



## Back to the Future: Italian Workerists Reflect Upon the Operaista Project\*

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### abstract

On the cusp of the new millennium, three Italian militant researchers undertook to record the reflections of leading participants in the history of *Operaismo*, the findings from which were then presented in the book *Futuro Anteriore* (2002). As one of those interviewed (Sergio Bologna, 2003) later put it, “It was a strange event and it surprised all of us, considering that amongst us there were people who had not spoken nor had any personal relations with one another on any level for years and years, so divergent were our individual paths. One day in 2000, without denying their past, though critical of their experiences, they agreed to recognise themselves in a common tradition”. Drawing upon the transcripts used in the writing of *Futuro Anteriore*, this paper will explore, in a critical manner, the ways in which the *operaisti* interviewed by Guido Borio, Francesca Pozzi and Gigi Roggero address the themes central to the current issue of *ephemera*: from debates around immaterial labour and post-Fordism, to the nature of subjectivity and the role of workers’ enquiries and co-research.

In recent times there has been considerable interest, in Italy and beyond, in the tendency of Marxism known as *Operaismo* (Workerism), a school many had thought consigned to oblivion along with the turbulent sixties and seventies of rebellious youth, women, and factory workers (first and foremost, the ‘mass workers’ of assembly line production). A large part of this curiosity is a consequence of the attention recently paid, in academic but also activist circles, to the work of former *Operaisti* such as Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno, as well as associated thinkers like Giorgio Agamben. Having once been treated primarily as a footnote to the intellectual phenomenon that is Deleuze and Guattari, such authors (and Negri above all) have become increasingly the subject of attention in their own right, through the publication and circulation of texts such as *Empire*, *Multitude*, *Homo Sacer* and *Grammar of the Multitude*.<sup>1</sup>

Given these circumstances, the 2002 book *Futuro Anteriore* authored by Guido Borio, Francesca Pozzi and Gigi Roggero, informed as it is by nearly sixty interviews with

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1 While not himself a Workerist, Agamben’s trajectory since at least the late eighties has regularly intersected with significant circles emerging from *Operaismo* (see, for example, his association with the journals *Luogo comune* and *DeriveApprodi*).

participants from the Workerist experience (along with some of their critics), is a crucial resource. It is crucial because it provides important insights both into the work of those theorists already somewhat familiar to English-language readers, as well into as the broader milieu of political and theoretical engagement from which they emerged. I have discussed the broad contours of *Futuro Anteriore* elsewhere (Wright, 2004): here I want to focus instead upon the discussion across the interviews of some themes at the heart of this issue of *ephemera*. While alluding to the overview of *Operaismo* that the authors of *Futuro Anteriore* themselves construct, I want to explore how these questions are addressed by some of those interviewed for the book: both the famous and the relatively unknown, both those who had been fundamental in developing Italian Workerism as a distinctive tendency, as well as those more sceptical about many of its central precepts.

What makes *Operaismo* and the various circles that emerged from it of interest and relevance today? The originality of classical Workerism in the sixties and seventies lay in its commitment to rethink political practice in the light of new problems thrown up by the post-war social compact in Italy, problems that the mainstream of the local left and labour movement too often seemed unable to comprehend. Foremost amongst these problems was the historical specificity of the relation between capital and labour: in the Italian case, the rise of what the *Operaisti* called a new *class composition*, centred upon the mass worker employed in Taylorist production regimes. In turn, the Workerist imperative to understand the mass worker and its distinctive political practices (notably, its struggle against the organization of work – even, in certain instances, against the wage relation itself) found attraction in the student movement and Hot Autumn of the late sixties, leading to a questioning of many precepts within the Marxist-Leninist canon. The flowering in the seventies of the so-called ‘new social movements’, and of workplace struggles beyond the domain of the mass worker, fuelled further research and engagement, much of it associated with the autonomist movement of that period. Eclipsed by repression and the defeat in Italy of the mass worker as a social subject, *Operaismo* was considered dead by the early eighties. To the surprise of most observers, therefore, ‘post’-Workerist sensibilities have found a new audience since the nineties, contributing to contemporary debates in social movements and the academy alike, around the new forms assumed by capital’s tyranny over labour, and the social antagonism this inspires in all spheres of social engagement in the Internet age. Thanks to the work of Borio, Pozzi and Roggero, it becomes possible to peer inside the kaleidoscope of viewpoints posited by ex-*Operaisti* and post-*Operaisti* alike, as they ponder the successes and failures of their political tendency, as well as how best to understand the nature of social domination and conflict today.

