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SMALL IS NOT BEAUTIFUL

Decentralized Production & the Underground Economy in Italy

Philip Mattera

Over the last year, the business press of the U.S. has begun to present a glowing picture of the health of the Italian economy. Abandoning the commonplaces of the past decade, in which Italy was grouped with Britain as a "sick man of Europe," analysts have started to gush over what is seen as a remarkable industrial boom led by small business. *Business Week*, taking note of the official 5 percent growth of the country's gross national product — the highest in Europe in 1979 — declares that Italy's "small industrial entrepreneurs and their hard-working labor force are the engines that drive the country's troubled economy." The *New York Times* marvels at "the number of small oases of hard work and business acumen in a country otherwise beset by strikes, industrial inefficiency, and overstaffing." And *Time Magazine*, echoing a discourse that is common in Italy today, writes of the "mythical small entrepreneur *Sciur Brambilla* (Mr. Brambilla in Milanese dialect) for whom business is business and doing very well. These tireless Brambillas . . . are the men who keep Italy booming despite constant reports of an economy on the brink of bankruptcy. Facing a tough job, *Sciur Brambilla* spits on his calloused hands and goes to it."

The tone of these articles is a fairly accurate reflection of a viewpoint that has been developing in Italy for several years and that is now the accepted wisdom for a political spectrum ranging from the governing Christian Democrats to the Communist Party. There is endless celebration of what is called the new entrepreneurship, the supposed flowering of a spirit of enterprise among small businessmen seeking an alternative to flaccid state-run industries and to large corporations crippled by persistent worker unrest. Unlike in the U.S., where a

Yves Jeammougin, Naples, 1979.

similar ideology of the sort serves chiefly to mask the continuing monopolization of industry, small business in Italy has indeed assumed a much greater importance. The growth in the number of entrepreneurs is, however, only a minor aspect or side effect of a complicated and dramatic restructuring of the whole of Italian industry, including giants such as Fiat and Olivetti. This process, which involves unprecedented departures from the course that capitalist development has taken over the past 150 years, is of great political importance for the future of Italy. It may also be an emerging trend throughout the rest of the capitalist world.

The restructuring is characterized above all by what is known in Italy as productive decentralization: the removal of more and more aspects of production from the large factories to much smaller plants and even to the home. Business has brought about this shift in its quest for sharply reduced labor costs and for greater flexibility in production. Thus the large majority of those employed in decentralized production are compelled to work without the rights and protections that the labor movement has won through union and legislative battles in decades of struggle. Decentralization, in bringing about a proliferation of *lavoro nero* ("black" or precarious labor), has thereby reintroduced labor conditions reminiscent of nineteenth-century Britain: working days of 16 hours, abysmal wages often on a piecework basis, an extremely intense pace of production, very dangerous and unhealthy working environments, and the absence of benefits and job security — in short, "managerial prerogative" run wild. The most radical form of decentralization is the shift of capitalist production into the home. It was precisely the rapid growth of home labor that first led to research and analysis in Italy of the *economia sommersa* (the submerged or underground economy) — the overall realm of

unreported, unofficial business activity. In the early 1970s economists and sociologists who were puzzled at the exceptionally low official rate of labor-force participation in the country, especially among women, finally began to recognize that the statistics reflected, not the supposedly rising level of "affluence" (which would make "supplementary" wage earning unnecessary), but widespread under-reporting of wage labor. A large number of women, especially housewives engaged in home labor, did not reveal their employment to government interviewers. Some women did not declare themselves employed because they did not think of themselves as workers, others feared jeopardizing their husbands' family allowance payments, and others were afraid to admit to an activity that was technically illegal in that it violated labor laws and involved tax evasion.

In study after study in the early 1970's it was found that this supposedly outdated form of production was rapidly expanding throughout the country. In addition to sectors such as textiles, apparel, and footwear, in which a limited amount of home labor had always existed, more technically sophisticated industries such as metal working and electronics were found to be relocating phases and sometimes entire cycles of production in workers' homes. Women in Turin were turning out parts for Fiat subcontractors on basement presses; in the region of Umbria they were fabricating miniature motors for teleprinters; in the city of Carpi, the center of the underground fashion industry, they were sewing and weaving garments which, once the "right" labels were added, were being resold at highly inflated prices in Paris and New York.

