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# The FBI campaign against women

By Sidney Blumenthal

## Part II

"My Dearest Sisters," wrote J. Edgar Hoover to a group of Maryknoll nuns in upstate New York who were fearful about the subversive intentions of feminists. "I have received your letter of May 27 with enclosures and understand the concern which prompted you to write. I appreciate your thoughtfulness and kind sentiments." The nuns were disturbed by the appearance of two feminists at Mary Rogers College, where they taught.

The feminists, identified by the nuns as "members of the Women's Liberation Front," had been invited by a professor the nuns suspected of having "some sort of connection with the UN." The Maryknoll sisters wrote Hoover with some pleasure that "the sisters were ready and gave [the feminists] a hard time.... Their talk followed the party line." The nuns also collected the literature the feminists distributed and mailed it along to the FBI Director. "God love and keep you all in the FBI," the sisters wrote reverently.

The FBI did not need such free-lance efforts to keep tabs on developments within the women's liberation movement (dubbed "WLM" by the Bureau). Extensive documents recently released under the Freedom of Information Act revealed an FBI program of spying on feminists from 1969 through 1973.

At J. Edgar Hoover's instigation the FBI sent informers into feminist groups, clipped newspapers that printed information on the movement and created dossiers on individuals who joined a wide spectrum of groups ranging from those supporting the Equal Rights Amendment to lesbian separatist organizations.

### ►Dangerous "women talk."

Hoover tended to see all social movements emanating from a common conspiratorial source, and most FBI agents attempted to buttress the aging director's views. Much of the material the Bureau accumulated on the "WLM" was perfunctory—briefings from informers on meetings, reports about the surveillance of feminists and notes about speeches made at public gatherings.

The veracity of the details the FBI garnered were never checked. One report

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about a Boston group, for example, states "[Name deleted] advised that Bread and Roses is a Communist Party USA oriented group which adheres to the interpretations of Marxist-Leninist theory as outlined by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics." Despite the FBI informer's insistence, Bread and Roses was not accepting instructions from the Kremlin. It was an early feminist group, with loosely defined socialist politics, and mainly engaged in what used to be called "consciousness raising." Another informer's report noted, "most of the discussion [at a Bread and Roses meeting] was general 'women' talk with little political discussion." Although this information seems to undermine the previous report both were duly filed in FBI records. In the Bureau's view, "general 'women' talk" might easily be classified as something "outlined by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics."

While J. Edgar Hoover was primarily preoccupied with the "WLM" intent to embark on violent subversion, FBI agents themselves occasionally strayed from this mission. At the Women's Rights Day rally held in Boston in 1970 agents carefully recorded that speakers emphasized the "need for daycare centers, equal employment opportunity and revision of welfare programs." One of these speakers was, they were sure, "a subversive." Details about the content of the speeches at the rally is scanty after that assertion. "Midway during the rally," the agents wrote, "male onlookers were diverted to a nearby fountain which had been taken over by female bathers." Were the agents referring to themselves?

### ►Concern with appearance.

Across the country, in Eugene, Ore., the FBI had planted an informer at the Pacific Northwest Women's Conference in 1970. The account of the meeting the FBI received expressed disapproval about the dress of the participants. "The women, in general, appeared to be hippies, lesbians, or from other far-out groups," the informer wrote. "Most of them were very colorfully dressed, but the majority wore faded blue jeans. Most seemed to be making a real attempt to be unattractive. The majority probably were from upper-middle class backgrounds. Some homosexual delegates openly expressed their tendencies in public. One of the interesting aspects of the delegates' dress was the extreme fuzzy appearance of the hair of the majority of them. Someone said this was gotten by braiding their hair in tiny braids and leaving it that way while it was wet until it dried. Then they would take out the braids. From the looks of their hair, they really didn't bother to try and comb it out afterward." Such were the unpatriotic crimes of feminists.

The most dazzling coup of the FBI intelligence effort conducted against feminists was the stymying of a planned disruption of the 51st annual Women's National Republican Club luncheon at New York's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in 1972 by five women. A cable from the New York FBI office to J. Edgar Hoover assured him that "potential pandemonium" had been avoided due to "very professional investigative work."