What follows will provide some glimpses into the discussion by *Futuro Anteriore*’s protagonists. Along with the interviews, I will also draw on transcripts from the series of seminars around Italy by means of which the book was launched in Italy in 2002. This seminar series, which culminated in a two-day conference – about which Enda Brophy (2004) has written a very useful account – is well worth examining, since it allowed participants in the project to respond both to the authors’ interpretations, and their fellow-interviewees: in short, to participate in a collective exercise of co-research. But first, for the sake of context, some information on the scope and intent of what Borio, Pozzi and Roggero set out to accomplish with their project.

The authors of *Futuro Anteriore* make no pretence to be disinterested parties when it comes to trying to make some kind of sense of *Operaismo* as a body of thought, to ascertain the successes and failures of the movements it influenced (stretching from circles with the Italian Communist Party to *Autonomia* and sections of the libertarian left), let alone its legacy for anti-capitalist politics in the present. Deeply influenced by the worldview of Romano Alquati, one of the more distinctive participants in the history of Italian Workerism, Borio, Pozzi and Roggero do not hold back from expressing their own views in the book-length summation of their fieldwork that is *Futuro Anteriore*. At the same time, by including the transcripts of all interviews on an accompanying CD-ROM, they make it possible for others to construct their own readings of the primary sources they have drawn upon.<sup>2</sup>

Who was interviewed for the book? There were fifty-eight participants all told, of whom five were women. Borio, Pozzi and Roggero group those interviewed in a number of ways. For example, by generation: there are those born between 1929 and 1936, most of whom had become politically engaged by the fifties; those born between 1937 and 1944, who often entered radical politics in the early or mid-sixties; those born between 1945 and 1952, and were typically part of the generation of 1968 and its immediate aftermath; and finally, those born after 1952, who more commonly cut their political teeth in the movements of the seventies (or, in some cases, the eighties). Those interviewed played various roles in post-war Italian radical politics: some were part of that small intellectual and political elite seen by the book's authors as developing key categories within the Workerist lexicon; others were militants in local collectives, while a third cluster belonged to an 'intermediate stratum' of cadre that sought to bridge these two spheres. Perhaps a quarter of participants had been associated with *Quaderni Rossi* and/or *Classe Operaia*, two journals of the sixties in whose pages many of the distinctive sensibilities of *Operaismo* were first outlined. About a third had belonged to the organization *Potere Operaio*, and about one third had been part of the Italian autonomist movement that arose in the early seventies, coinciding with *Potere Operaio*'s death throes. Many but not all of those who had participated in *Autonomia* had also been in *Potere Operaio*. Most had assumed the role of political militants at one point in their lives, most had been or were still academics, and all remained politically engaged.

*Future Perfect*: the book's title echoes the name of a journal that Negri and others founded in Paris in the late eighties. Searching for a definition of the term on the Internet, I came across this rather charming explanation: "when we use this tense we are projecting ourselves forward into the future and looking back at an action that will be completed some time later than now" (Edufind, 2004). While the purpose of *Futuro Anteriore* is largely to make sense of an historical experience (or better, an ensemble of experiences), almost a quarter of the book is given over to examining the opinions of interviewees concerning the nature of capitalism and social conflict today. Twisting the book's title around somewhat, Carlo Cuccomarino would argue that the aim of *Futuro Anteriore* is "to think ahead through looking back, to take what is useful [*buono*] from

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2 All but one of the interview transcripts (that with Lauso Zagato) can be found online at [http://usuarios.lycos.es/pete\\_baumann/futuroanteriore.html](http://usuarios.lycos.es/pete_baumann/futuroanteriore.html). Edited versions of some interviews have since appeared in Borio, Pozzi and Roggero (eds.) 2005.

things that happened 20-30 years ago, actualise it and use it for the possible attempt to change the state of things” (Cuccomarino et al., 2002: 2).

