

CHRONICLES OF INSURRECTION: TRONTI, NEGRI AND THE SUBJECT OF ANTAGONISM

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ABSTRACT: This article seeks to trace the origins of contemporary ‘post-workerism’ in the formulation of concepts of political subjectivity, antagonism and insurrection in Tronti and Negri. In particular, it tries to excavate the seemingly paradoxical position which postulates the increasing immanence of struggles, as based on the Marxian thesis of real subsumption, together with the intensification of the political autonomy or separation of the working class. In order to grasp the political and theoretical proposals of Italian workerism and autonomism, Toscano concentrates on the thesis of a historical transformation of capitalism into an increasingly parasitical and politically violent social relation, a thesis which is grounded in an interpretation of Marx’s notion of ‘tendency’ and which serves as the background to the exploration, especially in Negri, of increasingly uncompromising forms of antagonism. The article focuses especially on Tronti’s so-called ‘Copernican revolution’—giving workers’ struggles primacy in the understanding of capitalism—and critically inquires into the effect of this workerist axiom on Negri’s writings on proletarian sabotage and insurrection in the 1970s. By way of a conclusion, it notes the difficulties in prolonging the workerist gambit in light of capital’s continued effort, as Tronti would put it, to emancipate itself from the working class.

KEYWORDS: Antagonism; Capitalism; Class Composition; Communism; Insurrection; Measure; Marx; Negri; Subsumption; Tendency; Tronti; Workerism

Once I went to May Day. I never got workers’ festivities. The day of work, are you kidding? The day of workers celebrating themselves. I never got it into my head what workers’ day or the day of work meant. I never got it into my head why work should be celebrated. But when I wasn’t working I didn’t know what the fuck to do. Because I was a worker, that is someone who spent most of their day in the factory. And in the time left over I could only rest for the next day. But that May Day on a whim I went to listen to some guy’s speech because I didn’t know him.

Nanni Balestrini, *Vogliamo tutto*

Force ... is itself an economic power.
—Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1

BEFORE EMPIRE, BEHIND THE MULTITUDE

Though much work has been carried out to rectify, whether critically or affirmatively, a dehistoricized understanding of the political content of the theses forwarded in books like *Empire* and *Multitude*, there remains a strong tendency—at times enabled by their own rhetoric of rupture and transformation—to treat the recent works of Hardt and Negri as a kind of theoretical UFO, or better a time-machine emancipated of all nation and class coordinates, visiting us from a vibrant future that the authors insist in describing as our present. Behind the seemingly apologetic and impressionistic character of the figures of Empire and the multitude lies a long, punctuated history of theoretical work and political practice aimed at testing the validity of Marxist categories in light of empirical transformations in modes of production and reproduction, tendencies in class composition and shifts in the forms of capitalist domination, driven by political struggles and economic reconfigurations in post-war Italy.¹ Behind the non-dialectical pairing of Empire and multitude, one needs to discern the figures of a far more classical albeit ‘mutant’ antagonism between capital and labour, of the kind formulated in what can loosely be defined as the ‘workerist’ (*operaista*) and ‘post-workerist’ (*post-operaista*) development of critical Marxism beginning with the work of Raniero Panzieri and the *Quaderni Rossi* journal, and then gaining greater prominence chiefly in the writings of Mario Tronti and Antonio Negri, whose intellectual production of the sixties and seventies will concern me here.

My aim in this article is to explore the following question: What drives the move from the ‘workerist’ dialectic of antagonism and its capture, through the insurrectionary unilaterality of worker’s autonomy, all the way to the recent theories of exodus? In order to sketch an answer to this question, we need to investigate the juncture between the political-economic logic of capital and the revolutionary logic of separation—of *communism as separation*.² In the epoch of what Marx referred to as ‘real subsumption’, wherein all labour and production processes take place within the ambit of capitalist relations, it is only an organized act of antagonistic separation that, from the vantage point of *operaismo*, can elicit the emergence of living labour as a collective subject capable of appropriating a production process founded on the exploitation of its capacities. As Negri remarks, capitalist ‘totality is a texture in which we find ourselves and in which we must separate ourselves in order to exist—but it is the intensity of the separation, the force with which antagonism is recognized, that constitutes us as singularities—as subjects’.³ The open paradox of the workerist ‘tradition’ (to adopt a term whose intensely problematic character has been highlighted by Sergio Bologna) and of the political philosophy of the multitudes that has followed in its wake—which is of course a paradox faithful

1. See Guido Borio, Francesca Pozzi and Gigi Roggero, *Gli operaisti*, Roma, DeriveApprodi, 2005, Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*, London, Pluto, 2002.

2. For a treatment of this concept—which also features strongly in Negri’s ‘The Italian Difference’—with reference to the work of the French philosopher Alain Badiou, see Alberto Toscano, ‘Communism as Separation’, in Peter Hallward (ed.), *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, London, Continuum, 2004.

