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THE WORKER'S KATECHON: MARIO TRONTI'S THEORETICAL CHALLENGE IN THE LABORATORY OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY*

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EL KATECHON DEL TRABAJADOR: EL DESAFÍO TEÓRICO DE MARIO TRONTI EN EL LABORATORIO DEL SIGLO XX

Abstract

This article examines the primary sequences of Mario Tronti's reflections over approximately sixty years. Following a singular suggestion from Tronti himself, it argues that within the story of Italian workerism (and in that of post-workerisms), two different perspectives can be recognized: an eschatological perspective, with Antonio Negri as its main exponent, and a 'katechontic' perspective, which Tronti himself would embody. Although this distinction is recent, this article shows how traces of the katechontic perspective can already be found in Tronti's early works, which began to study capitalist development in the wake of the 1956 crisis. The subsequent theoretical turns — represented by the 'autonomy of the political' and the arrival at 'political theology' — should therefore be interpreted as consistent developments of a reflection that, even in historically diverse contexts, always proceeds from the same vision of the relationship between the factory and society and from the same image of capitalist *Verfassung*.

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Keywords

Mario Tronti; Italian workerism; Italian Theory; the political; political theology

Resumen

Este artículo examina las secuencias primarias de reflexión llevadas a cabo por Mario Tronti durante aproximadamente sesenta años. En particular, tomando una sugerencia del propio Tronti, argumenta que dentro de la historia del obrerismo italiano (y en la de los post-obrerismos), se pueden reconocer dos perspectivas diferentes: una perspectiva escatológica, con Antonio Negri como su principal exponente, y una perspectiva “catecónica”, que Tronti mismo encarnaría. Aunque esta distinción es reciente, este artículo muestra cómo ya se pueden encontrar rastros de la perspectiva “catecónica” en la forma en que el joven Tronti, a raíz de la crisis de 1956, comenzó a analizar el desarrollo capitalista. Los giros teóricos posteriores, representados por la “autonomía de lo político” y la llegada a la “teología política”, deberían interpretarse como desarrollos coherentes de una reflexión que, incluso en contextos históricamente diversos, siempre parte de la misma visión de la relación entre la fábrica y la sociedad y de la misma imagen de la *Vermassung* capitalista.

Palabras clave

Mario Tronti; obrerismo italiano; teoría italiana; lo político; teología política

A Conservative Revolutionary

Over the past half-century, the reflections of Mario Tronti —deceased at the age of ninety-two on August 7, 2023— has been the subject of very different reinterpretations, often marked by strong polemical connotations, in which the weight of *Workers and Capital* almost always ends up being theoretically and politically overwhelming¹. For decades, those who reproach Tronti for the role of the ‘father of Italian workerism’ have considered his entire reflection to be marked by this indelible stigma and the consequences that resulted from it, while those who stand as custodians of the purity of the paradigm cannot forgive the theoretical ‘betrayal’ by the ‘founder’ of that radical interpretation of Marxism. Since the Sixties, some readers of *Workers and Capital*, developing an interpretation to some extent suggested by Raniero Panzieri himself, have also identified in Tronti’s pages the presence of a Hegelian matrix (Panzieri, 1973; Bigalli, 1967; Cazzaniga, 1967). In the following decades, other readers instead emphasized the weight exerted by Galvano Della Volpe’s method, the Leninist tradition, the robust connection with the Communist Party and its Togliattian imprint, the ambiguous relationship with Carl Schmitt’s thought, and the philosophies of Giovanni Gentile and Ugo Spirito (Mangano, 1978; Preve, 1984; Sbardella, 1980; Meriggi, 1978; Tomassini, 1976 and 1977). Almost twenty years ago, in his scathing pamphlet on ‘Italian Difference’, Antonio Negri indicated in Mario Tronti’s reflection one of the few exceptions capable of escaping the recurrent theoretical and political fragility of Italian philosophy. ‘The first exception that the Italian XX century has known, the first philosophical and political force that has managed to lay hands on reality and grasp the resurgent and anticapitalist powers of the beginnings’, wrote Negri, ‘this exception was workerism, the work of Mario Tronti’, and together with the thought of sexual difference outlined by Luisa Muraro, Tronti’s proposal thus constituted one of the few “elements of theoretical innovation in the Italian ontology of the XX century” (Negri, 2005, p. 13). According to Negri, Tronti’s and Muraro’s proposals both moved ‘from the consideration of the fundamental forms of the constitution of exploitation, of man over man and of man over woman’, and furthermore, they were born, in the Sixties and Seventies, from “new subjectivities formed in the worker’s struggle against wage labour and in the female uprising against patriarchal domination” (Negri, 2005, pp. 13–14). Even according to the interpretation advanced by Roberto Esposito, Tronti’s reflection represented a crucial stage of Italian Theory, presenting a

¹ Regarding Mario Tronti’s radical theory, see for example: Anastasi (2020), Cavalleri (2016), Cavalleri, Filippini & Mascari (2017), Cerutti & Dettori (2021), Cortés (2018), Farris (2011; 2013), Filippini (2011), Filippini-Macchia (2012), Mezzadra (2008), Milanese (2014), Palano (2009; 2015b; 2020a; 2020b; 2023), Serra (2016).

specific way of looking at reality identified by the interweaving of the three paradigms of the “immanentization of antagonism”, the “historicization of the non-historical”, and the “worlding of the subject” (Esposito, 2010, pp. 25–30). Despite the controversy surrounding such interpretations, Pier Paolo Portinaro also identified the “original nucleus” of Italian Theory “in Italian workerism” (Portinaro, 2018, p. 12), attributing to Tronti the responsibility of a “cold fusion” between authors like Marx and Schmitt, aimed at generating “a hyperrealistic polemological paradigm” (Portinaro, 2018, p. 113).