This extraordinary system of production was estimated to involve at least 1.5 million persons, many of whom were women forced out of the factories after the postwar economic boom ended in 1964. These women were and are com-

pelled to toil under the worst kinds of exploitation: the piecework system means that the working day amounts to virtually all the waking hours not taken up by housework. Despite the absence of pay deductions, the compensation for this work is miserable; researchers have found effective wages of about 40 to 60 cents an hour, depending on level of skill and intensity of work. In addition, home workers are usually forced to purchase their own machinery — often at the cost of thousands of dollars — and pay (at the higher domestic rates) for the electricity consumed by those machines. What this amounts to is an enormous savings in both constant and variable capital for the entrepreneur, and practically the complete elimination of investment risk. One analysis has found that domestic production in the knitwear industry costs only 25 to 40 percent of factory production in the same sector.

It is important to see that this resurgence of home labor is not a return to a pre-capitalist organization of production. Not only was domestic industry, or the putting-out system, a key aspect in the emergence of capitalism in Europe in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries; but home labor remained an important part of the developed capitalism that Marx described in *Capital*. In fact it was Marx himself who went to the heart of the matter in a passage that is now frequently quoted in Italy: "This modern so-called domestic industry has nothing, except the name, in common with the old-fashioned domestic industry. . . . That old-fashioned industry has now been converted into an outside department of the factory." And the workers, Marx says, remain controlled "by means of invisible threads." What is remarkable in Italy today is the extent to which this phenomenon, which shrank to minimal dimensions throughout the capitalist world with the growth of monopolies, has come to dominate a wide range of industries — so much so that in many

cases the investors of capital have no direct involvement with the production process. Their function is purely financial and commercial, that is, buying raw materials and selling the finished products. The home laborer owns the means of production, controls the labor process, and plans her own exploitation — a grotesque form of "socialism" that serves nicely for the new manipulators of those "invisible threads."

Another aspect of nineteenth century capitalism that Italian business has rediscovered is child labor. This practice, like home labor — to which it is closely related and sometimes identical — has always existed but has greatly expanded in the restructuring process. It is now thought to involve at least 450,000 children below the age of sixteen. Research in this area has begun only recently, but it seems that child labor is most prevalent in the underdeveloped south of Italy, especially in the labor-intensive leather goods industries in and around Naples. Recent journalistic accounts of the exploitation of children as young as six and seven in that city are in substance interchangeable with the reports of the British factory inspectors 140 years ago. One of the worst tragedies to arise from this phenomenon occurred in June 1976 in the Casavatore area of Naples. Three girls, aged fourteen to sixteen, burned to death in a tiny clothing factory whose exit was blocked by piles of materials. Even after the flames were extinguished, the bodies of the young workers could not be removed, since the water from the fire engines had flooded the cramped, windowless basement shop; skin divers had to be brought in to do the job.

Another notorious aspect of child labor in the underground economy of Naples is the excessive exposure to dangerous substances, particularly certain adhesives used in footwear and pocketbook production. In the mid-1970s there was a virtual epidemic of lung and



Yves Jeammougin, Naples, 1979.

nervous system diseases — including cases of permanent paralysis — among child workers. The glues they had inhaled, such as Visgum, continued to be used in the small factories despite strong public protests. As compensation for this hazardous work, the child workers are paid from about \$8 to \$20 for a more than full week. This form of super-exploitation has become so popular with the small entrepreneurs of Naples that, as one journalist put it, "If one day all the children of Naples decided not to work,

the city's industry would collapse immediately."

A third and more recent type of precarious labor that has arisen in the decentralization process involves not a return to a supposedly outdated form of production, but rather a borrowing from more industrialized countries — the illegal employment of foreigners. Until only a few years ago, Italy was a country which huge numbers of workers emigrated from, not one they immigrated to. Yet with the great reduc-

tion in internal labor migration from South to North and other factors, labor shortages have been created that are being resolved (in many decentralized factories, at least) with the employment of foreigners. In 1978 the research organization CENSIS estimated the presence of the "illegal" foreign workers at 280,000 to 400,000, mainly from northern Africa and Yugoslavia. The immigrants are concentrated in Rome and the large industrial cities of the North and, like the undocumented Latino workers in the U.S., they are usually subject to great exploitation.