3. Antonio Negri, *Fabbriche del soggetto*, Livorno, XXI Secolo, 1987, p. 224.

to some of the key insights of Marx—is precisely the twin affirmation of an integral *immanence* of capitalist relations to the social (of a thoroughgoing *socialization* of production) and of the radicalization of the antagonism between capital and labour. Subsumption, precisely to the extent that it is real, manifests itself as an irrational form of command and heralds the possibility of a communist appropriation of production. In a nutshell, the problem is that of the realization of communism in a situation of advanced and dynamic capitalism, in which political crisis and antagonism are by no means necessarily accompanied by scarcity or stagnation (as witnessed by the fact that the golden age of FIAT in Italy was concurrent with fierce struggles that invested the factories themselves, whilst the relative social peace of the 80s and 90s saw its progressive enfeeblement and eventual collapse).

TENDENCY AND COMMUNISM

Such a position rests on the conviction that the rule of capital is now divested of any possibility for mediation, dialectics, or measure. It posits the rupture, catalysed by worker's struggles, of any social-democratic, Rooseveltian, or Keynesian project. However, and this point is paramount if workerism is to include its own 'refutation of idealism', the putative collapse of measure and mediation must itself be the outcome of a historical process. It must itself be the product of a dialectic—albeit a dialectic that seems to signal the impossibility of further dialectical mediation. In Negri, it is the concept of *tendency* that provides this historical determinacy, rather than that of a closed and endogenously developing dialectical totality. Negri defines it as follows:

The tendency gives us a forecast that is determinate, specified by a materialist dialectic which is developed by the factors comprising it. The tendency is the practical/theoretical process whereby the working-class point of view becomes explicit in its application to a determinate historical epoch. This means that to pose the tendency, to describe it and to define its contradictions is a far cry from economic determinism. Quite the opposite: to pose the tendency is to work up from the simple to the complex, from the concrete to the abstract, in order to achieve an adequate overall theoretical perspective within which the specificity and concreteness of the elements which were our initial starting point may then acquire meaning. [...] [It is] reason's adventure as it comes to encounter the complexities of reality.⁴

Without such a concrete tendency, communism would be reduced to the unilateral purity and impotence of a terroristic decisionism incapable of intervening in the real articulations of systemic development. Viewed in this light, workerism, as the militant combination of political-economic forecast and organized intervention, can serve as a useful corrective to the dominant perception of Marxism as first and foremost a theory of systemic transformation, one that necessitates supplementing by specifically 'political' theories of antagonism, hegemony and subjectivation. The workerist gambit—later rad-

4. Antonio Negri, *Revolution Retrieved: Selected Writings on Marx, Keynes, Capitalist Crisis and New Social Subjects 1967–1983*, trans. Ed Emery and John Merrington, London, Red Notes, 1988, p. 125.

icalized in the theories of workers' autonomy and self-valorization—lay in arguing that one can move beyond a treatment of the dynamic of capitalism solely in terms of exploitation and the vampire-like 'absorption' of living labour as variable capital into the process of production, to a consideration of the driving importance of the subjectivity and organization of the working class, shifting analyses of the transformations of capitalism firmly onto the level of a materially and temporally determinate antagonism. In other words, workerism revitalizes the Marxian thesis whereby the parameters of the capitalist domination and exploitation of labour-power and the extraction of surplus-value are political through and through. As we shall see, this is not simply a theoretical posit, but is accompanied by an analysis of the politico-economic conjuncture via the prism of the tendency. From this perspective, according to Negri, the complex mediations of the law of value that had played such a dominant role in the American New Deal, in the fortunes of Keynesianism and in the entire tradition of social democracy become increasingly obsolescent, as capital manifests itself increasingly as a form of political command desiring ever greater autonomy and ever-diminishing negotiation with labour power.

The thesis of Negri and his comrades at the time was that such an 'autonomization' of capital—marked by an increasing reliance on monetary, fiscal, and financial policies to the detriment of social planning, as well as by the concomitant forms of enforcement and control—can be regarded as the *effect* of an ever-greater claim to autonomy and self-determination exerted by working-class struggles to appropriate a domain of production and reproduction which, far from being relegated to the factory alone, now covers the entirety of the social fabric. Though the concepts of 'class composition' first and of 'organized autonomy' later mark the sensitivity of this approach to the complexity and power dynamics of antagonism, we could still say of 'antagonism in general' what Marx says of 'production in general'; to wit, that it is 'an abstraction, but a rational abstraction insofar as it really brings out and fixes the common element and thus saves us repetition'.⁵

The question of workerism—and then of autonomism and post-workerism broadly construed—was that of how to perpetuate, at the level of political strategy and organization, the idea of communism as the suppression of work. In other words, how to effect a practical transition to communism in the conditions of a highly socialized economy but also one characterized by a high dose of political repression. It is in this sense that we should grasp the three theses that Negri posits as crucial to his politics of antagonism: 'all Marxist categories are categories of communism';⁶ 'communism has the form of subjectivity, communism is a constituting praxis';⁷ 'communism is in no way a product of capitalist development, it is its radical inversion'.⁸ Evidently, the principal theoretical enemy here is any variety of (parliamentary) socialism, to wit any attempt to think the

5. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, London, Penguin, 1993, p. 85.

6. Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*, Jim Fleming (ed.), trans. Michael Ryan, Mauricio Viano and Harry Cleaver, New York, Autonomedia, 1989, p. 161.

7. Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx*, p. 163.

8. Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx*, p. 165.

suspension of capitalist relations as a possible result of a mediation organic to the capitalist mode of production—be it as a ‘natural’ outcome, as the progressive accumulation of victorious reforms, or as the gradual effect of the shows of force of the working class and its party leadership. Against any such faith in mediation, Negri wishes to affirm the ‘antagonistic nature of Marxist logic’. As he writes: ‘The antagonism must become social, *global revolutionary power must become a revolutionary class* against capitalist development.’⁹ Such affirmations cannot fail to trail a whole set of thorny questions in their wake. To begin with: What is the nature of the purported independence of the proletariat? Does it possess a kind of social latency or is it a product of political will and organization, *ex nihilo*? How can we think the political and programmatic autonomy of the exploited, as well as the full immanence of the antagonistic class within capital? In other words: What is an immanent antagonism, a separation in and against real subsumption? It is only by confronting this question that I think light can be shed on the practical-historical shortcomings and theoretical potential of workerism and autonomism, as well as upon the antagonistic theses that determine both *Empire* and much of the theoretical discourse of contemporary post-socialist anti-capitalism.

TRONTI’S COPERNICAN REVOLUTION

The source for this turn to an explicitly and systemically antagonistic brand of Marxism is twofold. Historically speaking, it was born of the resurgence—outside of the direct sway of the PCI (Italian Communist Party) and official trade unions—of fierce workers’ struggles in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, where what was at stake was no longer the participation in the nationalist and productivist agenda of progress and negotiation, but rather the unilateral demand for the *immediate* satisfaction of workers’ needs outside of any rationale that would see these needs as predicated upon the buoyancy of the economy, the continuation of high levels of investment, and a general increase in production and profitability. Theoretically speaking, this wave of openly ‘egotistical’ struggles, marked by the refusal of any socialist idolatry of work as the essence of the human as well as by an utter disdain for the political impetus behind economic plans, was eminently registered in Mario Tronti’s epoch-making *Operai e capitale* [*Workers and Capital*].¹⁰ This work, together with the productions of some of Tronti’s comrades in the journal *Quaderni Rossi*, tried to operate a radical reversal of the theoretical standpoint that regarded labour-power as a *factor* within the cycles of production and their political rationalization. This was a factor that could at best delegate political command over itself to the party as class representative, but which, until the attainment of the receding threshold of communism, would remain fettered by the demanding discipline of the essentially capitalist relations obtaining in the factory and beyond.

Against this ideology of productivism, economic planning and worker sacrifice, Tronti attempted to translate the antagonistic demands for appropriation that had

9. Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx*, p. 168.

10. See Mario Tronti, *Operai e capitale*, 3rd ed., Roma, DeriveApprodi, 2006.

marked ten years of workers' struggles into an adequate theoretical framework. Contrary to the view whereby it was possible interminably to engage capital in reformist political mediations safeguarding the livelihood (if not the desires) of the working class, Tronti argued for the illusory character of this position, on the basis of the following thesis, which becomes more persuasive by the day: The political history of capital is *the history of the successive attempts of the capitalist class to emancipate itself from the working class*. The strategic ambivalence of the working class as a subject of exploitation was framed by Tronti in the following characteristically lapidary lines:

The working class *does* what it *is*. But it is, at one and the same time, the *articulation* of capital, and its *dissolution*. Capitalist power seeks to use the workers' antagonistic will-to-struggle as a motor of its own development. The workers' party must take this same real mediation by the workers of capital's interests and organize it in an antagonistic form, as the tactical terrain of struggle and as a strategic potential for destruction.¹¹

What we have here is neither an organic dialectic nor a Manichean theory of pure antagonism. Rather we are introduced to the idea that capital is concerned with a *dialectical use of antagonism*, whose ultimate if utopian horizon is the withering away of the working class and the untrammelled self-valorization of capital; whilst the working class and its political vanguard aim at an *antagonistic use of antagonism*, which refuses precisely the capitalization of antagonism whereby, for example, the flight from the factory is turned into an opportunity for profitable technological leaps and the exploitation of a de-unionized 'flexible' work force. In Harry Cleaver's useful gloss, this means that 'capital seeks to incorporate the working class within itself simply as labour-power, whereas the working class affirms itself as an independent class-for-itself only through struggles which rupture capital's self-reproduction'.¹² Communist politics is thus aimed at exploiting the inner tensions of a capitalism whose 'strength' lies in the 'production of ever-renewed antagonism',¹³ and which depends on 'breaking the autonomy of labour-power without destroying its antagonistic character'.¹⁴

In a sense, the exasperation of capital's bid for freedom, which became more obvious in 1960s in the transformation of the organic composition of capital (ratio of constant to variable capital, specifically involving an increase in controllable technologies and the marginalization of uncontrollable workers for the sake of increased productivity) did nothing but reveal that process, indicated by Marx in the *Results of the Immediate Process of Production*, whereby the working class (*qua* living labour) confronts the seemingly monolithic character of capital's command over the production process.¹⁵ Here then lies the vampirism of capital, whose only fluidity is offered by the process of absorption

11. Mario Tronti, 'The Strategy of Refusal', in S. Lotringer and C. Marazzi (eds.), *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics*, New York, Semiotext(e), 1980, p. 29.