For Sergio Bologna, a key figure in the history of *Operaismo*, one of the most important things about the *Futuro Anteriore* project is its very existence, since this “broke the ice and created an ambit ... in which the protagonists and witnesses [*testimoni*] could see their own history treated with respect” (Gambino et al., 2002: 2). At the same time, there were certain aspects of the book which he found problematic. For example, the dependence of *Futuro Anteriore*’s authors, at crucial points of their arguments, upon the stylised lexicon of Alquati, risked over-intellectualising the Workerist project, as if

we went outside the factories with the German edition of the *Grundrisse*. In reality, it was exactly the opposite: that is, my perception and memory is that we were the first who succeeded in speaking a language that workers understood. The party militants didn’t understand it, the leftwing intellectuals didn’t understand it: when you gave a leaflet to a leftwing intellectual, they would say ‘But what have you written? Who could understand these things?’ [...] it was a filtered and enriched political discourse that knew how to communicate or transmit certain messages to the working class or to workers, who received and perceived them. It was their language: we gave a certain form [*una veste nobile*] to their language, but it was theirs, it wasn’t the language of leftwing intellectuals, who in fact always reproved us for writing abstruse things. (Gambino et al., 2002: 4)

One of the principal reasons that *Operaismo* scandalised so many of its contemporaries within the Italian left of the sixties was that it sought to ground a revolutionary politics within the contradictions of capitalist valorisation, as seen from the perspective of those whose ability to work capital attempted to subsume. As Paolo Virno would recall at a public meeting on *Futuro Anteriore* held in Cosenza,

Think of the 1969 slogan ... ‘the wage uncoupled from productivity’. Now, granted it’s awkward, it lacks the nimbleness and elegance of ‘equality, liberty, fraternity’, it’ll probably never inspire a national anthem ... and yet this idea of the wage uncoupled from productivity provoked such antipathy precisely because it was not a theory of justice, it was not the Tobin Tax, it was the radical critique of the very fact that a commodity such as labour-power existed. (Cuccomarino et al., 2002: 5)

Opening the Turin book launch of *Futuro Anteriore*, Carlo Formenti reiterated a point made by many of those interviewed for the project: despite attempts to represent it from the outside as homogenous, the history of *Operaismo* had been marked by significant differences over theoretical frameworks and approaches to organizations, by divisions based upon ‘situations of struggles’ as well as of generation (Formenti et al., 2002: 1). That this remains so is evident in Formenti’s assessment of the category *multitude*:

To my mind, a long phase of conflicts with enormous risks and opportunities is opening before us. The only thing that I feel we can inherit as positive from a certain type of path, of experiences – above all of practice, less of theoretical reflection than of practice and of experiences of life in struggle – is to go back to reflecting on forms of social autonomy. That is, what today are the forces that are concretely in conflict, what are the needs, desires, subjects (not subject) that concretely incarnate them and move in the territory? Avoiding instead a continuity of abstract categories that at times irritates me greatly, such as when in *Empire* my friend Toni Negri repropose categories of absolute abstraction like ‘empire’ and ‘multitude’. (Formenti et al., 2002: 3)