The discussion on the originality and internal coherence of Italian Theory is likely to continue in the coming years (Gentili, 2012; Gentili-Stimilli, 2015; Toscano & Chiesa, 2009). Nonetheless, it is hardly contestable in Negri’s thesis that precisely in the pages of *Workers and Capital* lies an authentic rupture in the history of Italian radical thought. There can be no doubt that Tronti constitutes the authentic foundational pillar of the entire workerist theoretical strand, not only for the role he played within experiences such as *Quaderni rossi* and *Classe operaia*, but primarily because in the essays of *Workers and Capital*—perhaps the most important work stemming from the heterogeneous panorama of Italian Marxism— all the elements of the ‘Copernican revolution’ carried out by workerism can be found, as well as a significant portion of the subsequent post-workerist or neo-workerist hypotheses (Borio et al., 2002; 2005; Filippini, 2011; Gentili, 2012; Roggero, 2019; Trotta & Milana, 2006; Virno & Hardt, 1996; Wright, 2002).

Over the years, Tronti’s judgements about the workerist experiment have become almost proverbial. “Within the sixties, we were all happily mistaken,” he wrote in ‘Politics at Sunset’, right at the turn of the twentieth century: “To us, to many, it seemed [...] that an era was opening up. [...] The red on the horizon was there: it’s just that it wasn’t the glow of dawn, but of dusk” (Tronti, 1998, p. 22). Such judgements only reinforce the impression that Tronti’s journey is marked by some distinct ruptures: more specifically, the impression is that, initially, at the beginning of the Seventies, the workerist approach was abandoned, and after the crucial turning point of 1989–1991, the hypothesis of the ‘autonomy of the political’ was definitively set aside, leading Tronti decisively towards the direction that leads to political theology (through more than a few episodic forays into the terrain of spirituality). Such impressions have some basis, particularly because the milestones found in Tronti’s thought are indeed these. And it is very difficult to deny that there is a substantial change in the way of looking at society and the transformations of capitalism. Nevertheless, it might also be possible to find in Mario Tronti’s theoretical reflection often overlooked elements. In particular, it is possible to trace elements that suggest questioning the internal coherence of Italian workerism and to find,

already in the same foundational phase of the Sixties, traces of the divergence destined to emerge later.

In a conference held in June 2015, Mario Tronti evoked some notes by Musil, in which the author of *The Man Without Qualities* spoke of progress as something very much like a dream. “You dream of riding a horse, the horse walks, because the beast never stops. And so the dream becomes a nightmare. Progress makes sense only if it has an end. If it has no end and, I add, if you don’t give it an end, it becomes meaningless. To go where? To do what? The old question demands a new answer” (Tronti, 2015a). Contesting the image of that endless progress destined to turn into a nightmare, Tronti claimed for himself the formula of a ‘conservative revolutionary’: a formula that was certainly a provocation to reject the qualification of a ‘democratic reformist’ but was also a true programmatic statement, capable of summarizing an attitude towards the world and, above all, the logic of his theoretical journey. When he defined himself as a ‘conservative revolutionary’, Tronti intended to emphasize his criticism of the entire tradition of the workers’ movement. In the pages of *Dello spirito libero*, for example, he wrote about the October Revolution that it “was not an eschatological event” and that it “did not prepare a recipe for the future kitchen”; rather, it was “an attempt, desperate and successful, to hold back an intrusive ugly present, stop the war, find a remedy for the peasants’ hunger, an answer to the exploited workers’ fatigue” (Tronti, 2015b, p. 21). Its defeat was thus due to succumbing to the logic of modernization, and the main mistake that Tronti attributed to Marx and the entire movement was therefore that of cultivating the illusion of being able to pursue capital on the grounds of modernization.

The criticism that the ‘conservative revolutionary’ directed at the workers’ movement and Marxism was also a self-criticism that retrospectively involved the season of Italian workerism, of which Tronti —due to his role in *Quaderni rossi* and in *Classe operaia*, as well as for *Operai e capitale*— remains the father and one of its main exponents. “The limit of workerism”, we read again in *Dello spirito libero*, “was being excessively Marxian” and that “having to always be absolutely modern in that radically antagonistic training school, in the end, proved to be a subordinate act” (Tronti, 2015b, pp. 26–27). Moreover, it was a self-criticism that Tronti had already outlined long before. In *Noi operaisti*, he suggested recognizing, within the body of workerism in the Sixties, a sort of genetic ambivalence, defined by the simultaneous presence of an ‘eschatological’ tension and a ‘katechontic’ vocation. “Workerism, as it was expressed in the first half of the Sixties, had an eschatological sign: it certainly

did not aim to conclude the salvation story at its best, but, more modestly, aimed to give political direction to workers struggles” (Tronti, 2009, p. 63). Nevertheless, its political merit, in retrospective terms, appeared quite different: in fact, “its function of active opposition stands out more, consisting in restraining, delaying the humanitarian-philanthropic drift of the very figure of the factory worker, now the last bastion to be conquered by bourgeois universalism” (Tronti, 2009, p. 63). In contrast to Negri’s ‘eschatological paradigm’, Tronti thus evoked a ‘katechontic paradigm’, which conceives history in terms far removed from those of determinism and the industrialist fascination of a good part of the socialist tradition (and of Marxism). “I think we can no longer say or believe that there is a linear idea of history, therefore, in any case, we must move forward in development because it will entail new contradictions, [...] we must hold back, not let the river of history flow [...], we must slow down the acceleration of modernity”, because “this slower time allows us to recompose our forces” (Tronti, 2009, p. 111).

Naturally, the idea of the distinction between an eschatological paradigm and a katechontic paradigm is the fruit of Tronti’s more recent reflection, and it would be naive to make casual use of it to reinterpret the history of workerism. However, a faint trace of that divergence was perhaps already present in the Sixties, although it emerged later, increasingly distancing paths that began from the same origins. The Roman thinker’s conclusions —precisely those conclusions that led Tronti to define himself, in his later years, as a ‘conservative revolutionary’— were not merely the theoretical consequence of the political defeat suffered in the Eighties by the workers’ movement. The thesis of the ‘decline of politics’ indeed had deep roots, probably rooted in the same assumptions of Tronti’s theory, and referred to the foundation of *Workers and Capital* and, above all, to the relationship between factory and society that the young Tronti had placed at the base of his vision of capitalism.

