

Santina Musolino

**Ruth Glynn, "Women, Terrorism, and Trauma in Italian Culture". Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 300 pp.**

(doi: 10.2383/78829)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, maggio-agosto 2014

**Ente di afferenza:**

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

**Licenza d'uso**

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

## Book Review

**Ruth Glynn, *Women, Terrorism, and Trauma in Italian Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 300 pp.**

doi: 10.2383/78829

*Women, Terrorism, and Trauma in Italian Culture* intends to provide an analysis of cultural representations of women and terrorism in Italy through the theoretical and conceptual prisms of trauma theory, whose foundations have been firmly established across multiple disciplines and fields ranging from psychoanalysis to cultural studies, sociology, and anthropology among others. This theory roughly argues that trauma creates “a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity.”

Glynn’s book is part of a scientific literature which – especially in the last decade – has variously developed the topic of women’s participation in political violence. Lots of researches have approached the phenomenon of women terrorists in a comparative, global perspective, surveying a wide range of secondary literature relating to different national and political contexts [Cunningham 2003,] but there are also researches that have studied the phenomenon through the analysis of specific case studies [Alison 2003.] This literature has shown that women are more active in terrorist groups that espouse domestic objectives and act against a state government, than in terrorist organizations with an international agenda that target globalization, imperialism, or foreign influence. Moreover, it has explored the roles that women have played in a wide variety of terrorist groups [women as “logisticians,” “operational leaders,” “fighters” or “political vanguards”] and the reasons that underlie female terrorism, defining two major research areas: the personal motivations of women terrorists and motivations of terrorist groups.

The central thesis of the book is that Italian cultural production – which construes women’s involvement [as terrorists] in acts of political violence as an intensification or escalation of the threat posed by domestic terrorism – may be seen as a symptom of the collective and cultural trauma associated with female-gendered violence [p. 207.] Media representations play a determining role in the process of forming and transforming collective perceptions of social phenomena [p 40] and – according to Jeffrey Alexander’s Cultural Trauma Theory – also in the representation and cultural construction of trauma.

Cultural trauma is rooted in an event or series of events but not necessarily in their direct experience. It always engages a “meaning struggle” and involves the attempt to identify “the nature of the pain, the nature of the victim, and the attribution of responsibility” Alexander calls this the “trauma process”, when the social crises becomes a crisis of meaning and identity, therefore a cultural crises [Alexander et al. 2004.] With close reference to psychoanalytic and sociological contributions in the field of Trauma Theory, Ruth Glynn, over the course of the volume, shows the diverse ways in which women identified as terrorists have been portrayed in Italian cultural production and traces the development of those representative modes in different genres and media, paying close attention to the broader social, cultural and political contexts from which they emerge.

The well-structured and clear introduction provides a brief overview of the events occurred between 1969 and 1983 – a period known as the *anni di piombo* (“years of lead”,) in which political violence was a prominent feature of Italian culture – and intro-

duces the concept of cultural trauma, whereas the first chapter presents the theoretical principles of the book. The exploration of the Italian cultural production starts with an analysis of press representations of women involved in armed organizations in the 1970s that allows to identify cultural implications of the particular news frames commonly deployed in the major organs of the Italian press to depict women's participation in terrorism [p. 41.] Glynn observes that the increasing presence of women in armed organizations led to a "hysterical questioning" [p. 70] of women's participation in political violence and identifies in the increasingly negative portrayals of women terrorists evidence of the perceived intensification of the threat posed by women's involvement in political violence [p. 56.] Analysis is extended to cinematic representations of women's involvement in the political violence of the *anni di piombo*: Glynn makes a comparison of the mechanisms of the feminization of terrorism threat in the cinematic corpus of *pentitismo* [the practice of turning informer] in order to identify the anxieties clustering around the figures of the perpetrator and the victim in the context of Italy's attempts to eradicate political violence in the 1980s.

Glynn outlines that in the first films concerning Italian terrorism - such as Mario Monicelli's *Un borghese piccolo piccolo* [1977,] Dino Risi's *Caro papà* [1979,] Marco Tullio Giordana's *Maledetti vi amerò* [1980,] Bernardo Bertolucci's *La tragedia di un uomo ridicolo* [1981] – women are absent or marginal to the construction of events and relationships [p. 74.] It was in the context of the confessions facilitated by the *pentitismo* legislation – which provided significant reductions of sentences for prisoners who collaborated with the authorities by naming their fellow militants – that the importance of women's involvement in act of terrorism was finally revealed to the Italian public [p. 75.] Glynn explores the feminization of terrorism in the cinematic corpus of *pentitismo* through the analysis of three films: Carlo Lizzani's *Nucleo zero* [1984,] Giuseppe Bertolucci's *Segreti segreti* [1984] and Marco Bellocchio's *Diavolo in corpo* [1986,] and asserts that the cinematic corpus of the mid 1980s, in its "hysterical construction of women's capacity for violence" [p. 97,] reveals societal anxieties about women's participation in violence during the *anni di piombo*. After analysing representations of female terrorists as developed in the cultural production of the 1970s and 1980s, Glynn examines how the female perpetrators of the *anni di piombo* represent themselves in the 1990s. Autobiographical writings are viewed by the author as an attempt on the part of former terrorists to promote their public rehabilitation, facilitating their release from prison and easing their re-entry and reintegration into Italian society.