## Post-Fordism

*Operaismo*, as a distinctive political tendency with its own research agenda, had collapsed by the early eighties, with many of its Italian proponents at that point in prison or exile. For all their disagreements on other matters, most of the strains of thought that arose from its wreckage have used the term post-Fordism to describe a new configuration of capitalist social relations after ‘les trente glorieuses’ (Guinan, 2002) that followed the Second World War. One of the best known of such exponents of the term post-Fordism is Paolo Virno. In a number of texts since translated into English, he has emphasised not only the repressive nature of capital’s attack upon the process of political recomposition in the sixties and seventies, but also the counterrevolution through which it sought to incorporate and normalise much of the creativity expressed by those challenging the post-war Fordist compact in Italy and similar social formations. In his interview for *Futuro Anteriore*, much of Virno’s (2001: 13) emphasis is upon the anticipatory nature of Italian struggles of the mid-seventies, as responses to the crisis of Fordism and – parallel to this – the nature of contemporary capitalism, “precisely as post-Fordist ... as translating in historical, social and also economic terms, the most general characteristics of the human animal”. From this viewpoint, post-Fordism is addressed primarily as ‘the communism of capital’, a thematic to which much of Virno’s book *Grammar of the Multitude* is devoted. In a broader sense, post-Fordism is read as the framework within which the new relationship of labour and capital is constituted, a framework which, depending upon how it is read, may well contain a host of latent possibilities, from struggles against social domination, to the risk that “the multitude can become fascist” (Virno, 2001: 14).

Unfortunately, much of the discussion of post-Fordism in the interviews for *Futuro Anteriore* is of a passing nature. Yet even these are, on occasion, suggestive. For Andrea Colombo (2001: 2), the term post-Fordism itself is ‘horrendous’, yet the fundamental shift that it seeks to address seems acceptable enough. Bruno Cartosio (2000: 16), in contrast, states that “I don’t like the expression post-Fordism, because I believe that reality today is complex, in which Fordism lives alongside post-Fordism and pre-Fordism”. Aldo Bonomi (2001: 13) adds a further twist by talking of the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism – “and from the latter to globalisation”, although he doesn’t elaborate as to the differences between these terms. Massimo De Angelis agrees: “within the modern global factory, post-Fordism doesn’t exist without Fordism, wage labour doesn’t exist without slavery, immaterial labour doesn’t exist without material labour” (2001: 6).

One of the more extended discussions of the category post-Fordism is offered by Marco Revelli, who like Cartosio had once been an editor of the influential Workerist journal *Primo Maggio*. An acute chronicler of the rise and fall of the mass worker at FIAT (his 1989 book on the subject is a classic of its kind, informed by a wealth of firsthand recollections and his own experience there as an ‘external’ militant), his views concerning social conflict have shifted markedly since the eighties. More than a workplace regime, he argues, Fordism was a whole system: “Taylorism plus Keynesianism ... based upon the hypothesis of an unlimited expansion of markets” that “incorporated pure instrumental rationality” in the project of formalising all aspects of

capitalist production (Revelli, 2001: 5). The situation now, Revelli insists, “is exactly the opposite”:

We can call it whatever – post-Fordism, post-immaterial, Empire, we could call it “cabbage” – but this mechanism has been broken: today capital’s valorisation occurs in a context in which markets are increasingly saturated, and thus express a strong resistance to absorbing products; the cost of raw materials are climbing, and labour-power can’t be disciplined in the hierarchical-authoritarian manner presupposed by the Fordist model. (Revelli, 2001: 5-6)

In what seems to be in part a self-criticism of his own earlier stance, Revelli argues that the *Operaisti* had assumed “the absolutisation of one of the many possible forms of capital’s valorisation, as if Fordism was in some way the highest stage of capitalism”. Thus, when capital succeeded in destroying the mass worker as a political subject (an event exemplified in the Italian case by the strike and subsequent mass sackings at FIAT in 1980), Workerism was unable

to see the limits of that class composition, still completely closed within capital’s envelope, [and so paid] scant attention instead to the processes of cultural accumulation in the sense of lifestyle, of styles of behaviour, the transformation of subjectivity and so on. (Revelli, 2001: 3)

What do the authors of *Futuro Anteriore* themselves say about post-Fordism? Their frequent reference in interviews to ‘so-called post-Fordism’ is something of a clue, as is their observation in conversation with Claudio Greppi (2000: 11) that “so-called post-Fordism is one of the themes on which the majority [of participants] have expressed many certainties and few doubts”. Making a distinction between Fordism as a social model of mass consumption and Taylorism as a model of workplace organisation, they suggest that, far from having been surpassed, Fordism may well be flexible enough to attempt to incorporate workers’ informal knowledges into its management of the accumulation process (Borio, Pozzi and Roggero, 2002: 116-21). Their views here are echoed by another participant, whose path from the sixties, unlike that of most interviewees, followed that of Mario Tronti’s long-term engagement with the Communist Party. Enrico Livraghi (2000: 6, 4) is likewise doubtful about the usefulness of the category post-Fordism, asking whether the current age might not be better understood as one of ‘hyper-Fordism’. For good measure, he adds that the category immaterial labour is a tautology, whose advocates forget that Marx had long ago established labour-power as ‘the authentic immaterial commodity’.