The following pages aim to retrace the main sequences of Mario Tronti’s reflection over about sixty years, focusing on those elements that can be interpreted as traces or anticipations of the katechontic paradigm. In addition to recalling Tronti’s figure after his passing, this article seeks in particular to show how the traces of the ‘katechontic’ perspective were already present in the way the young Tronti began to look at capitalist development in the aftermath of the 1956 crisis, as well as the relationship between factory and society and the autonomy of the ‘worker’s point of view’. The subsequent theoretical shifts —represented by the ‘autonomy of the political’ and the arrival at ‘political theology’— should therefore be interpreted not so much as retractions but as coherent developments of a reflection that, despite historically different contexts, always emerges

from the same vision of the relationship between factory and society and the same image of capitalist *Verfassung*. And the search for a political transcendence becomes the indispensable step in giving the worker's katechon the ability to resist the overwhelming march of capitalist *Zivilisation*.

The Point of View

In Mario Tronti's final theoretical phase, the melancholic surrender to the reasons for the economy echoed, albeit with a changed sign, the celebrations of the victory of the global market over politics. According to Tronti, the end of class struggle and the workers' movement meant that politics —the 'grand politics'— had been irreversibly set, leaving the logic of the economy as the sole mistress of the field. Moreover, according to his interpretation, it was not capitalism that defeated the workers' movement: "The workers' movement", he wrote, "was defeated by democracy" (Tronti, 1998, p. 195). For Tronti, the workers' movement had been the synonym of the struggle against the destiny of the economy, a fight precisely against the advent of the 'democratic mass man' (Tronti, 1998, pp. 142–134), while the end of the twentieth century had sealed the irredeemable defeat of that struggle. In *Politica e Destino*, echoing *Also sprach Zarathustra*, he further wrote that the 'people' were dead, and this was precisely the '*novum sub sole*': "The people, individuals, citizens, the multitudes, are what remains after the victorious global processes of neutralization and depoliticization" (Tronti, 2006, pp. 19–20). Thus, the 'democratic mass man' emerged increasingly as the 'last man' of whom Nietzsche had written. "After the sunset of the glorious days of class struggle", Tronti affirmed, "neither the great bourgeois —à la Rathenau that we liked so much when we were young— nor the petty bourgeois we always hated, won. It's the average bourgeois: this is the figure of democracy" (Tronti, 2005, p. 22). In other words, in Tronti's view, the 'mass man' and democracy converge in the fatal embrace of depoliticization: "Democracy is this: it's not the tyranny of the majority, it's the tyranny of the average man. And this average man fits into the Nietzschean category of the last men" (Tronti, 2005, p. 22).

In many of Tronti's writings published in the twenty-first century, the figure of the 'mass man' indeed became the distinctive mark of the era of 'depoliticization'. Such pessimism was naturally the result of the political defeat suffered in the 1980s, but perhaps it was also the outcome of a perspective that could be recognized as far back as the distant pages of young Tronti's work. On closer examination, when Tronti, in his later writings, found the dominant trait of the present in the hegemony of the democratic man, in the victory of the 'last man', in the centrality of the

‘democratic mass man’, he placed at the heart of the discourse an aspect that was anything but residual, an aspect that was perhaps even foundational in the writings of the 1960s and 1970s. While it might be somewhat forced to read the aversion of the twenty-first-century Tronti to the ‘democratic mass man’ in terms of faithful continuity with the young Tronti, it is highly probable that continuity exists, at least in terms of underlying assumptions (not always explicitly stated) that guided the ‘Copernican revolution’ of the 1960s. From the moment Tronti outlined the project to redefine the Marxist perspective by breaking away from the Italian historicist tradition, his attempt was to use *Capital* to criticize neo-capitalism and its myths, as well as to transform Marxism into “a populist ideology, an arsenal of banal commonplaces to justify all possible compromises in the course of the class struggle” (Tronti, 1966, p. 34). To some extent, it could be argued that Tronti not only found distorted the representations spread in American sociology at the time and among enthusiasts of the Frankfurt School, who began shaping the image of a society of passive consumers subdued by the seduction of mass media and the spectacle of commodities. Rather, Tronti —while recognizing the formidable grip of consumer society— sought to stem the *Vermassung* not at the level of ideology but, following Marx, within the laboratory of production. And following the path indicated by *Capital*, he found himself intersecting with those young militants who, gathered in Turin around Raniero Panzieri, were discovering the first traces of what would later be defined as the ‘mass worker’, namely a layer of workers far from passive or integrated within the ‘one-dimensional society’ (Palano, 2009; 2015b; 2020a; 2020b).

The beginning of Mario Tronti’s theoretical research largely coincided with the shock of 1956. As Tronti himself acknowledged on several occasions, that year represented a crucial turning point, a fundamental ‘strategic transition’ that contributed to determining a veritable ‘epistemological rupture’ (Tronti, 1998, p. 18). Indeed, for the young Roman militant, 1956 was the starting point of a profound disillusionment with the reality of realized socialism that, in a short span of a few months, led to a critical re-examination, often demolishing, of all those pillars on which the political culture of the Italian Communist Party had been founded: “The passage of ‘56”, as Asor Rosa recalled, “meant the breaking of the materialistic historical-socialism realized paradigm, and thus the idea that it was necessary to seek a different path than that of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy” (Trotta & Milana, 2006, p. 660). And, as Tronti himself wrote more than half a century later, it was the transition “from a party truth to a class truth” (2009, p. 18).