Informers inside a New York feminist

organization apparently told the FBI that five women intended to attend the luncheon where Pat Nixon, Nelson and Happy Rockefeller, and John and Martha Mitchell would be present. The women planned to make speeches denouncing Rockefeller's handling of the Attica prison uprising and President Nixon's conduct in continuing the war in Indochina. Then each of the protesters would release two rats hidden in their handbags. "The luncheon proceeded without incident," however, the FBI local office informed Hoover. The feminists were stopped at the door by watchful agents. There is no word in FBI documents whether the rats secreted in the women's purses were discovered, but an agent writing to Hoover did state, "During the course of the afternoon six rats were discovered in the hallways and telephone booths of the hotel and disposed of by the management." The FBI neglected to tell Hoover who the rats were talking to on the phone.

### ►Ended in 1973 by Gray—supposedly.

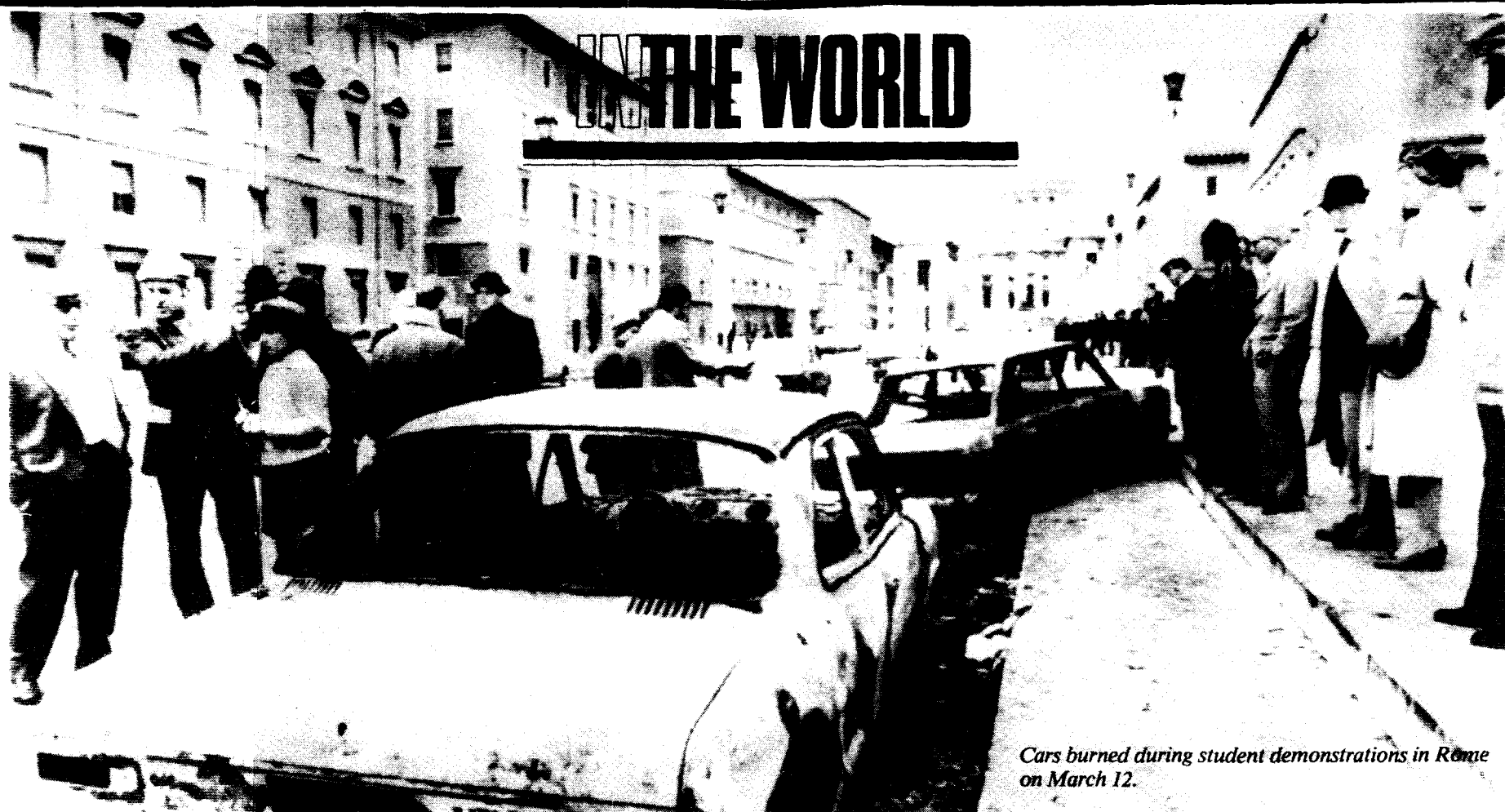
In January 1973 FBI director L. Patrick Gray terminated the Bureau's "WLM" mission. The San Francisco and Chicago FBI offices had been reluctant to spy on feminists initially, and from reports from other offices it appears that at least some agents were relieved to finish this assignment. The Boston office, for example, sent Gray a cable stating, "The following [names deleted] have advised that they have no current information concerning the Women's Liberation Movement. In view of the fact that no pertinent information has been developed in recent months concerning WLM further inquiry appears unwarranted at this time." Not a single criminal action had been uncovered by the FBI's surveillance of feminists.