## Immaterial Labour and General Intellect

Much has been made in certain post-*Operaista* quarters of the term ‘immaterial labour’. In the work of Negri (but others too), it is central in explaining the ‘post’ within post-Fordism:

There is this enormous phenomenon that is the change in industrial paradigm ... it’s useless playing the knave and saying, ‘immaterial labour, material labour, there’s more of one here, there’s more of the other there’. What changes is the model, in which the proportions of hand, muscles and head employed in labour changes radically. (Negri, 2000: 7)

Closely tied to the notion of immaterial labour is the category of general intellect. As Marco Bascetta (Parise et al., 2002: 6) pointed out during the Salerno book launch of *Futuro Anteriore*, “Italian Workerism had made almost a bible out of the ‘Fragment on Machines’ in Marx’s *Grundrisse*”, a passage which gives pride of place to general intellect. While Marx had understood the latter ‘fundamentally as dead labour’, the most common reading emerging from Workerist circles, continued Bascetta, interpreted it as “*not only* given in the form of machines and of technologies, but in the form of living labour” (Parise et al., 2002: 7, my emphasis). This ‘not only’ is intriguing, given the tendency within post-*Operaista* analyses to treat general intellect as *nothing but* an attribute of living labour. More typical amongst those interviewed is Yann Moulrier-Boutang (2001: 9):

If we characterise this passage [...] as a cognitive capitalism, this entails changes in the framework of classical Marxism, indeed of *Operaismo*. I was thinking, for example, of the reduction of living labour to dead labour, naturally reading the *Grundrisse* and other classics, and now I think that we truly have a new type of exploitation, which is the production of living labour by means of living labour through living labour. That is, the impossibility of eliminating or reducing living labour to mere machinery, capital etc. This changes everything concerning the question of command, because the latter cannot be given by the apparatus of fixed capital: therefore command is recast as [*ridiventa*] the command of affects. These new cognitive workers have more power than was possessed by technicians over material capital, because they are no longer reducible or controllable by means of the weight of capital.

What is striking in the *Futuro Anteriore* interviews is the variety of different ways in which this matter is tackled by participants. For example, when Giaro Daghini (2000: 10) turns to the question of ‘the immaterial’, it is to interpret globalisation in terms of “the construction of an immaterial universe of communication that allows the *ad infinitum* localisation within the territory of units of production, of exchange, logistics of transfer”. Here, in other words, the focus is less upon the immaterial as a realm of production somehow distinct from the ‘material’, than as a new means (for example, through telemetry) of deploying the material in previously unforeseen combinations and upon unprecedented scales.

One of the few non-*operaisti* interviewed for *Futuro Anteriore* (others include the historian Maria Grazia Meriggi and the Roman autonomist Vincenzo Miliucci) is Enzo Modugno. Long prominent within the intellectual circles of the Roman radical left, where he has often been critical of the local autonomist movement (Del Bello, 1997), Modugno has played an important role in a number of projects since the sixties: to take one example, the journal *Marxiana*, which aimed to publicise the work of Paul Mattick and other non-Leninist Marxists within the Italian movement. By the late eighties, Modugno (Collegamanti Wobbly, 1989) was also one of the first Italian Marxists to reflect at length upon the place of the immaterial within capitalist social relations. His take on the question is, he believes, “exactly the opposite” to that of Negri and other post-*Operaisti*: in his opinion, capital is actually seeking to separate knowledge from the human brain, because the latter has now become “totally untrustworthy” (Modugno, 2001: 3):