Almost coinciding with the crisis of 1956, in which he was prominently involved as the secretary of the Roman university cell, Tronti graduated in philosophy under

Ugo Spirito, discussing a thesis dedicated to Marx's early writings. The choice of the topic evidently revealed the desire for a 'return to Marx', in more or less explicit disagreement with the canonization of Marxism provided by Stalinism (Asor Rosa, 2011, p. X). However, alongside the return to engaging with Marxist texts, the intellectual encounter with Galvano Della Volpe was also decisive— probably facilitated by Lucio Colletti (who, as Spirito's assistant, had followed the writing of Tronti's thesis). Indeed, this encounter with Della Volpe —coinciding fatally with the shock of '56— directed the small group of communist university students, including Tronti, Asor Rosa, Umberto Coldagelli, and Gaspare De Caro, towards a clear break not only with the 'orthodoxy' canonized by Stalinism but also with the historicist tradition of Italian Marxism.

In the structure of his thesis —titled *Marxism as a Science of Society* and defended in November 1956— Della Volpe's influence was evident, even though the approach already showed the intention to use Marx's method for an investigation of capitalism (Tronti, 1956–1957, pp. 1–2). The echo of Galvano Della Volpe's Marxism, mediated by Colletti, was apparent not only in the thesis but also in Tronti's first two theoretical essays, published at the end of the 1950s, mainly dedicated to Gramsci's Marxism (Tronti, 1958 and 1959). In both of these works, a severe critique of the Italian historicist tradition was already quite clear, which had unfolded in Italy along a fundamentally linear path from Labriola to Gramsci, passing through Croce. Tronti's first essay, *Alcune questioni intorno al Marxismo di Gramsci* [*Some Questions about Gramsci's Marxism*], was an intervention at the Gramscian Studies Conference held in Rome in January 1958, attended by Togliatti himself with a report aimed at specifying the contours of the interpretation of Leninism in the Sardinian thinker and politician. Cautionary but quite evident, the 'tendentious interpretation' proposed by Tronti was markedly critical of Gramscian reflection. "The interpretation that Gramsci gives to Marxism in general", he wrote right at the beginning, "is integral philosophy and absolute historicism" (Tronti, 1958, p. 305). In this sense, there was no substantial divergence between the youth's positions of the 'Revolution against Capital' or 'New Order' and the later ones in the *Prison Notebooks*. The need to re-evaluate the 'creative' element within the historical–social relationship, which marked Gramsci's thinking, indeed reflected the need to abandon and deeply criticize any positivist and evolutionist temptation (together with their gradualist and reformist political implications). However, at the same time, according to Gramsci —based on Tronti's interpretation— it became crucial to overturn especially what Croce had done when he 'translated' the realist historicism of Marxism into speculative language (Tronti, 1958, p. 308). "The idea of an Anti-Croce", Tronti wrote then, "is not an occasional, contingent task dictated by

particular cultural, national developments, but represents the current global moment of Marxism; it's the historical task of Marxism of our time" (Tronti, 1958, p. 308). But the 're-translation' of Croce's philosophy into the 'philosophy of praxis' —the task that the author of the Notebooks constantly set for himself during his journey— ended up becoming the very 'limit of Gramsci's thought' (Tronti, 1958, p. 309).

The work conducted by the young Tronti in the concluding years of the 1950s still largely fits within the framework of the narrow circle of Della Volpe. However, there soon began a detachment from that school, requiring a reorientation of research towards different themes (Pavone, 1980). Moreover, at this stage, Tronti had resumed direct study of Marx's texts, which would later merge into the essays of the 1960s and *Workers and Capital*. Nonetheless, an article appeared on *Società* at the end of 1961 dedicated to recent studies on the logic of *Capital*, which was extremely important not only because it visibly testified to Tronti's changing interests but also because it showed a clear departure from Della Volpe's positions. In relation to the need to analyse capitalist transformations, Tronti diverged from Della Volpe's school in the sense that such approach appeared to him 'no longer sufficient', and its limits would be overcome only when the method was redirected towards 'concrete investigation' again: "when the materialist logic of *Capital* becomes, once again, the tool for a Marxist analysis of capitalism" (Tronti, 1961, p. 901). The 'workers' science' evoked by Tronti was not just a reflection of theoretical criticism but had already sprung from the viewpoint of the working class. In other words, it was scientific knowledge exercised from a specific standpoint. And precisely in this manner, by a move that effectively broke with the logic of Della Volpe, Tronti foreshadowed the idea of the theoretical centrality of the 'workers' point of view', explicit in the essays of *Quaderni rossi* and at the heart of the 'Copernican revolution' of *Workers and Capital*.

The consequences of this theoretical shift, and therefore the full break from Della Volpism, would only emerge in the essays of *Quaderni rossi*. But it is quite evident that the pivot upon which *Factory and Society* would stand was already fully announced by the operation suggested at the end of the article on the logic of *Capital*. Tronti's key argument revolved around the distinction between 'social production' and 'society', the same distinction that would become the dichotomy of 'factory' and 'society', upon which Tronti roughly anchored his hypothesis. In a truly crucial passage to understand the development of his reflection, after defining capitalism as 'the first social organization of production' and specifying that 'this sociality of production serves to sustain the entire society in function of production', he wrote:

The 'society' is the medium that allows production to subsist for production's sake.
Society is the sociality of capitalist production. Capitalism is truly bourgeois society:

in the sense that it is forced to position itself, at the same time, as an organizer of capitalist social production and as a system of bourgeois private property. From the societal perspective, one can view capitalism as a second nature, an artificial nature, a historical premise of a future social nature. (Tronti, 1961, p. 902)