12. Harry Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically*, 2nd ed., London, AK Press, 2000, p. 66.

13. Mario Tronti, *Il tempo della politica*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1980, p. 58.

14. Tronti, *Operai e capitale*, p. 217.

15. Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, London, Penguin, 1992, pp. 987-8.

of living labour. As Bruno Maffi, editor of the *Results* in Italian, noted: ‘Capital is truly *capital* only if it becomes “value in process”; only if, *within* the process of production, the magic touch of human labour transforms it from a constant to a variable magnitude.’¹⁶

This dual phenomenology of the production process, split between the immediate point of view of production and the point of view of capital’s self-valorization, is precisely the object of Tronti’s attempt at forcing a political assumption of this antagonism, in the here and now, which would not subordinate itself to economic rationalization (which is always the prelude to capital’s emancipation from the working class). By facing the totality of the conditions of labour as capital, alongside the increasingly intimate bond between these conditions and a practice of command and discipline (such that exploitation is sedimented by and articulated through objective technologies of discipline in production), we can, according to Tronti, begin to project the political constitution, through antagonism, of an explicitly militant and anti-systemic working class. On the terrain of the command over production, what serves as a structural or phenomenological antagonism must be assumed, doubled and reinforced (to the point of crisis) by a political antagonism that directly targets the capitalistic process of self-valorization, and tends towards a self-valorization of the working class, which is to say, towards a de-stabilization and de-structuring of capitalist command. The entire issue, both strategically and tactically (and the deep cause of numerous splits on the Italian left), concerned the means of moving from certain practices of autonomy that characterized workers’ struggles to the political formation of what Tronti refers to as a *class against capital*. From insurrection to organization, and back again.

This is Tronti’s ‘Copernican revolution’, whereby ‘the economic laws of the movement of capitalist society must be newly discovered as the political laws of the movement of the working class’ and ‘*bent* with subjective force of organization brutally to serve the objective revolutionary needs of antagonism and struggle’.¹⁷ Capital, through this openly political torsion, becomes a function of the working class, in a situation wherein politics ‘precedes’ science. As Cristina Corradi has duly noted in her recent history of Italian Marxism, if we wish to stick with the scientific analogy, this Copernican revolution is really a ‘post-Copernican’, or Einsteinian one. Tronti’s vision of a new politicized antagonistic science of capital is not that of a ‘general methodology and universal science’ but of a ‘*partial, subjective, unilateral science, in the ambit of a system marked by a high degree of indeterminacy*’. The Marxist inquiry is compared to the discovery of non-Euclidean geometries, just as the spirit of the October revolution is argued to have an affinity with the break represented by Einstein’s theory of relativity’.¹⁸ This idea of a partisan science of capital, which dominates Tronti’s work and is also present, in a different guise, in Negri, has a number of significant consequences, two of which I want to mention. First, it entails that there is no scientific theory from which one could simply deduce political action. Rather, theory as an attempt to grasp the objective tendencies of accumulation

16. Karl Marx, *Il Capitale, Libro I, Capitolo VI Inedito*, Bruno Maffi (ed.), Milan, Etas, 2002, p. xi.

17. Tronti, *Operai e capitale*, p. 224.

18. Cristina Corradi, *Storia dei marxismi in Italia*, Roma, manifestolibri, 2005, p. 169.

is always in a relation of disjunctive synthesis to politics as the ‘global refusal of objectivity’, the attempt to vanquish the tendency. In other words: ‘Theory is anticipation. Politics is intervention.’¹⁹ Furthermore, it means that the link between politics as a science of intervention and Marxism as a science of anticipation must always be conquered in and against changing conjunctures: ‘Science as struggle is an ephemeral knowledge. It lasts as long as it’s useful. ... This is a happy condition of thinking: when you know that there is one part, and one part only, of the world that asks you a question. A state of exception in which thinking is the force that decides.’²⁰ And contrary to a facile determinism, ‘to predict the development of capital does not mean subjecting oneself to its iron laws: it means forcing it to take a path, waiting for it at some juncture with weapons stronger than iron, attacking and breaking it at that point.’²¹ Crucially this link between tendency and initiative in ‘brief political moments’ can mean that certain opportunities for ambushing capital can be irretrievably lost, that defeat is a real possibility. As Tronti warns in *Operai e capitale*, ‘we don’t have much time.’²²