The thing that I don't understand is why the *ex-potoppini*<sup>3</sup> want to assign the dignity of general intellect to this new worker. They consider him or her as precisely the finally realised general intellect that therefore possesses the dignity held earlier by intellectuals – which presumes that he or she also has that type of formation, that is that they have the capacity, with a computer, to produce all those things, therefore that they contain in their head all the knowledge. I don't agree: on the contrary, this is a diminished intellectual, it is an old intellectual separated from knowledge and learning [*dal sapere e dalla conoscenza*], exactly as the waged worker of early capitalism was an artisan deprived of their virtuosity, because that virtuosity had now been incorporated in a machine. (Modugno, 2001: 11-12)

Providing their own assessment of the category general intellect, Borio, Pozzi and Roggero also take the opportunity to polemicise with the likes of Franco 'Bifo' Berardi and Negri concerning the meaning of Marx's 'Fragment'. In doing so, they question those who see this text as an anticipation of capital's ability to free itself from the constraints of the so-called 'law of value'. Not surprisingly, they follow Alquati in talking about two forms of general intellect: on the one hand, "human capacities incorporated in machines"; on the other, that particular to living labour. More than this, they quote Virno's interview (now in Borio, Pozzi & Roggero, 2005: 319) – 'What is more material than a mental panorama?' – in support of their use instead of the category *non-tangible commodities*:

We prefer this definition to that of immaterial commodities. It is in fact rather debatable to call immaterial all that one cannot touch: the commodity education or the commodity communication, for example, while they cannot be physically touched, have their indisputable, peculiar and fundamental materiality. (Borio et al., 2002: 126)

## Subjectivity and Enquiries

For Borio, Pozzi and Roggero, one of the weaknesses of most strands within Italian Workerism lay in their efforts to deal with – but in fact, more commonly, to elide – the problem of subjectivity. The Workerists were correct in locating subjectivity as a distinctive attribute of that 'particular' commodity labour-power: indeed, the very two-sidedness of the latter means that while such subjectivity is not

in itself antagonistic to the capitalist system ... as peculiar [property] of the human agent, it implies at least a capacity of rather autonomous initiative: this autonomy, if partial, is already a first step beyond the actor and towards potential alternative projects. (Borio, Pozzi and Roggero, 2002: 178)

Yet, for all the emphasis upon workers' behaviour and championing of the force of the mass worker, both *Operaismo* in its heyday, and those (ex or post) *operaisti* interviewed more recently for *Futuro Anteriore*, actually

say little about what that force was, not only in its revolutionary potentiality, but also in its subjectivity (certainly not all antagonistic), therefore in its totality of behaviours, needs, beliefs, knowledges, cultures etc. (Borio, Pozzi and Roggero, 2002: 107-8)

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3 That is, former members of Potere Operaio.



I'm not convinced such criticisms are entirely fair, particularly if one takes into account the kinds of documentation (often in the form of workplace leaflets, many of them made available for wider circulation in journals such as *La Classe*) produced by the Workerists at the height of the Hot Autumn – or indeed, the kind of documentation made available through the 'life history in the guise of a novel' that is *Vogliamo Tutto* ('We Want Everything') by Nanni Balestrini. All the same, the question of reading subjectivity – and the implications that follows for understandings of class composition and mass organization – is one that deserves considered attention in any effort to unravel the *Operaista* experience.

In his discussion with *Futuro Anteriore*'s authors, Carlo Formenti (2000: 7) links the problem of subjectivity with what he calls "the old idea of class composition ... within the theoretical tradition of global, but above all Italian, Workerism", one obsessed with the quest to identify 'a driving nucleus' within any given class composition. If this mindset dovetailed with the Leninist propensities of the self-styled 'organised' factions of the autonomist movement, it could also be found in the arguments of an anti-Leninist like Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, whose reading of the recent movements against global capital interpreted these as the manifestation of a new vanguard within production, the 'cognitariat'. As Formenti puts it:

To my mind this is the old flaw of the Workerist tradition: that is, the constant attempt to chase what can be thought to be the most advanced 'point' of conflict and of contradiction, defining it as vanguard and thinking that the entire dynamic of conflicts can, in the last instance, be brought back to the paradigm, the model, the objectives, the culture, the practices and the behaviours of this most advanced point. (Formenti, 2000: 7)

Since, in his view, the discourse of class composition cannot be understood outside this process of identifying vanguards, Formenti's (2000: 8) preference, like that of his friend Romano Màdera (2000), is to abandon it altogether in favour of "a federalism of antagonisms" that accepts the contingent nature of the encounter between different struggles in society.

