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Workerism and Politics

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This is the text of Mario Tronti's lecture at the 2006 *Historical Materialism* conference. It provides a brief, evocative synopsis of Tronti's understanding of the historical experience and contemporary relevance of *operaismo*, a theoretical and practical attempt, embodied in journals such as *Quaderni Rossi* and *Classe Operaia*, to renew Marxist thought and politics in the Italy of the 1960s through a renewed attention to class-antagonism and the changing composition of labour.

Keywords

capitalism, communism, factory, Italy, labour-power, workerism

First, what is 'workerism'? It is an experience that tried to unite the thinking and practice of politics, in a determinate domain, that of the modern factory. It looked for a strong subject, the working class, capable of contesting and putting into crisis the mechanism of capitalist production.

I underscore its character as an experience. Young intellectual forces were involved, encountering the new levies of workers, introduced especially into the large factories of the Taylorist and Fordist phase of capitalist industry. What had taken place in the thirties in the US was happening in the sixties in Italy.

The historical context for workerism was precisely that of the sixties of the twentieth century. In Italy, that period witnessed the take-off of an advanced capitalism, the passage from an agricultural-industrial society to an industrial-agricultural one, with the migratory displacement of labour-power from the peasant South to the industrial North.

They called it 'neo-capitalism'. Mass-production and mass-consumption, social modernisation with the welfare-state, political modernisation with centre-left governments. Christian Democrats plus Socialists, a mutation in customs, mentality, behaviour. We were moving towards '68, which in Italy was to be '68–9, youth protest plus the 'hot autumn' of the workers, which

saw a great shift in the balance of power between workers and capital, with wages impacting directly on profits.

And this could happen also because of workerism, with its stress on the centrality of the factory and of the working class in the general social relation. Workerism was, therefore, a political experience, which mattered historically, that is in a determinate historical situation.

It was a question of giving a new theoretical and practical form to the fundamental contradiction. The latter was identified from within the capital-relation, namely in the relations of production, that is in what we called ‘the scientific concept of the factory’. Here, the (collective) worker, if he fought, if he organised his struggles, potentially held a kind of sovereignty over production. He was, or better, he could become a revolutionary subject.

The central figure was the worker on the shop-floor, the assembly-line worker, within the Fordist organisation of the productive process and within the Taylorist organisation of the labour-process. Here, the alienation of the worker reached its peak. Not only did the worker not love his work. He hated it. The refusal of work became a lethal weapon against capital. By making itself autonomous, labour-power, as an internal part of capital, variable capital as distinct from constant capital, evaded its function as productive labour, planting its threat in the heart of the capitalist relation of production.

The struggle against work sums up the meaning of the workerist heresy. Yes, workerism is a heresy of the workers’ movement. It should be rigorously conceived as internal to the great history of the workers’ movement, not outside, never outside. One of the many experiences, one of the many attempts, one of the many headlong rushes, one of the many generous revolts and one of the many glorious defeats.

Following the example of Marx, who studied the laws of movement of capitalist society, we went to study the laws of movement of workers’ labour. Workers’ struggles have always pushed forward capitalist development, forcing capital to innovation, technological leaps, social transformation. The working class is not the general class. That is how the parties of the Second and Third International wanted to represent it. Marx’s phrase was right: the proletariat, emancipating itself, will emancipate the whole of humanity. This process has already happened, limited to the West alone.

If emancipation is progress, modernisation, affluence, democracy, all of this is there, but in the service of a great conservative revolution, of a process of stabilisation of the capitalist system, which today, following its original vocation, takes on the dimensions of world-space; a world-order of domination that comes down from the heights of Empire, but also rises from below, incorporated by the bourgeois mentality of the majority.

Today, democratic political systems provide the tribune for free consent to voluntary servitude.

Workerism, the claim of the centrality of workers [*centralità operaia*] in the class-struggle, came up against the problem of the political.

In the middle, between workers and capital, I found politics: in the form of institutions, the state, in the form of organisations, the party, in the form of actions, tactics and strategy.

Modern capitalism would never have been born without modern politics. Hobbes and Locke come before Smith and Ricardo.

There would have been no primitive accumulation of capital without the centralisation of the state under absolute monarchies. The history of England teaches us this. The first English revolution, the ugly one of Cromwell's dictatorship, and then the beautiful, glorious one of the Bill of Rights, correspond to the two phases dictated by Machiavelli: the conquest of power and its administration are two different things. For the first, you need force; for the second, consensus. Free and competitive capitalism needed the liberal state, the capitalism of welfare needed the democratic state. Then, after the (provisional) solution of totalitarianism, fascist and Nazi, the synthesis of liberal democracy stabilised the domination of capitalist production.

And, now, we are in the phase in which the model is exported on a global scale. Not everything works according to capital's plans. Today, what is most interesting politically is the world. The 'great transformation', to use Polanyi's expression, concerns the shift of the global centre of gravity from West to East.

Internally, our European countries offer little of interest. It is difficult to feel a passion for politics with the likes of Blair or Prodi.

But capitalism is an order and today, as Marx predicted, a world-order, continually revolutionising itself. And this is the interesting point.

Look at the revolution it has brought to the world of work. To respond to the threat posed by the centrality of workers, it decided to destroy the centrality of industry and it abandoned, or revolutionised, the industrial society which had been the reason and the instrument for its birth and its development.

When the assembly-island replaces the assembly-line in the great automated factory and we enter the post-Fordist phase, all other work changes with it, in the classical passage from the factory to society.

This is the question of the day: Does the working class still exist? The working class as the central subject of the critique of capitalism. Not a sociological object but a political subject. And the transformations of work, and of the figure of the worker, from industry to service, from employment [*lavoro dipendente*] to self-employment [*lavoro autonomo*], from security to

precarity, from the refusal of work to the lack of it, what does all this mean politically? It is this that we need to discuss.

Workerism was the contrary of spontaneism. And the opposite of reformism. Closer, then, to the initial communist movement than to the classical or contemporary social democracies. Creatively, it renewed the link between Marx and Lenin.

I ask myself if, in the changed conditions of contemporary work – fragmentation, dispersion, individualisation, precarisation – and of the figures assumed by the worker we can once again, here and now, articulate the analysis of capitalism with the organisation of alternative forces. And I do not have an answer.

What I do know with certainty is that, without organisation, there will be no real, serious struggle, capable of victories. There is no social conflict capable of defeating the class-adversary without a political force.

This is what we have learned from the past.

If the new movements do not pick up the legacy of the great history of the workers' movement, to take it forward in new forms, they have no future.

Look. Capitalists are afraid of the history of workers, not of the politics of the Left. The first they cast down among the demons of hell, the second they welcomed into the halls of government.

And we need to make the capitalists afraid. It is time that another spectre start to haunt not just Europe, but the world. The resurrected spirit of communism.