Tronti’s work does not simply represent a voluntaristic adjunct to the critique of political economy, but wishes to recast capitalist society and capitalist domination as a *reactive formation*, a character recognized by Marx himself in his accounts of the theft of workers’ knowledge and ensuing structural adjustments in the process of production. As Marx once quipped, capital (with all its technological prostheses) chases strikes. The key axiom here, which proved a huge influence on Negri’s work throughout the 70s, and which remains embedded in the latest analyses of the ‘multitude’ is the following: there is a primacy of resistance over exploitation and domination. The corollary of this axiom is that ‘capital is a consequence of worker’s labour’. In Tronti’s own words: ‘it is the specific moments of the class struggle which have determined every technological change in the mechanisms of industry.’²³ Contrary to Tronti’s later stance, which would see the possibility, heralded by the ‘political centrality of the working class’ of a communist use of ‘the provisional autonomy of state manoeuvres from capitalist interest’²⁴ (echoing the PCI’s view of itself as a superior organizer of capitalist production), his writings of the early and mid-1960s exude a combative *irresponsibility* on the part of the working class within a society riven by antagonism: ‘It is not up to the workers to resolve the conjunctures of capitalism. Let the bosses do it, on their own. It is their system: let them sort it out. It is here that a strategy of the total refusal of capitalist society must find the positive tactical forms for the most effective aggression against the concrete power of capitalists.’²⁵ Against the neutrality of technology, its manipulation and ‘evolution’, and against any productivist compact between big government, big business, big unions and a big party, this position argues for the use of the political antagonism of labour and capital

19. Corradi, *Storia dei marxismi in Italia*, p. 258.

20. Mario Tronti, *Cenni di castella*, Fiesole, Cadmo, 2001, p. 19.

21. Tronti, *Il tempo della politica*, p. 64, Tronti, *Operai e capitale*, p. 17.

22. Tronti, *Operai e capitale*, p. 21.

23. Tronti, ‘The Strategy of Refusal’, p. 30.

24. Tronti, *Il tempo della politica*, p. 64.

25. Tronti, *Operai e capitale*, p. 98.

as a prism for comprehending the dynamics of social transformations in terms of the subjection and absorption of living labour by dead capital, foregrounding the subjectivity of the working class, which is both the presupposition and the principal threat to capitalist reproduction.

It is on this basis that Tronti articulates the paradoxical situation of workers labouring under capitalist command: ‘the only thing which does not come from the workers is, precisely, [the conditions of] labour’.²⁶ That is, it is the overtly political framework of command, discipline and rationalization of the labour process that serves to shackle living labour to the demands of capital, such that the ‘ontological’ primacy and ineluctability of living labour is subjected to a thoroughgoing instrumentalization. As Marx himself had acerbically indicated: ‘It is not the worker who buys the means of production and subsistence, but the means of subsistence that buy the worker to incorporate him into the means of production.’²⁷ But for Tronti, Negri and their comrades, in the phase of ‘high’ workerism, these mechanisms of coercion that situate the bearer of labour-power within the system of production, circulation and distribution mask the very real *dependency* of capital, which cannot be simply dispelled by means of changes in the organic composition of capital. Capitalism is both thoroughly dependent upon the capacity, relative docility and availability of the working class and constantly dreams of (often brutally destructive) ways of escaping this dependency; of escaping the moment of labour in the cycles of accumulation. As Tronti writes, ‘Exploitation is born, historically, from the necessity for capital to escape from its *de facto* subordination to the class of worker-producers’.²⁸

Thus, it can be argued that capital is in a double bind, which demands from it both a ruthless command and minimization of workers’ demands (or at least of any of those demands that would interfere with capitalist valorization) *and* a capacity to absorb not simply living labour in terms of the physical expenditure of the worker, but a whole host of skills, knowledges and capacities for cooperation that are inseparable from workers’ struggles for an emancipation *from* and not *of* work. The problem of capitalist command becomes that of a parasitic capture of the political vitality of the working class joined to a neutralization of its deeply threatening nature. This is where Tronti points to the role of ‘organic forms of political dictatorship’ in the history of capitalism, and we may consider today the twin phenomena of the *grand enfermement* of the American ‘underclass’ and the punitive and selective measures aimed at migrants in Europe and elsewhere in this light.²⁹ The paramount function, within social conflict, of the state *of* capitalism means

26. Tronti, ‘The Strategy of Refusal’, pp. 30-1.

27. Marx, *Capital, Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*, p. 1004.

28. Tronti, ‘The Strategy of Refusal’, p. 30.

29. The continuing vitality of the partisan methodology of workerism—linking the study of class composition, the primacy of struggle and the forms of capitalist dictatorship—is evident in the work of a generation of researchers who have combined its prescriptions with the tools of other radical theoretical traditions (from the Foucauldian and Deleuzian study of societies of discipline and societies of control, to notions of subjectivation originating in subaltern studies and postcolonial theory). Alessandro De Giorgi’s studies of postfordist regimes of penalty (Alessandro De Giorgi, *Zero Tolleranza. Strategie e pratiche della società di controllo*, Rome, DeriveApprodi, 2000, Alessandro De Giorgi, *Il governo dell’eccedenza. Postfordismo e controllo della multi-*

that the antagonism at the heart of the process of production can only manifest itself as an attack on the state, what Negri would call a destabilization and a de-structuring. Tronti's *Operai e capitale* outlines the tendency towards the ever more explicit face-off between two separate but reciprocal processes of subjectivation: the subject of capitalist command and the subject of communist insurrection. Here Tronti introduces the specific *political difference* of labour and capital: the first does not need institutions, but only organization, while the second must be institutionally articulated. As he writes:

