. I was desperately opposed to their plans, and I did everything I could to convince them. What a ridiculous word, "convince"! Many of them are dead and live on in my memory like brothers. They were men, I don't recall any women coming in at the start of NAP from the prisoners' movement; any that there were — and I never met any of them — came from abroad.

Now it's common knowledge that the embryonic political movement of the detainees found a detonator in 1968 and the following years, when so many comrades were coming and going from jail; from that ferment of activity sprang the Rome prison collective, the prison commission Lotta Continua and other groups dotted around.

What was not clear at the time to those of us who worked on the outside was why comrades in jail felt the need to join together even over objectives which were "modest" or "reductive" as Lotta Continua liked to put it: the right to vote, for example, the right to one's sexuality in prison, the abolition of censorship of the post and the newspapers, the abolition of criminal records, compulsory call-ups and so on. Too many of us thought the revolution was going to happen the next day; for people who had to get through on average ten years inside, these issues raised a lot of hopes destined to be brutally disappointed when finally they got out, with no job, no arms and perhaps repatriation papers in their hand. Then Lotta Continua went in for some self-criticism, changed its political strategy and finished up dissolving the prison commission. But in the meantime the repression inside had got very heavy, and the growth of the movement had a logic of its own, which allowed it to ignore the directives of the organizations; it was easy to foresee a bit of a reaction, a bit of adventurism.

I remember Sergio, who got out of prison when he was 17 and turned up at my house. He had always been a thief and when he was of an age to be convicted he'd been put inside. He was a street-kid from Naples who at the time only spoke dialect. His eyes were shy and watchful, as he tried to

*Nuclei Armati Proletari — *Proletarian Armed Nuclei*

6 work out quickly and infallibly whether he could love and trust people or not. He wanted to make spaghetti, he was kind to my parents, he greedily read everything he could lay his hands on, he listened, he asked questions, he was always in a hurry, a damnable but very understandable hurry. Once I told him the famous sentence “The fundamental qualities of a revolutionary are irony and patience”, and he smiled: “Must have been a bourgeois, that one.” He went to work as a bodyguard for Sofri: “I’d die for him”, he used to tell me. Instead he got himself killed with the NAP, together with Luca Mantini, in the shooting at Piazza Alberti, Florence, in 1974.

There are several reasons for the late birth of the female protest movement, which is still very sporadic if you don’t count the women in the fighting units. The first might seem banal, but in 1969 there were no female comrades going into prison, and so it was difficult to make contacts. Who with? How could we be at all sure of them? Another reason is women’s passivity, what I call our “inner prison”, the need for chains, the desire for expiation which all of us have inside us in one way or another, because sacrifice is ingrained in our existence, ingrained in our history over the centuries. This need to give without sparing ourselves, and to pay for it at the same time, to pay a very high price, almost religiously, is not an illness; it’s a way, however twisted it might be, of somehow legitimizing ourselves, as if only by expiating both our sins and those of others can we win, I don’t know, the right to be loved, liked, considered, in other words some kind of reflected identity. Women are extraordinarily resigned to the organization of prison correction. Sometimes I’ve even heard them taking pleasure in it, like some kind of self-flagellation: “It serves me right, it’s right like this, I have to pay for my mistakes. . .” and so on. This never happens among men. All us women have within us a sense of sacrifice as normality, which has taken root within us. Besides, this prison masochism is not really any worse than the other kinds of masochism of the women “outside”, who excel in building themselves horrific cages in which they can suffer and which it takes them a lifetime, if ever, to get out of. And all this goes for me too, for example.

In prison there are women detained for crimes which their men committed. Unlike their male comrades, women don’t get together on the basis of politics, or games, or gangs. Instead they go to mass, they take communion, each of them believes she is a case apart, and that her fate may be very unfortunate, but it is hers alone. They don’t think of breaking the rules collectively, on the whole they accept their sentences, deep down they are on the side of those who punish them. They are in a state of monstrous insecurity. This is something of what I mean by an “inner prison”.

When the prisoners’ movement was born, we tried to establish contacts with the women detainees. The first link in the chain was a woman who had been

a prostitute and who had had enormous difficulties, but was not altogether unaware of the political implications of her condition. Through her we began the usual contacts: books, letters, discussion of the news, the search for a possible future platform for struggle . . . but we found ourselves in the role of patronesses, which they made us play, asking us for money, recommendations, information on the private life of someone or other. We never got away from just two main tracks, one of which was spending a huge and frustrating amount of energy only to feel like a Lady of San Vincenzo, the other becoming indoctrinators, following a political line such as “Come here, dear comrade, you don’t know anything and I’ll explain everything to you.”

Those women had no major part to play in their lives, and they were especially impervious to what we thought should have been their “logical” rebellion. Yet if we had thought about it a little more instead of just giving up, we would have understood something not only about them but about ourselves. It’s very difficult to uncover the real source of rebellion in a woman, and it’s true that when you find it you have no need to nourish it; it’s like a fire which is more violent the deeper it goes. It doesn’t need to be nourished, as we naively thought following the models which the male prisons had imposed on us, by reasoning, short programmes to follow, righteous indignation over the speculation on the cost of food. The questions which we should have been asking both them and ourselves were much older than that: why am I writing to you? Why am I your sister? Who are you? What do you still want to do with your life? What can you still do with it? Is it right to experience love the way you (or I) have experienced it? Perhaps there is some other way . . . there has to be some other way . . . and what is this love anyway? What are you sure of in your life? Is there a free zone or have you too never managed to say “Now, that’s it”? Or perhaps you were too scared and so you lived in the dim shadow of received truths, then you found yourself here and you marked out your monstrous little refuge with its curtains and Saint Theresa on the wall and the doll lying on the straw? So many other questions and missed opportunities! It seems to me now that this was the way not only to release energy and radical feeling in women inside, but also to recognize them in us, which we always need to do.

As for the other women, the ones in the armed struggle, it’s a completely different matter, and they should talk about it for themselves. I believe that all differences disappear: you are not there, you’re neither a man nor a woman, you are the struggle, you are one with it. You become the task, the function, the signal. What counts is the integrity of the group, its material and affective cohesiveness. And this seems only right when you are tied together not only by faith, by complicity, by fear, but also by the monstrous sacrifice of having to watch your comrades die. I also believe that if you go down that road, it’s the first step that decides everything;

“After that
you are on
a path with
only one
possible
direction.”

SECUNDA