The Political:
Some Experiences from the Italian Operaismo of the 1960s & 1970s

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Overview

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- Tronti in the sixties
- The problem of the *ceto politico*
- Debating ‘the political’ within the movement of the seventies
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One way of defining the political

‘why is the apparatus of state coercion created not as a private apparatus of the ruling class, but distinct from the latter in the form of an impersonal apparatus of public power distinct from society?’

(Pashukanis 1924)
State forms of class relations

‘the formidable impulse of working class struggle has determined the crisis of the political system and imposed both a modernisation of the constitutional system and a deepening of political command … this entails therefore a real modification of the material constitution, where by material constitution is meant the long term historical-political ambit constituted by diverse but competing political forces’

(Negri 1977: 17, 18)
‘There is a judgment around which many of the interviewees converge: … none of the various workerist experiences had succeeded in coming to terms with the political … The problem we need to pose from the outset then, is what is meant by the political. As can be seen from the majority of interviews, a certain widespread superimposition and flattening between the political and organisation is prevalent amongst the workerists’

(Borio, Pozzi, Roggero 2002: 234, 236)
Workerists and the political

‘a class politics was needed; such a vast movement needed to find an adequate interlocutor, not only as force and extension, but as capacity of institutional mediation. And it was there, above all in the union, which in my opinion was the true class party back then’

(Dalmaviva 2001: 5)

‘In practical terms, the movement died over the problem of the party ... The idea that the party has in hand the whole complexity of elements that lead to a process of radical transformation is an idea worthy of paranoids: it’s like saying, “I’m God”’

(Negri 2000: 10, 14)
Political re/composition

‘Analysing class composition means … being aware that the working class is not a homogenous bloc, but rather a body striated by divisions that reproduce professional hierarchies, the separation between manual and intellectual labour, differences of age, gender and geographical origin, etc. It means distinguishing between its technical composition, which legitimates this pyramid-like stratification, and its political composition – which, on the contrary, subverts [such stratification] from the moment that awareness of its own class interests and antagonistic position concentrated itself at the base’

(Formenti 2013: 75)
'We must not take seriously the bourgeois arguments concerning State intervention in the economy: at a certain level of development this apparent external intervention is nothing more than a very advanced form of self-regulation of the economic mechanism'

(Tronti 1963/1973: 105-6)
Tronti and the political

‘Raising the price of labour-power was a working class act of force that coincided for a moment with a necessity of capital, and then overthrew it, surpassing and upsetting it. The imbalance between wages and productivity is a political fact, and must be understood as a political fact and utilised as such … Today the machine of the bourgeois State must be smashed within the capitalist factory’

(Tronti 1971: 99, 59)
Tronti and the political

‘the existence of political organisation not in general, but tied to the real levels of the working class – that is, tied directly to the place of production. The thematic of the party in the factory means nothing more than this … Without the moment of the party, no moment of tactics at a working class level’

(Tronti 1965: 468, 469)
Tronti and the political

‘taking this group of people, forming them through a relatively long political work, and constructing a sort of alternative political stratum [ceto]. In synthesis: bring them into the PCI and make them the leadership, if possible, of that party. This was the crazy idea’

(Tronti 1998: 606)
Bologna on the ‘ceto politico’

‘the formation – through the struggles in the universities – of a ceto politico that identified with its own function of revolutionary vanguard and aspired, according to a model oft-repeated in history, to assume the command, the political direction of the class movements, substituting itself for that other ceto politico (for the most part, bourgeois and intellectual) which, formed in the fascist period, continued in some degree to hold power within the institutions of the Italian labour movement’

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Political *stratum* or political *subject*?