It was probably not coincidental that, when introducing Marx's unpublished writings on political economy (roughly during the same period in which he was preparing essays for *Quaderni rossi*), Tronti wrote that "the civilization of the liberal individual is precisely the historical premise of mass democratic civilization", or that "the hypothesis of the abstract individual could only be overturned into the cult of the empirical undifferentiated mass" (Tronti, 1963, p. XXXIV). In that passage, where he had already outlined the new reading of Marx articulated in *Workers and Capital*, Tronti reaffirmed the validity of *Capital* as the key to critiquing neocapitalist society because, after a century, the 'nature of capitalism' had remained unchanged. In this context, the 'alienation' brought back into debate by sociological research was not a novelty but simply the extension into the realm of intellectual production of the mechanism that "the modern worker [...] has experienced in his material production ever since capital and alongside capital, the capitalist class, exist" (Tronti, 1963, p. XXXIV). But perhaps the crucial point lay precisely in the substantial homogeneity perceived from then on between 'the civilization of the liberal individual' and the 'mass democratic civilization', and thus between the celebrated 'abstract individual' of eighteenth-century liberalism and the subsequent 'cult of the empirical undifferentiated mass'. In other words, already for the young Tronti of the Sixties, 'mass democratic civilization' coincided in many ways with the realm of the 'undifferentiated empirical mass', just as, in Tronti's late maturity works, the victory of 'political democracy' coincided with the historical victory of the democratic mass man. The difference between the young Tronti and the Tronti of the twenty-first century should not be sought in this respect because, for Tronti, the 'bourgeois society', in which individuals move as consumers, had coincided since the Sixties with the sphere dominated by the 'undifferentiated empirical mass'. The distance between the Tronti of *Workers and Capital* and the author of *Dello Spirito Libero* should instead be sought in the type of force entrusted with the task of 'restraining' the impetuous advance of the 'mass democratic civilization'.

Class and Mass

The 'braking power' that the young Tronti had in mind was naturally the working class of the large factory. Even in this case, it can be useful to reread some famous passages from *Factory and Society*, Tronti's first essay published in *Quaderni rossi*,

perhaps finding in them the embryonic forms of both subsequent workerism and the post-workerism that continues until today. In that essay from *Quaderni rossi*, traces of the eschatological soul of workerism (and hence the premises of the main variants of post-workerism) as well as signs of the ‘katechontic’ perspective can indeed be found. “When the whole society is reduced to the factory, the factory, as such, seems to disappear”, wrote Tronti (1962/2019, pp. 27-28). Despite the tertiarization, despite the apparent disappearance of the factory, it was indispensable for Tronti to re-oppose those two dimensions. Following this path, Tronti would continue to represent the relationship between factory and society as fundamentally contradictory; the factory, therefore, came to identify the moment of productive cooperation within the work process, while society coincided with the site of commodity exchange, where the valorisation process could close its cycle every time. ‘Seeing’ the factory in society, therefore, equated to recognizing—even in neo-capitalism, even in a society where the ‘empirical undifferentiated mass’ apparently triumphed—the working class as a conflicting subject capable of breaking the apparently unbreakable nexus of production–reproduction–exchange–consumption. The factory vs. society couple revealed the two faces of capitalist production: on the one hand, the work process, and on the other, the valorisation process. These were two moments that, from the ‘worker’s point of view’, needed to be opposed to each other because only within the factory could the working class gain the strength that was otherwise destined to be lost in society in the sphere of exchange and consumption. Only within the work process could cooperation make possible the aggregation of workers’ antagonism and the use of wages as a battleground. Conversely, in the valorisation process—or, better said, outside the factory, in society, in the sphere of commodity exchange and consumption—workers had to return to being simple individuals, isolated atoms, defenceless consumers entirely devoid of instruments of struggle. Precisely to the extent that society coincided only with the site of market mediation, it was (politically) essential to root the conflict within the factory, that is, as Tronti wrote with one of the famous phrases from his youthful texts, “to root the general struggle against the social system within the social relation of production; in other words, to pitch *bourgeois society* into crisis from within *capitalist production*” (Tronti, 1962/2019, p. 30).

In many ways, it was with the leverage of that formidable theoretical and political intuition that Tronti could find at the core of Marx’s operation the discovery of the *Doppelcharakter* of labour power in *Workers and Capital*. For Tronti, the ‘double character’ of labour power indeed became the key to unlocking the mystery of the transformation from labour power to the working class (or, if you will, from a ‘mass’ of individuals to

a 'class'). It was only the socialization and objectification of labour power that could allow the transition from passivity to conflict because only integration made it possible for the working class to simultaneously be 'part' of capital and to show its estrangement by refusing to be a passive factor of production. The intuition of taking the 'worker's point of view' as a strategic reading key led Tronti to propose that theoretical inversion characterizing the 'Copernican revolution' of *Workers and Capital*. At the heart of this operation was, of course, a conscious 'forcing' of Marx's texts, largely playing out in the opposition between factory and society, hiding implications that would weigh heavily on the theoretical outcomes of workerism. By placing the valorisation process and the work process not only as distinct but as contradictory from the 'worker's point of view', Tronti somehow had to assume that even the process of extending the factory to society could never come to a conclusion. Since the factory and society essentially coincided with two different modes of social synthesis —the first based on productive cooperation within the factory and the second based on market exchange— a solution to the conflict could only be imagined by following the suppression of one of the two poles, namely, after the senescence of the production mode based on exchange or through the complete dissolution of the factory into society. But these were hypotheses that Tronti did not consider; indeed, he explicitly dismissed them in relation to the socialization of the factory. So much so that in a famous passage of *Workers and Capital*, he wrote that although the process of socialization tended to lead the production relationship to coincide with the social relationship, there would never be "a gap between capital as a *production relation* and capital as a *capitalist society*" (Tronti, 2019, p. 207). In other words, even if integration was completed, a substantial contradiction would always remain between the two moments. "Even if factory and society were to become perfectly integrated at the economic level, at a political level they would, nonetheless, forever continue to be in contradiction", he wrote, and based on this schema, he predicted that "one of the highest and most mature points of the class struggle" would consist of the "frontal clash between the factory as working class and *society as capital*" (Tronti, 2019, p. 241).