L. Patrick Gray was deeply involved in other, more pressing matters by then. During the month the FBI intelligence program against feminists ended the Watergate burglars were convicted. The month before, on Christmas day, Gray burned sensitive documents about the White House Plumbers' activity given him by E. Howard Hunt. Because of this action he would resign in disgrace.

(Last of a series.)

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Cars burned during student demonstrations in Rome on March 12.

Photo by UPI

# Italian students take to the streets

By Diana Johnstone

In Italy, the revolutionary upsurge of 1968 has been going on for ten years. This month it was back where it started—in the universities.

The new student movement began in the first days of February at the Universities of Palermo and Naples and spread rapidly up the peninsula. What set it off was a circular issued by Public Education Minister Franco Maria Malfatti announcing his program for reforming higher education.

Its main features are the creation of new degrees corresponding to the needs of industry and the social services, along with abolition of studies that have been irrelevant to such needs; the introduction of a two-year period of professional apprenticeship following graduation; and a complicated tracking system in the secondary schools forcing an early choice of specialization plus an extra written exam at the end of secondary school.

Like the reforms in France proposed to undo 1968, the Malfatti program pretends to meet the growing problem of diplomas that are useless on the job market by tailoring university programs according to the needs of that market. Estimates vary, but today some two million young Italians are out of work, and close to half of them may have degrees.

But the students are not taken in: Malfatti belongs to a government which is doing nothing to expand that job market, but on the contrary, is pursuing a policy of austerity meant to shrink it. Thus tailoring the university to suit the job market envisaged by this Christian Democratic government can only mean eliminating large numbers of students.

Furthermore, the supposed practicality of forcing students at an early age into narrow job-related specializations is a snare and a delusion in an unplanned economy where employers are notoriously unable to predict well in advance just what skills they will require and in a period when flexibility is frequently the best asset for avoiding unemployment.

## ►City Indians.

The job situation being as bad as it is in Italy, a number of young people reasonably prefer spending a few years of their unemployment enrolled in a university, taking courses that interest them. The Malfatti reform would end that. It would also cast into the ranks of the unemployed quite a few *precari*—badly paid (about \$120 to \$200 per month) research and teaching assistants whose jobs are as precarious as they sound.

This adds up to a considerable univer-

sity population whose future outlook is bleak and which feels it has little to lose by raising hell over yet another blow aimed at further reducing their prospects.

The 1968 student movement occurred when the industrialized countries had been enjoying a long prosperity, against the background of heroic Third World struggles. The students were mostly of bourgeois or middle class origin, challenging the values and purposes of their class and their education and trying to make contact with less privileged sectors of the population. Today, many of the students are less privileged themselves, and they have been joined in the militant occupation of the universities, especially in Rome, by unemployed youths from the working class suburbs who like the atmosphere and have added to it in color or in violence.

The most colorful are the "city Indians"—who sometimes paint their faces for the warpath and during the past months have shown surprising creativity in the "autoreduction" movements, for instance lowering cinema prices by arriving en masse and paying less. No doubt influenced by the political effervescence of Italian society while rejecting any political party, these young people have found ways of getting together to protest publicly against a society of production and consumption that largely excludes them from both activities.

The violence seems to be largely the contribution of the "workers' autonomy" current, which is not only outside political parties but fiercely hostile to them. It is this "autonomous" factor that sets off '77 most strikingly from '68 and points to serious trouble for the left.