The analysis highlights that female-centred texts try to offer an alternative construction of the experience of female participation in political violence that was promoted in the mainstream media in the 1970s and in novelistic and cinematic production [p. 101.] Glynn argues that, for female former terrorist authors, issues relating to identity and selfhood lie at the heart of the project of narrating the terrorist past and the post-terrorist present and explains that "Their participation in political violence is perceived as a social or cultural, rather than political, transgression" [p. 102.] Being aware of this, they work to rehabilitate their public image by deploying discourses of femininity that serve to re-inscribe them within the dominant social order [p. 110.] In the exercise of "rewriting the self" [p. 110,] in the post terrorist context of the 1990s, the issues related to maternity and femininity become significant.

The topic of motherhood and femininity in relation to political violence and terrorism has been variously developed in different researches: the analysis of cinematic representations of violent women highlighted the multiple issues that underlie the condemnation or demonization of violent women. On the other hand, the analysis of media and public discourse identified the range of biological, psychological and sexualized stereotypes through which women involved in political violence are conventionally depicted [Sjoberg and Gentry 2011.] Glynn, examining the narratives of women terrorists, explains how femininity and motherhood are often the starting point of a process of “social rehabilitation” and reintegration. Particularly, the author outlines the way in which Nell’anno della Tigre reconstructs Faranda’s public image with reference to her maternity – she justifies her choice of taking up arms for political ends reasserting the centrality of maternal care – and argues that, in Bragheti and Mambro’s *Nel cerchio della prigionia*, Bragheti’s dream of motherhood “is constructed as an antidote to the violence she has wreaked” [p. 117.]

We find the dimension of maternity also in the analysis of press representations of the female component of the New Red Brigades in the 2000s. Femininity and maternity are constructed as antithetical to political militancy and terrorism in press construction of Cinzia Banelli’s life. Representation of Banelli as a woman (and a mother) rather than a terrorist contrasts with representation of Nadia Lioce as a terrorist rather than a woman. From the point of view of the author, their radically different treatment in press speaks suggests that Italian cultural production continues to deny the reality of women’s capacity for violence and reinforces the distinction between violence and femininity [p. 203.]

An important merit of this book is that it takes into account not only the perspective of the perpetrator, but also the perspective of the victim and the survivors of political violence. Treating cultural texts concerned with encounters – real and fictional – between female terrorists and male victims or survivors Glynn examines the extent to which gender relations may shape traumatic responses, trauma discourse and the legacies of personal and cultural trauma [p. 15.] Specifically, Glynn observes that the analysis of Sergio Lenci’s memoir *Colpo alla nuca* [1988] and Marco Bellocchio’s film *Buongiorno, notte* [2003] reveals that the post traumatic healing of the victim is related to reassertion of the female terrorist’s femininity and capacity for humanity. From Lenci’s extremely lucid reflection on the psychological significance of female-gendered violence, Glynn derives her fascinating conceptualization of women’s perpetration of political violence as a form of “double wound” [p. 31] that invokes both the psychic wound inflicted by the female terrorist’s subversion of gender norms and the experience of individual and societal “emasculatation” [p. 32.]

Moreover, exploring psychological significance of cultural representations of women and terrorism, Glynn has identified two dominant tendencies – a pervasive portrayal of violence as antithetical to femininity and a feminization of terrorism in general [p. 206] – and concluded that an antithetical understanding of the relationship between women and violence emerges across all media, from press representations of the 1970s to those of the 2000s, and from the narratives of former terrorists to literature and films centred on the victims of Italian terrorism.

This book represents an important contribution in studies of cultural representations of Italian terrorism and provides interesting insights for scholars of other disci-

plines. Through a critical analysis of the representations of Italian women terrorists in cinema, autobiographies and novels, Glynn makes interesting considerations about the multiple ways in which these representations have variously reinforced implicit assumptions about women and violence, for example the idea that femininity and maternity are antithetical to political militancy or the tendency to describe women terrorists through predefined categories such as those of “madwoman” or “femme fatale.” The topic of women, terrorism and trauma – dealing with issues that go beyond the legacy of political violence and bringing out issues such as the influence of gender stereotypes on women’s role within society – could prove to be a fertile ground to develop an analysis of the cultural mediation of gender relations, social anxieties and collective psychology, especially given the on-going relevance of the debate on gender inequality in Italian society.

Glynn’s book represents a step forward in our understanding of the last, contradictory, three decades of Italian history and – in accordance with the hope expressed by the author – the theoretical and conceptual perspectives deployed in this book have potential applications far beyond the specific context of the *anni di piombo* and could provide a platform for the realization of studies on the relationship between gender and trauma in other post conflict cultural contexts [p. 208.]

Santina Musolino  
University of Roma 3

## References

- Alexander, J., Eyerman, R., Giesen B., Smelser, N.J., and Sztompka, P.,  
2004 *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Alison, M.  
2003 “Cogs in the Wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.” *Civil Wars* 6(4): 37-54.
- Cunningham, K.J.  
2003 “Cross-Regional Trends in Female Terrorism.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 26(3): 171-195.
- Sjoberg, L. and Gentry, C.E.  
2011 *Women, Gender and Terrorism*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.