Aspects of Formenti's view are echoed in Christian Marazzi's recollection of a Negri "caught completely unawares" by his interest in the poor as a social subject in the Switzerland of the eighties. While this may sound strange to readers who know of Negri's work only through *Empire*, the exclamation "Poverty? What's this crap [roba]?" is consistent with the broad trajectory of Italian Workerism.<sup>4</sup>

[*Operaismo*] was never a model of a theory that started from the poor: it started, from the strong points of capital. In this sense the critique of third worldism was political, it was the critique of the idea of attacking capital from the peripheries and from underdevelopment. We instead have always sustained the opposite: the struggle over the wage was for more wages, for a certain consumerism, but it was also political, a struggle for counterpower. (now in Borio, Pozzi & Roggero, 2005: 227, 227-8)

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4 Although it should be added that those Italians more attentive to debates amongst North American Workerists following the emergence of the welfare rights movement saw the discourse around 'poor people' somewhat differently – see, for example, some of the articles published in the seventies and eighties in the pages of *Primo Maggio*. It should also be noted that the *Materiali Marxisti* column published by Feltrinelli, under the direction of Negri, Bologna and others at the University of Padua, translated Piven and Cloward's classic text *Poor People's Movements*.

For *Operaismo*, the means most suited to identifying subjects of struggle was through enquiry: best of all, a form of enquiry that involved those subjects themselves in the process of accumulating knowledge and deploying it to effect change. It is here that the debt of *Futuro Anteriore*'s authors to Alquati is most apparent. The opening pages of their book quote at length from a text by Alquati (n.d.: 35) included along with the interview transcripts, in which he calls for a new round of 'co-research' carried out by those in the workplace together, and 'on an equal footing', with 'intellectuals and researchers' based outside. In light of this, perhaps one of the most marked aspects of many of the interviews is the sense of isolation recalled in the wake of *Operaismo*'s defeat, often contrasted unfavourably with circumstances in the seventies. As Sergio Bologna (2001: 11) recounted,

it was much easier to be an intellectual in the seventies, because basically you had before you such a wealth of subversive behaviours, of rebel fantasies, of desires, of innovation etc. that, when all is said and done, your behaviour was that of formalising things a bit.

For Alisa Del Re (2000), too, it is this absence of a broader context of collective projects of social change visible all around in one's daily world that is felt most strongly:

If I miss those times it is because I have not witnessed the same feeling and power of a communitarian kind since then, even though subjectively and individually now I have much more power over my life and decisions about it than I used to: but it is a very solitary thing.

## Conclusion

To date, only one transcript from *Futuro Anteriore* – the interview with Alisa del Re quoted above – has appeared in English. It is to be hoped that the present interest in 'Negri thought' will spark more such translations from this rich body of primary sources. Or perhaps intellectual fashion in the English-speaking left will move on, leaving the *operaisti* a mere footnote to a fad that will soon become yesterday.<sup>5</sup> If so, that would be a great pity. As Guido Borio (Cuccomarino et al., 2002: 9) put it at one of the *Futuro Anteriore* book launches, "You undertake research when you lack certainties, when you don't know which road to take". If nothing else, the materials collected by Borio, Pozzi and Roggero open a window upon a serious, collective attempt – even if in different circumstances, now passed – to make actual the time-honoured project of overturning 'the present state of things'. Given this, those seeking to do the same in today's uncertain times could do worse than to spend a few hours perusing the fascinating ensemble of opinions and reflections brought together in *Futuro Anteriore*.

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5 One of the more charming aspects of Negri's two interviews for *Futuro Anteriore* is that he seems to be at a loss as much as everyone else to explain the success of *Empire* in the United States and other English-speaking polities.

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