The idea of opposition between factory and society —in many ways a truly crucial intuition for workerism— paradoxically began to reveal problematic dimensions when the opposition seemed to take shape explicitly in the workers' struggles of the late Sixties. This was when wages became a clear instrument of struggle 'within' capitalist development. However, it was precisely the intensity reached with the 'Hot Autumn' of '69 that led Tronti to question not only the dichotomy of factory and society, but how their conflict had been represented. Until then, Tronti had not considered the hypothesis that class conflict within the factory could reach heights capable of challenging the

functioning of capitalist society. In other words, until then, Tronti seemed to assume as a premise of his discourse that society —the institutional mechanisms external to the factory but also the dynamics of consumer society— would continue to operate according to its own logic, even if the working class had gained immense power within the production sites. Class conflict was therefore understood as the ‘engine’ of capitalist development, but conflict and development were always seen as poles of an irresolvable conflicting relationship (just as the conflict between factory and society was irresolvable and perhaps even that between class and mass). However, it was the level of the demands in the factory —at the same time as the eruption of radical conflicts ‘beyond’ the factory gates in society— that put this scheme into crisis. The different outcomes of workerism continued largely within the coordinates identified by Tronti in the Sixties, although with different modifications proposed.

One solution to the puzzle posed by the relationship between factory and society consisted of the elimination of one of the two poles, namely, the elimination of society. Since the opposition between factory and society had been presented by Tronti as a contrast that contained the workers’ struggle only within the confines of the factory, a solution could come —to put it bluntly— from the ‘suppression’ of society, namely, from the logical suppression of social synthesis based on market exchange and therefore from the complete ‘socialization’ of the factory. In this way, once the highest level of integration was achieved, the factory and society could finally cease to oppose each other; the factory would have extended to the entire society, and thus there would be no more distinction between the two. A consequence of this solution was the recognition that the working class tended to coincide fully with the entire labour front (wage-earning and non-wage-earning) and that therefore all labour tended to become ‘productive’. It was along this path that Negri, beginning in the early Seventies, began to move, picking up the suggestions from the famous *Fragment on Machines*, already appearing in the fourth issue of *Quaderni rossi*. From a certain point of view —although the discussion is obviously more complex— the introduction of a series of passages can be considered consequences of the need to logically ‘dissolve’ society: the idea of the ‘end of civil society’, the idea of the exhaustion of the law of value, the conviction that life transforms entirely into labour (Palano, 2008; 2013; 2015a; 2020a).

Certainly, this was not the only possible option. Another path was to reconsider the schema centred on the two poles of the factory and society, to add a perspective capable of understanding how the dimensions external to the factory were not always reducible only to the dimension of commodity exchange. In other words, it was about widening

the perspective, recognizing how the domains of social reproduction external to the work process could become sites of conflict, insofar as within them, the reproduction of labour power in the form of a commodity was at stake, even though it was not wage labour (and therefore, the conflict was not about wages). In other words, this solution did not imply resorting to the idea of the full extension of the factory at the societal level but rather suggested an analysis capable of discovering the dynamics with which, outside of production in the strict sense (but in an area that was not that of commodity exchange), the 'premises' of the capitalist mode of production were being produced: a workforce available to sell itself in the market. This was the main innovation because, even in this domain, often 'microscopic' conflicts could mature, capable of influencing the definition of socially necessary labour. In many ways, it was precisely in this direction that both the historiographical work of *Primo maggio* and Sergio Bologna and the 'feminist' reading of workerism developed, for example, by Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Silvia Federici, and Leopoldina Fortunati in the Seventies, albeit with contradictions with the hypothesis of the 'socialization' of the factory, Negri himself, with his theory of 'self-valorization', would move along this direction (Palano, 2008; 2013; 2020a).

The adoption of these two solutions —which in simplified terms proceeded to both recognize the transformation of the entire society into a factory and to rediscover the capital-labour conflict also in society (thus outside the strict wage relationship but also outside the work process)— can be considered a crucial turning point in the history of workerism. Indeed, it is around this passage, roughly at the beginning of the Seventies, that one might place the rift between workerism proper and post-workerism, whose events whose events extend until today. Tronti did not adopt either of these two solutions. Even though in some passages of *Factory and Society* in 1962 he had prefigured the idea of a complete extension of the factory to society, he subsequently abandoned this option, even explicitly. In the *Postscript of Problems* published in 1971 as an appendix to the second edition of *Workers and Capital*, he unequivocally excluded the idea of relinquishing the political centrality of factory workers and an 'objective' definition of the working class. "The problem is how to find new definitions of the 'working class' without abandoning the domain of objective analysis and without falling back in ideological traps", he wrote then (Tronti, 1971/2019, p. 325). Precisely for this reason, to him, "to broaden the sociological boundaries of the working class in order to embrace all those struggling against capitalism from within, such as to reach the quantitative majority of the social workforce or even of the active population" was a serious theoretical error, as well as "a serious concession to democratic traditions" (Tronti, 1971/2019, p. 310). Tronti would therefore seek another key to

solving the ‘enigma’. In many ways, he would continue to retain the idea of structural opposition between factory and society. However, alongside —or, better said, between these two dimensions— he would begin to glimpse a terrain at least relatively (and potentially) ‘autonomous’: the terrain of the ‘political’. That conviction would then lead Tronti to turn towards a new dimension and to articulate the project of ‘critique of politics’ and ‘political democracy’.

The Autonomy of the Political

In *Quaderni rossi* and *Classe operaia*, as well as in *Workers and Capital*, the dimension of political institutions and the role of the State were not entirely absent, especially because, even in that period, the ‘political programming’ of economic development was considered one of the components of ‘neo-capitalism’. Nevertheless, the discourse was focused on factory struggle, viewing a substantial equivalence between wage conflict and anti-capitalist struggle, while almost no attention was given to the mediation occurring in the realm of ‘civil society’ by the organizations of the workers’ movement. It was clearly a simplification, the consequences of which would be felt later. To thrust “hegemony under the presses of Mirafiori” —in Sergio Bologna’s famous wording (1974, pp. 3–8)— was, however, an indispensable prerequisite for reinterpreting Marx’s works in a ‘subjectivist’ way, as well as a necessary provocation against the Gramscian view canonized by the theorists of the PCI.

