Reply to John Foot

Phil Edwards
Manchester Metropolitan University

Dear Editors,

John Foot gives a thoughtful and interesting appraisal of my book '*More work! Less pay!' Rebellion and repression, in Italy 1972-7* in *BIP* 2 (1). I'd like to comment briefly on three key issues identified in John's review: the role of the PCI and its failure to engage positively with the radical movements of the 1970s; the question of violence; and the issue of feminism.

On the last of these the book is more or less guilty as charged: while it's not correct to say that the book "never mentions the 1974 divorce referendum" (it's covered from the standpoint of the PCI), it's true that "there is far too little here on feminism". In my defence, the Italian women's movement of the 1970s was larger, longer-lived and more successful than any of the movements I cover in more detail, as well as being less closely related to any of them than they were to one another: doing it justice would inevitably have changed the balance of the book, shifting its focus away from some badly neglected groups and episodes. But the near-total absence of the women's movement from the book is undeniably a weakness.

I'm less persuaded by John's take on the question of a positive engagement between the PCI and the movement. John argues that the PCI should not be seen as a monolithic bloc approaching the movements from outside - "many of those who took part in strikes, housing occupations, protests of all kinds, were in fact members of the PCI". He then argues that a positive engagement was not to be looked for because the movements and the party were bitter enemies: "the PCI was clearly *the* enemy for many who took part in the direct action protests of the 1970s" (emphasis in original). The point here is not that John's statements are contradictory but that they reflect a complex reality, in which PCI activists could agitate alongside sympathisers with Autonomia, even while Autonomists denounced the PCI leadership as class traitors. Moreover, it is just these contradictory conditions which would have enabled the PCI to engage positively with the movements of the period, as the party had done with the movement of the Hot Autumn. A party leadership proclaiming the party's moderation and restraint, while local activists endorsed - and

claimed leadership of - campaigns for fair rents and fair prices, would have been a powerful combination.

There is, I think, an underlying misunderstanding of what I meant by a "positive" or "inclusive" engagement; the fault may be mine, for using inappropriately friendly-sounding terminology. "It would have been very odd indeed if Enrico Berlinguer were to have adopted the ideas of Antonio Negri", John writes, and I have to agree; however, this kind of rapprochement is in no way required by the model of a positive engagement. As I wrote, an inclusive engagement would require the party "quietly to appropriate and absorb the demands and tactics of the new movement, while publicly denouncing its leadership as irresponsible extremists" (p. 204). On the organisational level, in other words, a positive engagement is not so much a meeting of minds as a hostile takeover. The PCI's positive engagement with the late-1960s cycle of contention was accompanied by repeated denunciations of groups such as Lotta Continua and Potere Operaio, whose wider base the party's tactics effectively cut away from under them. This 'positive engagement' was the result of a calculating, unsentimental, self-interested approach to the movement; it nevertheless led (as Sidney Tarrow wrote) to the expansion both of the PCI's base and of the tactical repertoire legitimated by the party. To repeat the trick in the changed circumstances of the mid-1970s would always have been difficult, but it was not impossible - or not until the traumatic clashes of the early months of 1977, for which the PCI was at least as much to blame as the movements themselves.

On the question of violence, lastly, John writes:

> Edwards discusses the use of violence on a number of occasions, but very rarely is it seen in critical terms or as a problem in itself. This agnostic attitude was also very much part of the movement itself.

This is precisely right. In fact, the two statements are connected: my research into the movements of the period led me to share their agnostic attitude to violence. Despite the evident connections between the movement activism I describe and the ghastly dead-end of the *anni di piombo*, I do not believe that studies of the movements must needs reflect on their violence "as a problem in itself". 'Violence' is not a simple concept: for everyone but an absolute pacifist, to condemn violence is always to condemn certain levels of violence, by certain sources and against certain targets, while tolerating others. The movements of the period argued that many of those who condemned them as violent turned a blind eye to the violence of neo-fascist groups and of the police and carabinieri, to say nothing of the deaths routinely brought about by heroin addiction and by unsafe working conditions. At the same time, they argued that a certain level of violence - actual or threatened - could be justified if it prevented greater harm: witness the campaigns by the 'proletarian youth movement'

against sweatshop employers and drug-pushers. These positions may be unpalatable to law-abiding academics such as ourselves, but they are not self-evidently invalid.

It can be argued that letting the genie of violence out of the bottle led ultimately to assassinations, carried out by groups which claimed to be part of the broader movement and were not disowned. However, some distinctions should be made here. The mass movements were routinely confrontational and disrespectful of the law, but these tactics should not be assimilated to the organised violence which was the stock-in-trade of the much smaller armed milieu - still less to the killings which made up a tiny proportion of the armed groups' actions. What was going on in the mid-1970s, as in the late 1960s, was a ferment of repertoire innovation, which was ultimately shut down by an emphatic drawing of the line between activism (legitimate) and violence (illegitimate). A positive engagement with the movements of the cycle would have redrawn that boundary in a different place, absorbing some of the movement's innovations into the political mainstream. The PCI's negative engagement with the cycle gave its activists no legitimate exit, leaving some to opt for 'armed struggle' on the principle of sticking to their radical beliefs - and, no doubt, on the broader principle that they might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb.

John's comments on violence in fact go to the heart of what I tried to achieve in my book. The book is about a sequence of political interactions which led a series of social movements to be denied political legitimacy, through their framing as deviant. A key element of this framing was the description of the movements as inherently violent. 'Violence' is an evaluative as well as a descriptive term: reports in *l'Unità* routinely described movement gatherings as violent, while celebrating the actions of PCI stewards (frequently both forceful and aggressive) as 'disciplined' or 'firm'. When we insist on seeing the movements through the prism of 'violence', we are restating the judgment that was passed in the PCI's negative engagement with them.

I attempted to see the movements without hindsight - as an unbiased contemporary observer might have done, if such a person existed - while also tracing the transactions through which they were written out of the political picture, to the great cost of Italian society (and, ironically, the PCI). Readers can judge for themselves how successfully the book achieves this. I don't claim to have written the last word on the subject; I'll gladly agree with John when he concludes that the book "asks as many questions as it answers, as any good work of history or politics should".