The last major form of precarious labor that has appeared is *doppio lavoro*, or moonlighting by workers with regular jobs. This type of occupation has also been mushrooming in the 1970's, and various surveys have found moonlighting rates of 30 percent and more among some groups of waged workers. Most participants are male; they are concentrated among public employees — whose working day officially ends at 2 p.m. — and among northern industrial workers, whose "system of guarantees" (including strict limits on overtime and the ability to take days off fairly frequently) facilitates moonlighting even though it is often prohibited in labor contracts. Although the total working day or work week for both primary and secondary occupations may be quite long and comparable to that of home laborers, the degree of exploitation of the moonlighter is usually much lower than that of other types of precarious workers. This is because a fair number of the moonlighters are skilled workers who are either selling services on their own account or are working for small firms that need their special qualifications. In either case the hourly income from moonlighting is relatively high, and sometimes greater than the net income from the primary job. Some analysts like to refer to the moonlighters as the aristocracy of precarious labor; whatever the

merits of this notion, it is clear that the proliferation of *lavoro nero* has led to a much more hierarchical structure of wages within the working class, along with an increase in the length of everyone's working day.

It is no surprise that at the heart of Italian capital's restructuring there should be the aim of increasing the hours of work. For it was precisely the struggle for reductions in hours — as well as other aspects of what was known as the refusal of work — that generated the crises of Italian industry, especially after the "hot autumn" of 1969. The process of decentralization must be seen primarily as a direct political response by capital to the successes of that struggle. By dispersing workers from the large factories where the struggle had taken place to situations in which the gains were in effect nullified, business has hoped to slash labor costs, stabilize class relations, and achieve a much greater flexibility in production, especially in industries vulnerable to international competition. As sociologist Massimo Paci has put it: "Just as Taylorism was the response to the autonomy of skilled workers, so the current tendency toward the 'fragmentation' of the productive cycle in 'islands' and in small firms is the response to the autonomy won by assembly line workers."

The use of the small firm as the pivot of the restructuring process was made easier by the fact that Italy had a lower level of industrial concentration than other advanced capitalist countries, especially the U.S. In the industrial census of 1961, firms with fewer than ten employees accounted for more than 40 percent of total employment and more than 95 percent of total firms. Whereas these hundreds of thousands of tiny operations continued to exist through the 1960s because of certain characteristics of Italian economic development, they proliferated in the 1970s in a decidedly new role. The sector of small-scale industry, once scorned



as inefficient and traditional, now became more efficient and profitable than its large-scale counterpart, beset by the "rigidities" imposed by the growing power of organized labor. In a study of the clothing and textile industries economist Luigi Frey found that the small firms were achieving, thanks to the use of precarious labor, savings in labor costs equal to about 14 percent of the average output per worker.

The dynamism of the new breed of small firms has not come solely from the super-exploitation of labor; there has also been extensive use of sophisticated machinery and technology. The mechanical industries, electronics, and chemicals have joined the traditionally more fragmented industries — clothing, textiles, and leather goods — in the decentralization process.

On the face of it, the proliferation of profitable and often technically advanced small firms may seem to fly in the face of both Marxist and orthodox theories of industrial development. Economists have always regarded as sacred the notion of economy of scale, and Marx seemed to regard both concentration of the means of production and centralization of the ownership of capital as the essential aspects, along with the increase of the proletariat, of the accumulation process.

What the restructuring of Italian industry in the 1970s represents, however, is not the refutation of these theories, but rather the need to modify them in order to understand capital's strategy. In simple economic terms, some Italian analysts have been arguing that the notion of economy of scale does not necessarily imply anything about the size of the firm or the workplace; it only relates to the technical organization of production. Economist Sebastiano Brusco, who has been the leading proponent of this view, insists that most large factories are simply collections of various small production processes that can just as well be dispersed, assuming that the costs of coordination and of transporting intermediate products are outweighed by the savings achieved in the decentralized operations. Italian capital has apparently adopted this view and has made sure that the last stipulation holds, by using precarious labor in the small firms.

There is also the question of how autonomous the small firms really are. Italian analysts, after years of passionate debate, now generally agree that the decentralized firms are all dependent directly or indirectly on the large corporations. Thus, rather than constituting a flowering of entrepreneurship, they are external departments of the big plants, or, to use the Italian term, a diffused factory. The restructuring of industry, far from threatening the position of big capital, is in effect a welcome new

form of "primitive accumulation." Whereas the process described by Marx involved the separation of the laborer from the means of production (land), decentralization involves the separation of the worker from the system of guarantees, the contractual and legislative gains made in decades of struggle. As we have seen, this has meant an extraordinary increase in the working day; the elimination of the extensive rights won by Italian workers with regard to hiring, firing, and scheduling of work; the imposition of dangerous and unhealthy working environments; and a great heightening in the intensity of the labor process.