As elsewhere, the Sixties marked a clear turning point on this front. After the student protests, the ‘Hot Autumn’ and the ‘strategy of tension’, the State returned as an unavoidable object of theoretical reflection. After 1969, for the heirs of *Quaderni rossi* and *Classe operaia* who chose the ‘movementist’ solution, the ‘discovery’ of the State took on the dark colour of repression and direct confrontation, occasionally even the face of the paradoxical revival of the analytical instrumentation of Marxist–Leninist orthodoxy (Berardi, 1998). For Tronti and those who decided to re-enter the institutions of the workers’ movement, it became essential to start grappling with political logic and institutional dynamics. The starting point for this season can be found in *The New Synthesis: Within and Against*, a lecture given by Tronti in 1967, soon after the dissolution of *Classe operaia*. In that lecture, the objective was explicitly stated: to use —from within— the party institution as a means of asserting working-class interests (Tronti, 1967). Subsequently, in the pages of *Contropiano*, a much stronger interest in the action of the State emerged, within a logic aimed at consistently exploring the hypotheses about the ‘State-plan’ and its action formulated in the Sixties. However, the political level —throughout this period— remained

predominantly determined by the party, understood as an organization and as a political mediation ring for class composition (Cacciari, 1972; 1978; Tronti, 1970). It was mainly between 1972 and 1980 that the more articulated hypotheses were outlined and, concerning Tronti's path, the hypothesis of the 'autonomy of the political' began to be outlined and investigated (Tronti, 1977; 1980a; 1980b; 2023; Palano, 2023).

In the Seventies, that hypothesis became the subject of a fiery theoretical-political discussion, not immune to polemical distortions. In particular, the intellectuals close to the extra-parliamentary left sought to show the close relationship between Tronti's idea of the 'autonomy of the political' and Berlinguer's strategy of the 'historic compromise'. Despite some acute observations amidst that debate, many polemical passages hindered an understanding of why Tronti turned to the 'political' and, most importantly, what 'political' corresponded to. In many ways, Tronti's new research phase, stemming from the need to find a different solution to the puzzle of the relationship between factory and society, was evident. Since the framework inherited from the Sixties was marked by the (ultimately irresolvable) opposition between the factory and society, and since he had rejected the path of 'socializing' the factory, Tronti had to look for a potentially 'neutral' area, where the fate of the conflict could be decided. The attempt to define politics as 'autonomous' also arose from the need to address this opposition, as it was in the face of the conflict between two equal forces that emerged as a possible terrain for resolving the conflict. Perhaps it is only by considering this aspect that it is possible to understand, beyond the autonomy attributed to it, what the 'political' truly represented for Tronti at that time.

Starting from the Seventies —especially when Carl Schmitt's famous *Begriff des Politischen* was reintroduced into the debate— referring to the 'political' became familiar inside and outside of Italy, claiming the notion to be the often-elusive realm where the 'heart' of politics itself, if not its 'essence', could be found. Tronti engaged in a lengthy dialogue with Schmitt's reflections, reaching its culmination in the Eighties and Nineties. Despite such a close and emphasized relationship, it would be incorrect to interpret Tronti's 'political' of the Seventies in a Schmittian sense (Cortés, 2018; Palano, 2023). The explicit formulation of the first hypotheses on the 'autonomy of the political' dates back to the end of 1972, during a seminar held by Tronti at the University of Turin (Tronti, 1977). In the discourse of that seminar, the expression 'autonomy of the political' was adopted in a meaning quite different from Schmitt's. For Tronti, the 'political' did not simply coincide with the State, because it encompassed both 'the objective level of power institutions' and 'the political class, the subjective activity of doing politics', and therefore —to put it more clearly— it identified 'the state plus the political class'

overall (Tronti 1977, p. 10). Defined as such, Tronti's problem was to understand what relationships it had with capitalist development. His hypothesis, in this regard, was that in certain historical phases the field of political institutions did not faithfully reflect the changes occurring in the economic sphere. Therefore, transformations that characterized capitalist development sometimes seemed 'out of sync' with the 'political', which was forced to 'chase after'. The 'political's delay' was not due to insufficient economic development, but primarily to the peculiar nature of political institutions. The discovery of the 'political's delay' suggested to Tronti the need to reinterpret certain passages in the history of capitalism, recognizing, alongside the continuity of economic development, political ruptures, understood as breaks in the rigidity of institutional structures and the ruling class, as 'political discontinuity' and 'political leaps' (Tronti 1977, p. 11). Above all, it also suggested the idea that, faced with a capital cycle, one should speak of a veritable 'political cycle of capital', a cycle linked to tradition, culture and the experience consolidated in the political ruling class and the rigidity of governmental institutional and administrative structures. The model from which Tronti's considerations took shape was naturally Roosevelt's New Deal, because during that period the autonomy of the political terrain had become clear, allowing the State to intervene in the economic sphere. But even Italy in the Seventies seemed to present similar conditions. Hence, Tronti then indicated the indispensable task of exploring the "laws of movement of the modern state" (Tronti, 1977, p. 16).

Even in 1980, Tronti revived the idea of the 'autonomy of the political', this time in an explicitly political context. In the face of the widespread social conflict, well beyond the factory, Tronti argued that it was essential for the party—obviously the PCI—to ensure an institutional relationship between the factory working class and the new social forces. He recognized that the centrality of the working class itself was in crisis and could no longer function in the same way as in the Sixties. However, this 'block' did not imply the decline of centrality but rather its shift to the political level. Through a chain of subsequent mediations, the working-class centrality could now only function 'politically'. "To produce government, the ideological mechanism of a dominion machine is no longer enough", he wrote. "What is needed is a reference to a real point of strength, to a real power capable of winning consensus, and this is no longer anywhere on the capitalist side, it is now only in the historical body of the working class"; thus, to overcome the 'bourgeois autonomy of politics', the "centrality of the factory worker shifts from social to political" (Tronti, 1980b, p. 82).