From the very beginning, the proletariat is nothing more than the immediate *political interest* in the abolition of every aspect of the existing order. As far as its internal development is concerned, it has no need of 'institutions' in order to bring to life what it is, since what it is is nothing other than the *life-force* of that immediate destruction. It doesn't need *institutions*, but it does need *organisation*. ... *The concept of the revolution and the reality of the working class are one and the same.*³⁰

Against a social-democratic politics of mediation, Tronti argues that the strategic setbacks of the working class movement have always been based on seeking to transfer the model of the bourgeois revolution to the communist revolution—to wit, of imagining a slow takeover of economic power, followed by the reversal of political control.³¹ In other words, the perpetual delay of a full assumption of antagonism and autonomy on the part of working-class movements has meant that:

Basically, all the communist movement has done has been to break and overturn, in some aspects of its practice, the social democratic logic of what has been its own theory ... here we see the working class articulation of political development: at first as an initiative that is positive for the functioning of the system, an initiative that only needs to be organized via institutions; in the second instance, as a 'No', a refusal to manage the mechanism of society as it stands, merely to improve it—a 'No' which is repressed by pure violence. This is the difference of content which can exist—even within one and the same set of working class demands—between *trade union demands* and *political refusal*.³²

tudine, Verona, Ombre Corte, 2002) and Sandro Mezzadra's *Diritto di fuga*, with its thesis on the 'autonomy of migration', are of great significance in this regard (see Sandro Mezzadra, *Diritto di fuga. Migrazioni, cittadinanza, globalizzazione*, 2nd ed., Verona, Ombre Corte, 2006). For an insightful post-workerist attempt to think struggle, discipline and control in terms of the transformations and uses of money, see the collective volume *La moneta nell'Impero*, especially Andrea Fumagalli's 'Moneta e potere: controllo e disciplina sociale' (see Andrea Fumagalli, Christian Marazzi and Adelino Zanini, *La moneta nell'Impero*, Verona, Ombre Corte, 2002). It is on the subjective side, which is to say vis-à-vis the articulation between class and organization, that these texts show the contemporary difficulties facing a workerist legacy. In this respect, the concept of 'multitude' seems to serve more as a place-holder than a solution when it comes to the present impasses of a politics of working class insurrection.

30. Tronti, 'The Strategy of Refusal', p. 34.

31. In his later, more melancholic reflections on the closure of twentieth-century political subjectivity, Tronti will note that it is the very illusion of social-democracy that it can subsist without the fire of insurrection: 'No reformist practice can advance if it is not accompanied, fuelled, and given substance by a thinking of revolution', see Mario Tronti, *La politica al tramonto*, Torino, Einaudi, 1998, p. 52.

32. Tronti, 'The Strategy of Refusal', p. 34.

FANTASY WEARS BOOTS

Whilst Tronti—convinced that the workers’ movement could only be articulated through a mass party—returned to the PCI and tried to formulate the idea of an ‘autonomy of the political’ as a way of achieving working class hegemony over economic planning and rationalization (as part of a theoretical shift skillfully tracked by Matteo Mandarini in this same issue), Negri’s entire political and theoretical development is founded on the non-dialectical intensification of antagonism. The aim was to find an insurrectional and organizational outlet for Tronti’s exhortation: ‘As a matter of urgency we must get hold of, and start circulating, a photograph of the worker-proletariat that shows him as he really is—“proud and menacing”’.³³ Negri’s turn to an expanded reproduction of antagonism throughout the social sphere, beyond the factory and the mass party, depended once again on a certain assessment of the tendency at work within late capitalism, a tendency characterized by an ever-increasing exercise of command, crisis and control on the side of capital, aimed at the subjection of workers, the decomposition of any possible form of class unity and an extraction of surplus-value that tries to emancipate itself from any dialectic or negotiation with the bearers of labour-power.