Until now I have generally been speaking as if decentralization and the recourse to precarious labor have been uniformly present in all of Italian industry. This is clearly not the case: different industries and geographical areas have been restructured in different ways and to varying extents; moreover, the large factories have not disappeared. A more detailed description is not possible here, and Italian analysts themselves are far from completely understanding the process. Nevertheless, some things are clear. The underground economy in the industrialized North is, contrary to what traditional economic theory might suggest, more extensive than in the less developed South. This indicates that small-scale industry and precarious labor are not symptoms of underdevelopment, but rather of a transformation of development. Yet there is no doubt that a widespread underground economy exists in at least parts of the South, especially in Naples, which, with its estimated 11,000 predominantly tiny factories, is regarded by some observers as the most intensively industrialized city in all of Europe. It is for this reason that some Italian analysts have taken to speaking of two underground economies: that of the North and Center, characterized by a fairly high technical level and extensive moonlighting by regular

wage workers; and that of the South, characterized by much more labor-intensive production and the use of more highly exploited labor, often children.

Within the technically sophisticated underground economy of the North and Center, a key element appears to be a fair degree of political and social stability, including limited worker unrest. It is significant that two of the most dynamic regions of the underground economy are Veneto and Emilia-Romagna, the first solidly controlled by the Christian Democrats and the second by the Communist Party. In fact, the success of the restructuring in these two regions can be attributed to the political use that the two major parties have made of the underground economy. In the case of the Christian Democrats there has been a clear encouragement of decentralization in order to promote the ideology of "traditional" capitalism (owner-operated small enterprises) and to attack the unions. The underground economy thus represents, as one left analyst has put it, "The businessman's vision of the small firm as a place of subdued class conflict. . . . It looks to the dismantling of the labor movement in the name of a mythical liberty in individual contract."

What is astounding is that the attitude of the Communist Party in Emilia and elsewhere has not been much different. The PCI has created its own version of the unabashed free enterprise ideology that is rampant among Italian businessmen, including the attack on the labor movement. Intense criticism of both unions and workers in large-scale industry has been increasing over the past year among at least some factions of the PCI leadership. The leading voice in this regard (until his recent death) was one of the grand old men of Italian communism: Giorgio Amendola, a 50-year veteran of the Party, a hero of the Resistance, and a member of the PCI central committee. In

International report

What really keeps the Italian economy afloat

Millions of individuals work, produce, and save, despite everything we can invent to impede, stop, or discourage them.

—Luigi Einaudi, former President of Italy

Italy's small industrial entrepreneurs and their hard-working labor force are the engines that drive the country's troubled economy—and this is even more valid today than when the late Einaudi recognized their vital role more than two decades ago. While productivity and profits lag at Fiat, the Montedison group, and other corporate giants

Business Week 4/14/80; 11/29/79.

owned plants expanding at an average 20% annually for the past two years. Righi worries about Italy's inflation, currently rising at a 20% annual rate, and about the business slump that is forecast to start later this year. But small and medium-sized companies like Frarica, Righi predicts, will fare much better than large ones. "Our overhead is lower because everyone in the family works, citing a total turnover of the industry of \$62 million loss on auto sales 1 thanks to 9 million man-hours of time that cost the company 20 units. Operations of the Y group ran in the red, as did tire-making, while state-owned companies such as Italsider and which make up a big segment of the economy, are now threatened with bankruptcy unless the government

Commentary

Putting Italy's labor unions on the defense

The rock-like strength of Italy's labor unions is cracking for the first time since they seized a predominant role in Italian life during the "hot autumn" of 1969. In recent weeks, steps taken by the government, private and state-owned corporations, and even by a local authority, against flagrant job abuse by workers have dramatically upstaged the three major labor confederations and reflect Italians' growing resentment with

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construct an alliance with the strongest sectors of small business in order to achieve an economic renewal of the country." In recent months the PCI has also been promoting new legislation that would create "centers of development," local organizations designed to provide financial help and other services to small business. The Party claims that this overall approach is not meant to sanction super-exploitation; according to one exposition of the question by a Party functionary, a distinction must be made between those firms engaged in "wild" decentralization and abuse of workers, and those small firms which

restructure in a "responsible" way in order to achieve higher flexibility and efficiency. Other Party spokesmen say that the second variety, which they hope will eventually "emerge" out of the submerged economy, is essential for the future of the country. Whatever one makes of this dubious distinction, it is clear that the overall strategy of the PCI is essentially the same as that of the Christian Democrats and Italian business: the resolution of the economic crisis at the expense of the working class.