‘Militants form themselves in movements, and movements form and select militants: it is a spiral process that is not given once and for always, but one that must be continually cultivated, nourished and strengthened’

‘Militants are the link that structures the movement, that gives it form, potentiality and organisation’

‘The political subject becomes such in the moment when it defines and sustains a point of view, assumes a partisan position, differentiates itself and constructs its autonomy by counterposing itself in practice [praticando una contrapposizione]’

(CS Askatasuna 2012: 35, 23, 21)
Debating politics within Autonomia

‘At the beginning of 1975, at Lotta Continua’s national congress, the committees of Sesto San Giovanni, Marelli, Telettra and Casoretto split “to the left”. Along with a further product of Potere Operaio’s slow dissolution, they gave rise to Senza Tregua, perhaps the most traditionally “workerist” of the formations of autonomia. Very much linked to the theme of “workers’ decrees”, and more inclined towards a discourse on “the centrality of the factory”, it would constitute, in Milan, the second great pole of aggregation.’

(Castellano 1980: 111)
‘In recent years crisis/restructuring has created a fracture between “a workers stratum co-opted by a reformist perspective” and “a social area of workers’ resistance to restructuring” … Relaunching forms of rampant wage struggle, inscribed in a program, guided by an organised communist force, together with relaunching forms of proletarian assault on income: this is the terrain of immediate initiative. But it is absolutely necessary to move beyond the endemic nature of autonomous behaviours’

(Scalzone 1976: 3)
‘Whenever there is talk of a “workers’ government, the various types of “left forces” always speak in terms of management of the capitalist machine, and the correction of the model at the level of distribution, substantially discarding a discourse of production … none of them tackle the node of the relation between power and production’

(Scalzone 1976: 6)
‘Consider the enormous potential of a body of communist workers that promotes and leads a territorial assembly, a “proletarian political council”, that decrees … on a whole “raft” of questions: prices and tariffs; factory staffing levels and hours …’

(Scalzone 1976: 7)
“Forcing men (sic) to be free” remains a necessity for the movement’s vanguard fraction. All this is arbitrary when ‘men’ cannot or do not want to do so; all this is obligatory when this desiring will expresses itself widely but in a subterranean manner, suffocated by force, by the institutional apparatus, by the power to lead proletarians back to accepting the regime of domination and exploitation, and render them incapable of overthrowing the forms and functions of the social regime in force’

(Scalzone 1976: 8)
‘The document affirms that “it is absolutely necessary to move beyond the endemic nature of autonomous behaviours”. We agree … But [discussion of] the party is almost skipped over, as if precisely thanks to its organic nature, it is not indispensable … It’s as if a too-rapid step forward is taken, one that does not follow from the correct demands of workers’ centrality, of political work in the factory, which are part of the Senza Tregua comrades’ daily practice … Instead the document concludes with themes like “The working class becomes state”, “Practice of decrees, forms of workers’ social government” …’

(PC(m-l))I 1977: 2)
Reactions within Autonomia

‘If we are not in 1917 or the phase preceding October, if the social democratic plan of the unions is the rationalistion of capitalist society in pursuit of an alliance between working class and profit made at the expense of workers’ needs – then the slogan, the short term program, is not control over production, but the rigidity of job levels, the decrease in work, rigid opposition to restructuring, overcoming the forms of control and command that oppose this proletarian plan’

(Comitati autonomi operai 1976: 4)
Reactions within Senza Tregua

‘the so-called “workers’ component” criticised the intellectualist (as we then called it) stamp of the paper which, in our view, needed instead to propagandise already existing autonomous struggles within the factories ... it was no longer a paper for workers, but risked becoming a dissertation by the manner in which it was written’

‘the paper as this collective agitator struck me as an old-fashioned communist idea, to tell the truth. But I believe that Scalzone above all needed to produce a paper like he needed to drink coffee every morning’

(quoted in Guicciardi 1988: 116, 96)
i workerist feminists were not able to convince the whole feminist movement that the refusal of work must be managed within a process of wage bargaining, or otherwise domestic work would return in another manner alongside work outside the home, which we were also struggling over. In other words, the feminist movement never included, in its general political program, our objective of first obtaining social recognition for the value of housework by claiming money for it. The strategy that feminists applied to housework was simply to invite women to refuse it. But after a while it became clear that this strategy was inefficient, because it was not able to make housework disappear on a mass scale.