While 1968 drew a lot of previously unpoliticized young people into the then-blossoming extra-parliamentary left groups, and perhaps from there into the Italian Communist Party (PCI), in 1977 the so-called "autonomous area" is being expanded by disillusioned or even vengeful ex-militants of Lotta Continua (Constant Struggle), Avanguardia Operaia (Workers' Vanguard) or other far-left groups. Their greatest resentment seems directed against the PCI and the trade unions following the line of the "historic compromise" with the Christian Democrats, as showed up dramatically on Feb. 17 when Luciano Lama, secretary general of the communist-led General Confederation of Italian Labor (CGIL) was driven off the grounds of Rome University where he had come to speak.

## ►The attack on Lama.

"In Cile i carri armati, in Italia i sindacati" ("Tanks in Chile, trade unions in Italy")—such slogans, taken up in chorus

by the new student movement, seem to have shocked and baffled the PCI. The decision to send Lama to Rome University to establish a "unity" striking by its absence was, in retrospect, tactless to say the least. The invitation to the CGIL leader was issued on Feb. 15 by a meeting of some 200 members of the PCI youth organization from the law school and hotly debated the next day in a large general assembly, which voted down the "autonomous" call for a physical confrontation with the "revisionists," deciding on a verbal confrontation instead. "Workers' autonomy" agreed to respect this decision.

Just in case, Lama arrived the next morning for his speech surrounded by an impressive number of sturdy trade unionists. Laying down the law to the unruly youngsters, Lama told them it was necessary to "give rational and real objectives to a protest which otherwise risks remaining a nihilistic refusal, a furious and exasperated reaction to the grave problems of the university."

The workers and unions backed the students' protest, he said, but demanded a "constructive" discussion of reforms. "We want a different university which exalts the commitment to study, to deepen students' knowledge. To change, the country needs the qualified contribution of technicians and intellectuals. The energy of youth must not be wasted, on the contrary it is necessary to transform anger and protest...into a positive political will to renew society."

This did not go over very well. All at once, several hundred "autonomous" youths, armed with clubs and fire extinguishers and forgetting the commitment they had made the day before, charged the truck Lama was using as a speakers' platform, beginning a brawl which ended later in the day when police took over the university. The CGIL people got away quickly, while the majority of students looked on in disgust.

## ►Disarray on the far left.

The situation illustrated precisely the sort of political decadence and social disintegration PCI leaders have been warning must result from keeping the country stalled motionless in crisis but which they themselves appeared unable to deal with effectively in the crunch. The incident was the first serious warning to the PCI of the damage to its credibility wrought by months of vain exhortations to the Christian Democratic government of Giulio Andreotti in the name of an "historic compromise" that looks extremely one-sided.

The PCI could find itself in worse trouble yet if it allows its well-founded alarm that the "autonomous" collectives may

spawn a new wave of extremist violence, playing into the rightist "strategy of tension," draw it into close identification, not only with the Christian Democratic government's economic austerity, but also with its repression.

The PCI's difficulties in the face of the new student movement are exacerbated by the disarray of the far left parties—a condition due largely to its own electoral success. In 1968 and the years after, the PCI was to some extent sheltered from the wrath of impatient youth by the very Marxist-Leninist parties that criticized its "revisionism" while at the same time channeling the energies of thousands of young people into various movements with defined political aims.

Today, both PDUP and Avanguardia Operaia are both splitting over whether to merge, and above all over what strategy to pursue in regard to the PCI. The Manifesto contingent of PDUP led by Lucio Magri and Rosanna Rossanda and a minority of AO apparently see their possible role as one of prodding the PCI away from its doomed attempt at an impossible "historic compromise" towards a left-wing coalition, while a minority of PDUP and the majority of AO would want to form an alternative revolutionary party in opposition to the PCI. In Italy as in France, the far left is in crisis not only over strategy, but also over militant practice, with a rank-and-file rebellion, especially among women, against being "manipulated" by leaders.

This climate of rebellion is evident in the new student movement, which has as yet no clear political leadership or direction.

Italian Communists have been quick to see in the violence of the *autonomi*, in their "negative and mystical solidarity," as one of them put it, in their rejection of the work ethic and the labor movement, a new sort of fascism infecting the lumpenproletariat. The "autonomy" movement is in the line, not of Marxism, but of certain American movements current in the '60s, notably the Weathermen, whose sabotage manual is being published in Italy now. Such groups which reject political leadership and glorify original and spectacular group actions are obviously open to infiltration and manipulation by agents of the "strategy of tension."

The PCI is getting ready to clash with them in the name of "positive and constructive" programs which have as yet to materialize. The immobilism of the Christian Democrats seems to be doing its work of dividing the adversaries of the system and setting them at each other's throats.

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