There is little doubt that the advent of the underground economy has brought about a deterioration of the power of Italian workers; the labor movement, which had been so effective, has been largely halted. With workplaces fragmented and (in the case of home labor) isolated, more and more workers have been placed in situations in which it is extremely difficult to organize. In fact, it is hard to know what kind of struggle would be appropriate to precarious workers: an attempt to extend unionization and guarantees to underground firms might serve only to prompt the dissolution of those firms, for their very existence is predicated on the absence of unions and guarantees. This danger is all the more politically sensitive in that the underground economy is in a certain ironic sense progressive, to the extent that it provides employment — albeit under miserable conditions — to housewives, teenagers, and other weaker sectors of the working class who had been shut out of the labor market. This is another reason why the male-oriented industrial unions have had so little success in resisting the spread of precarious work.

Collective political struggle is also hampered by the fact that, for most people, participation in precarious employment appears as an individual (and often secretive) activity done in order to supplement a regular family income made inadequate by high rates of inflation. The

main political question for the labor movement in Italy is whether the combination of capitalist restructuring and persistent inflation has made many people willing to accept a prolongation of the working day and a higher intensity of labor as new "facts of life."

Even if the labor movement in Italy is to some extent at a standstill, this is no guarantee of a rosy future for the underground economy. The research organization CENSIS, in its last annual report, already detected signs that the new small firms are losing some of their dynamism. The reasons given were labor shortages, problems in obtaining credit, inadequate services, and difficulties in dealing with local institutions. All of which suggests that the small underground firms are beginning to face some of the same problems as their "legitimate" counterparts. Perhaps most significant are the effects in many areas of "full precarious employment," with underground firms being forced to compete for workers by raising wages. The overall question is whether the underground firms, along with their reimposition of nineteenth-century working conditions, may find themselves subject to nineteenth-century forms of economic crisis.

Thus far we have discussed restructuring of production through decentralization and the spread of precarious labor as a uniquely Italian phenomenon of the 1970s. Now it is useful to consider to which extent analogous processes may be at work in the U.S. First, it seems that here in the U.S., industry has remained highly centralized. This does not mean, however, that there has been no restructuring or expansion of precarious labor during the past decade. Rather than the recourse to small firms, the restructuring in the U.S. has primarily taken the form of geographical shifting of investment from the old industrial areas — where worker power was greatest — to cheap labor havens abroad or in the so-called sunbelt (which can be

considered a type of decentralization, as a matter of fact). In the apparel industry, for example, this shift has been accompanied by the use of some precarious and home labor, especially among undocumented immigrant workers in New York and Los Angeles. Precarious employment of such foreign workers is also very common, of course, in the agricultural industry of California and the Southwest. And apart from the location of investment, the significant rise in part-time, freelance, and temporary employment (both "legitimate" and "off the books") indicates that the worker with the full-time, permanent job is becoming less and less the appropriate stereotype for the contemporary wage worker in the U.S.

At the same time, there have been some signs of a kind of decentralization brought about through the process of subcontracting. In industry this involves expanding the amount of work done by small suppliers, whose employees are usually not unionized or at least are paid much worse than the workers in the big factories. This arrangement appears to be growing fastest among local governments, which have been laying off public workers and shifting responsibility for services to small private contractors employing cheaper labor.

Thus, while the U.S. has not yet witnessed productive decentralization in the exact Italian sense, there has been a clear process of restructuring of investment and some increase in precarious and decentralized employment. Both of these trends clearly point toward the same general result as the Italian situation: the generation of greater profits through a weakening of the collective power of workers.

What the particular case of Italy, including the unprecedented flexibility exhibited by capital in that country, does is to pose a serious challenge to those in the U.S. who adopt an anti-monopoly stance as the center of their

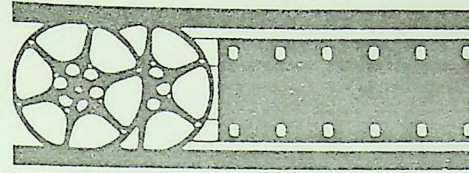
political strategy. The tendency by many in the socialist and public-interest movements to suggest that small business is somehow more desirable than monopoly capital is, like the position of the Communist Party in Italy, dangerous and potentially reactionary. To praise small business is simply to choose one form of capitalist organization over another, rather than attacking capital itself. The problem with big business is not simply that it is big, but that it is business, and thus exploitative and oppressive.