(Fortunati 2013)
The political

‘the state is incarnated first and foremost in those institutions that must organise, control and guarantee the reproduction of labour power (far from the army/police/government as seen from Lenin’s viewpoint). But guaranteeing, organising the reproduction of labour power has also meant guaranteeing and organising power divisions within the class … historically, extinction has never meant the destruction of the state, but only the destruction of one of its particular forms as a means towards its rationalisation’

(Le operaie della casa 1977b: 21)
Assessing Autonomia

‘In appearance, “everyone working, but very little” has the egalitarian face of equality in exploitation – preparatory, one supposes, to a unification of the class. In reality, precisely because it is oblivious to the labour already performed by the unwaged – and domestic labour first and foremost – behind this apparently egalitarian proposal lies the imposition of what today is wage labour upon the strata with less power’

(Le operaie della casa 1977b: 8)
Assessing Senza Tregua

‘an organisation that aspires to synthesise, unify, represent the interests of the whole class (its “general will”), will always and necessarily have a repressive function, because it will always represent the primacy of interests of the strongest strata. In doing so, it will reproduce within itself (at the level of objectives and organisation) the capitalist division of labour’

(Le operaie della casa 1977b: 16)
The cost of abandoning the struggle around wages

‘Despite the tactical differences, the political tendencies [under discussion] display great homogeneity. On the one hand, there is the conviction that the “productive machine” is ready for the passage to communism, and that it is only a matter of “freeing it” by removing it from the grasp of those who still control and manage it. On the other, the conviction that it is necessary to take charge of the productive forces and begin from today the “transition to communism”, because any other path will lead to defeat. The economic underdevelopment of the country is, therefore, the political underdevelopment of the class’

(Le operaie della casa 1977a: 4)
‘Whereas the areas of workerist origin tended to privilege the high points of workers’ struggles, those in the circuit of Collegamenti tended to emphasise the importance of “average” behaviours, verifying the fact that the radical is able to achieve rupture only if it assumes the value of common sense and is transformed into widespread behaviour’

(Soriano 2007: 7)
The political

‘the [state] form of “Authoritarian Democracy” is destined to endure on the one hand as the repression and exclusion of “non-guaranteed” workers’ strata, on the other as mediation of the central class sector … Workers’ power must be sought not in the autonomy of the political, but in the microphysics of social relations, in the radical change of workers’ daily life … Revolution is not the seizure of the Winter Palace, but the constitution of organisms of proletarian counterpower’

(Collegamenti 1979: 15, 17)
‘what we want to criticise is the arbitrary and artificial simplification of the social dynamic, obtained by reducing heterogenous and even mutually contradictory behaviours to a univocal working class behaviour … The conception of the socialised worker entails the obstinate attempt to discover at any cost a privileged subject, the driving axis of a neo-leninist hypothesis of the combattent party, conceived as the synthesising and centralising moment of the multiplication of social antagonism’

(Collegamenti 1978: 82)
Assessing Senza Tregua

‘That some workers’ strata are more combative, and that conservative attitudes and interests develop within others, is an undeniable fact; likewise that autonomous organisation develops precisely in the more combative strata. But today the conditions are completely lacking by which one can talk of a self-organisation of workers’ strata with a tougher behaviour – at least if one does not want to reduce this self-organisation to one’s own small apparatus, which amongst other things is ridiculously local’

(CCRAP 1976: 26)
Tackling the reality of the times

‘The network of minority agents produced by the struggle can properly define itself as a class political minority only insofar as it consciously lives the contradictions of the class within itself … Beyond being present in the workers’ debate in factory and zone, today comrades are posed the problem of gauging the new reality arising from the crisis, so as to draw out from the latter those elements capable of enlarging the proletarian front’

(Collegamenti 1977: 11, 12)
‘If it is true – and I am convinced it is true – that a politics of composition will not emerge naturally and spontaneously from movements, but can only be the fruit of a militant undertaking [lavoro], then the time has come to stop flirting with voguish spontaneism and the illusion that capitalism can be overthrown by small affinity groups practicing a politically correct horizontalism. The discussion on political organisation, strategies of struggle and scenarios of transitions has reopened’

(Formenti 2012)
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