In this phenomenon of tendency—which included the blackmail of austerity policies, the Cold War’s nuclear emergencies, and the ever increasing role of monetary policies after the oil crisis of 1973—Negri registers an increasing violence and irrationality on the part of capital. This violence ultimately lies in trying to maintain the *measure* and *command* of salary relations in a situation where social cooperation and technological advance are at such a level that the continuation of exploitative relations becomes ever more nonsensical. The ‘crisis politics’ and ‘strategy of tension’ that characterized the Italian state, but also the violent class decomposition that marked the onslaught against organized labour by Thatcherism and Reaganism, making way for the present neoliberal regime of flexibility, are emblems of the necessary vertical force required to reproduce capitalist social relations. As Negri remarks:

My denunciation is not therefore directed against the normality of violence, but against the fact that in the enterprise form of capitalist domination, violence has lost all intrinsic, ‘natural’ rationale (‘naturalness’ being always a product of historic forces), and all relation with any project that could be deemed progressive. If anything, the enterprise form of violence is precisely the opposite: it is an irrational form within which exchange value is imposed on social relations in which the conditions of the exchange relation no longer exist. It is the intelligent form of this irrationality, simultaneously desperate in its content and rational in its effectiveness.³⁴

In these passages, albeit in a far less morbid and claustrophobic vein, Negri anticipates the analysis of post-historical character of state violence forward by Debord in his *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*, and later seconded by Giorgio Agamben, who writes of how in 1970s Italy ‘the governments and servants of the entire world had observed

33. Tronti, ‘The Strategy of Refusal’, p. 34.

34. Negri, *Revolution Retrieved*, p. 131.

then with attentive participation ... the way that a well-aimed politics of terrorism could possibly function as the mechanism of re-legitimation of a discredited system'.³⁵ But for Negri the collapse of the dialectics of value and measure still has its source in the subjective pressure of antagonism, and indeed of constituent power. This means that the capitalist use of crisis and emergency, or rather the emergence of a 'crisis state' cannot be metaphysically and trans-historically sublimated into a view, such as Agamben's, whereby 'the state of exception is the rule' and 'naked life ... is today abandoned to a kind of violence that is all the more effective for being anonymous and quotidian'.³⁶ Contra Agamben, for Negri, then and now (as his critiques of the thesis of bare life make evident), this violence is always a determinately *capitalist* violence, that is to say a violence that *reacts* against a primary resistance, or better a prior antagonistic production of subjectivity.

Thus the tendency to an integral *socialization* of capitalism (following the *Grundrisse*, the 'bible' of *operaismo*), spreading far beyond the factory gates and encompassing all facets of social reproduction within the extraction of surplus value, comes into conflict with the endurance, enforced by exquisitely political means, of the measurability of production in the form of the wage. Arguing from the loss of any proportionality or translatability between a production now entirely socialized (the thesis of real subsumption) and its measure in labour-power or wage, Negri, beginning in the 1970s, identifies the tendency as the site of a *communist transition*. This transition however does not take the form of a plan or programme, but of an outright refusal of capitalist command and a consequent reappropriation—on the basis of an analysis of class composition, that is to say of the power-relations and differentiations within the working class itself—of workers' experience and productivity. The self-valorization of capital through command is thus confronted by the self-valorization of the working class via practices of autonomy aimed at destabilising and de-structuring of the political conditions for the perpetuation of capitalism. The programme is thus that of 'the direct social appropriation of produced social wealth'.

It is here that the concrete practices of the movements gathered under the banner of *Autonomia organizzata*—agitating in Rome, Padua, Milan and other urban areas in the 70s, and supported by publications such as *Rosso*—find their theoretical legitimacy. The practice of mass illegality (unilateral reduction of bills, house occupations, and so on), sabotage and violent assertions of the material reality of worker independence, all of which characterized the 'autonomist' movement in the 1970s, are thus conceptualized as an attempt to force the structural antagonism and its tendency towards an ever-greater arbitrariness of command. This strategy, not just of refusal but of the conquest of metropolitan 'red bases' and the irrecuperable intensification of antagonism, was aimed at preparing a generalized insurrectionary situation. The assumption of autonomy was thought to function directly as means of destabilising and de-structuring, recomposing class unity and countering the neutralization of resistance that the capitalist state effects

35. Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p. 127.

36. Agamben, *Means Without End*, p. 113.

through means both punitive (repressions and redundancies) and programmatic (the decomposition of a factory-based working class and creation of a precarious and flexible class of 'immaterial' workers: a situation that backfired in 1977, when the micropolitical strategies of the crisis-State—dispersion of workers, flexibilization—led to mass uprisings of unemployed and often highly educated urban youth).

This insurrectionary program is based on an analysis of a twofold tendency. On the one hand, we have the increasingly brutal attempt on the part of capital to emancipate itself from workers and workers' struggles, its 'dream of self-sufficiency'. On the other, we are presented with the increasing socialization of value, such that processes of production and reproduction, as well as circulation and distribution, become increasingly integrated and less and less linked to the mediating space of the factory and the official working class movement. The antagonism is therefore posited as an extreme contest between, on the one side, a capital hell-bent on the absoluteness of its own command and the fragmentation of any class initiative; and, on the other, a class of social workers (*operai sociali*, the mutant descendants of the Fordist mass worker) striving to attain a direct appropriation of the social production that finds its source in their own living labour as well as in their everyday practices and desires (chiefly in the domain of a consumption that is integrally 'put to work'). The subjectivation, singularization and socialization of living labour is thus the aim of a movement that seeks to force the separation from capitalist command.