It is true that the anti-monopoly movement speaks of creating new forms of business — ones which would permit workers' control, alternative energy, and so forth. But the long-term chances for such experiments are dubious, given that they must function in an overall economy still dominated by the large corporations. And there is the danger that the organizers of the projects may resort to austerity in order to survive. The unpleasant irony is that the advocates of the new small business may inadvertently be promoting the kind of restructuring that capital in Italy has carried out itself — with such negative results for the people of that country.

Whether or not U.S. big business moves further in the direction of decentralization, the Left must carefully analyze the restructuring of investment, the workplace, and the form of management as we develop political strategy. In doing so, it is useful to keep in mind that small, at least when it is small capital, is not necessarily beautiful.

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FILM SHORTS



Portrait of Teresa (Retrato de Teresa), Directed by Pastor Vega, produced by I.C.A.I.C. (Cuban Film Institute), color, 1979, 89 min., in Spanish with English subtitles. Distributed by Unifilm, New York.

Primal Fear (Mourir a tue-tete), Directed by Anne Claire Poirer, Production of National Film Board (Canada), color, 1979, 96 min., in French with English subtitles. Distributed by Nu-Image, San Francisco.

That rape is portrayed gratuitously in commercial cinema, often with more than a touch of eroticism is a "given." From *Lipstick*, to *Straw Dogs*, to *Dressed to Kill*, we have been inundated with the classic stereotypes of the "victim" and the historical insensitivity of filmmakers to the real issues of sex, violence and the question of power. That feminism, and "women's issues," are the primary domain of the middle and upper classes, is a more recent cinematic phenomenon. From *Julia*, to *Unmarried Woman*, to *Girlfriends*, we were shown that not only is the personal political, but with the proper trappings, marketable as well.

Now, from Cuba and Canada, have come two films dealing with these two subjects in a compelling and politically direct manner. That the two films are products of film industries that support and encourage politically conscious cinema is not incidental. *Primal Fear* was produced by Anne Claire Poirer, a Quebecois feminist, who has directed several films "for and about women," for the National Film Board. *Portrait of Teresa* is Pastor Vega's first dramatic feature that was inspired by a Cuban Academy of Science investigation revealing much intra-familial tension in post-revolutionary Cuba.

Both films also represent a new *docu-drama* style that incorporates intense research and criticism in their preparation. Poirer compiled a number of case studies of rape victims and interviewed scores of women. The story that forms the base of her examination of the societal and political bases and forms of rape is taken from one woman's experience. Vega's film, though a feature length dramatic study of sexism and the changing role of women, shows the input of his wife, Daisy Granados (who portrays the title character) and other women in the production who worked on the script. Teresa's children in the film are the real-life sons of Pastor and Daisy.

Vega is quoted as saying that he wanted "to plant a little bomb" in every home with *Teresa*. The film has borne out his wish as it has reached heights of popularity and controversy unseen in Cuban cinema. The film was seen by over 1/4 of Havana's population of 2 million in its first month of exhibition. Dialogues on its content carried over from the streets and homes, to workplaces and women's groups.

While *Primal Fear* opened to generally favorable reviews at the 1979 New York Film Festival, it has had a limited commercial run in this country. It has also not been without some controversy particularly among women's groups and feminist critics.

Teresa is the story of a working mother who is the manager of her textile mill's amateur dance troupe. When the troupe is selected to perform in national competition, the already strained relationship with her husband Ramon (Adolfo Llauro) is further tested. With woman's equality legislated by the revolution, and formalized in the recent Family Code, the film becomes an examination of the personal aspects of that transformation. Specifically, and not surprisingly, the message is that old ideas die hard — the traditions of capitalist relations, the Spanish family, male privilege. As Teresa's mother, a middle class holdover, chides her, "...not even Fidel can change that." Teresa thinks differently.

But as Vega revealed, the film was not thought of as a critical conscience standing *above* society but "as an element *within* society." It is in just that way that the film succeeds. There is a universality in the subtle portrait of the tensions and stresses of Teresa's and Ramon's relationship. Some familiarity with life in Cuba (unfiltered by our media) is helpful but not necessary in understanding the historical particularity of their situation. Ramon does not help with the housework or care of the children (as is now mandated); he does not hesitate in having an