But it is a subjectivation that, as we move into the 1970s and the decomposition of the factory, is obliged to spread itself across the entire social field. This is where the concept of class composition and the analysis of power-relations is of such importance, as without it only an entirely indeterminate dualism of class against state—ripe for a vanguardist and terrorist takeover *à la* Red Brigades—can take place. Here is where we encounter the fundamental non-homogeneity of class composition, the emergence of a *disseminated* figure of the worker and the need to generate new organizations of class struggle on a new terrain. In this context, the politicization of marginal labour power into working class is never given (in the factory, in the 'movement') but must be conquered explicitly. This is where the notion of the 'refusal of work'—to be understood as the refusal of the reproduction of capitalist wage-relations for the sake of an emancipation of social production, or of what Negri calls the 'force of invention'—takes root and acquires a pivotal role. Refusal of work, articulated outside the factory, is aimed both at class unity (crystallization of a new class composition beyond the factory) and geared for the project of destroying capitalist relations by the unconditional demand for a *right to income*, a *political wage* entirely detached if not wholly destructive of the conditions for the reproduction of capitalist cycles of profit and investment (this proposal returns in a slightly different guise in both *Empire* and *Multitude*).

Ultimately, the very terms of the antagonism, of the 'method of tendency' espoused by Negri, do demand the confrontation—determined by the particularities of class composition, organic composition and capital's strategies of restructuring and command, but neither mediated or dialogical—between the violence of a command that

tries to maintain the wage-relation and the measure of labour-power, on the one hand, and the creative violence of a self-valorising working class, on the other. We could thus say that both the force and the shortcomings of Negri's position lie in his determination to sap any possibility of institutional compromise, and in his insistence in addressing the question of *power* in its two senses of power over the state (of capital) and of power-relations within classes themselves (class composition). To use the Spinozist distinction so dear to him, we have here the face-off between the *potentia* of the working class and the *potestas* of a State dominated by the logic of the enterprise, the firm. If the face-off cannot be avoided, whatever its forms, it is because the very analysis of tendency means that a counter-autonomy or counter-self-valorization—briefly, insurrection—is the only countervailing force against the violence of capitalist command over the socialization of production. As Negri says, in discord with some of his later pronouncements about the exodus of the multitude: 'The *jouissance* that the working class seeks is the *jouissance* of power, not the tickle of illusions'. This theme returns in other texts from his 1970s Feltrinelli pamphlets, confiscated and immolated by the very state whose violence they dissected: 'Fantasy wears boots, desire is violent, invention is organized'. And further: 'The Party is the army that defends the borders of proletarian independence'. But this counter-violence against the state, which is the violence of a sabotage aimed both at the defence of worker's needs and experiences, and at the destruction of capitalist relations, was forced by its objective weakness into a strategy that could easily be portrayed as one provocation; a strategy which, at least in the Italian case, proved that, alas, in Negri's own words: 'Crisis is a risk taken by the working class and the proletariat. Communism is not inevitable'.³⁷

Where the insurrectionary *élan* of *operaismo* for a time promised a refusal and a separation from a position of strength (in the conviction that the primacy of resistance heralded the eventual obsolescence of capitalist command), the current conjuncture—witness the 'post-workerist' writings of Marazzi, De Giorgi, Fumagalli, Vercellone and several others—leads to an inevitable preoccupation not so much with separation or autonomy, as with the identification of subjective and material levers to disarticulate forms of command that have grown more recondite and redoutable since the 1970s. The challenge today is to think an antagonism whose autonomy would not entail a doomed attempt at separation, an antagonism that would not be entirely detached from the conditions of production and reproduction of contemporary capitalism. The mere positing of a duality, say between Empire and multitude, without the conflictual *composition* that can provide this duality with a certain degree of determinateness, can arguably be seen to generate a seemingly heroic, but ultimately ineffectual horizon for theoretical analysis and political militancy. In political-historical figures such as those of the 'immaterial labourer', a certain post-workerism seems to glimpse not just the end of the measured dialectic of capital and labour, but the overcoming of the need politically to confront the violence of capitalist command. Negri himself sees his work as leading to the 'theoretical

37. Antonio Negri, *Books for Burning*, Timothy S. Murphy (ed.), London, Verso, 2005, pp. 39, 260, 276, 280 (translation modified).

observation that the social transformation of class relations is definitively over. Today, *against* capital, rises up the social figure of immaterial labour'.³⁸

In this regard, any work that seeks to reinject the workerist method of antagonism into the current composition of social relations, into the uneven and combined development of capitalist command and political struggles, will be obliged to tackle two questions: How do we confront a situation in which capitalism's vicious rounds of accumulation by dispossession point to its continued and virulent, if contradictory, desire to emancipate itself from the working class, if not from humanity as a whole? And what does it mean to revive or prolong the methodologies and political gestures of workerism and autonomy at a time when—in many of the core capitalist economies that were always the privileged terrain of workerism—we are confronted by 'a depoliticization of society that reinforces the power of dominant forces'?³⁹

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38. Negri, *Books for Burning*, p. xlix (translation modified).

39. Mario Tronti, *Con le spalle al futuro. Per un altro dizionario politico*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1992, p. 13.

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