Just a few years later, Tronti's evaluations would change abruptly, and the new scenario would lead the 'thinking political' to close an entire season. In the early Nineties,

he did not hesitate to recognize in the just-passed decade, culminating in the dissolution of the USSR, the trajectory of a momentous historical passage. “The epochal data, the core of the need for a new synthesis, the element that links events and explains outcomes”, he wrote then, “is “ultimately” just one: it is called the decline of the working class”, the “conclusive episode of that decline of the West, which has precisely traversed the century and now concludes it by plunging, not with the surge of deliberate actions but with the decline of inevitable facts” (Tronti, 1992, p. X). Apart from marking the historical endpoint of the ‘autonomy of the political’, the Eighties also set a moment of strong discontinuity in Tronti’s research on the ‘political’. The hypotheses of the Seventies were born from a logical development —perhaps even a forced one— of the same premises that had generated the ‘Copernican revolution’. Above all, they represented an attempt to integrate new hypotheses into that schema centred on the dichotomy between factory and society elaborated in the Sixties and, in many ways, historically realized in the phase between the ‘Hot Autumn’ and the workers’ defeat at Mirafiori in October 1980. In the Seventies, the ‘political’ essentially appeared to Tronti as that articulated terrain —where the institutional level and political action, the State and the party, the apparatus and the political class were combined— that could potentially show itself to be ‘autonomous’ from capital and the logic of its development and could therefore be used ‘by the working class’. However, Tronti’s premise was that a sort of balance existed between the factory and society; that is, the working class could exert real power in the factory. Only a presumption like this —a reality that genuinely marked Italy in the Seventies— could make a working-class use of the autonomy of the political terrain credible or at least conceivable. Once the decline of this data and these real power relationships was recognized, the conditions that —in Tronti’s reasoning— could bring forth the autonomy of the political level in relation to capitalist development dissolved. This did not mean that Tronti truly accepted the thesis of those who welcomed (even enthusiastically) the advent of the ‘post-industrial’ society or the emergence of a complex society irreducible to any centrality. In fact, when Tronti acknowledged the ‘decline of the working class’ back then, he probably did not mean to assert that the working class had truly disappeared and that the conflict between capital and labour had ended. According to Tronti, the class struggle had not been exhausted at all. In his reasoning, the point was that the capital–labour conflict was no longer capable of triggering, in the dynamics of development, the same mechanisms that operated in the Sixties and Seventies. Put in the language of young Tronti, the ‘factory as the working class’ no longer seemed capable of opposing the ‘society as capital’, while in today’s terms, the class no longer seemed capable of functioning (either economically or politically) as an alterna-

tive, as a 'braking power' in the face of the eruption of the 'mass man', the triumph of the *homo democraticus*. This is precisely why the 'political' for Tronti could no longer be, or not only be, as it was in the Seventies, 'the state plus the political class'.

Critique of Political Democracy

It is unlikely to be a coincidence that, at a certain point in the Trontian journey, the intended title of *For the Critique of Politics* changed to *For the Critique of Political Democracy*. What prompted Tronti to make that change was probably the *Zeitgeist* of the Eighties and Nineties, as democracy was starting to be celebrated as the pinnacle and unsurpassable 'ideological evolution' of humankind. However, 'critique of politics' was an authoritative, even foundational, formula, as it echoed Marx's work and, in particular, the texts from which Tronti's research had started in the Fifties, following in the footsteps of Galvano Della Volpe: the youthful critique of Hegelian philosophy of public law, as well as the Introduction of 1857 and the subsequent *Critique of Political Economy*. The decision to set aside the 'critique of politics' formula probably had other motivations, not purely formal or stylistic, which stemmed from the usage that had spread in the Seventies, especially within that radical theory linked to the operismo of *Workers and Capital* (but not to Tronti's 'autonomy of the political'). The debate at that time arose from the crisis of the left-wing groups and the quest for 'a new way of doing politics' (Gruppo Gramsci, 1973). In this context, the 'critique of politics' translated, for example, into the idea of valorising the 'spontaneous' forms of conflict expression and the 'autonomy of needs' that they expressed. But above all, underlying that reflection—often strongly marked by the urgency of action—was also the idea that the stark division of labour between top and base, leaders and militants, needed to be overcome, along with the form of 'political alienation' inevitably produced by the classic party organization. Facing that discussion, Tronti cautioned against conflating the 'critique of politics', whose necessity he was arguing for, with a discourse that, by exalting needs, led only towards a 'rejection of politics' (Tronti, 1980a, pp. 259–279). Eventually, the widespread usage of the term in a context so distant from the logic of his research on the 'political' likely suggested to Tronti the opportunity for a title change that, at that point, in the new scenario unfolding in the Eighties, also demanded a clarification of the object of investigation.

This seemingly slight variation—shifting the analytical focus from 'politics' to 'political democracy'—reveals a substantial point of the Trontian position: a point that also helps explain Tronti's insistence, in the last years of his life, on '68 and the movements.

In a conversation with Pasquale Serra, for instance, Tronti explicitly distanced himself from the formula invoking ‘another way of doing politics’, a formula judged to be substantially analogous to contemporary anti-political rhetoric. For Tronti, this maxim was “at the origin of the current crisis of politics, which practically blocks the possible ways out”, while “there is no “other way of doing politics” because “the politics we deal with is modern politics”, “a closed, cohesive universe, logically self-contained, with rules and laws, not scientifically exact, that’s the beauty, but mutable and interpretable in contingency, with a foundation, within, of irrationality, chance, opportunity, and exception” (Tronti, 2011, p. 32). What Tronti reproached the contestation movements for was essentially what he reproached for the ‘critique of politics’ articulated by the theorists of ‘needs’ in the Seventies: a discourse on politics that translated into a ‘rejection of politics’, in a refusal that ultimately neglected the necessity of constructing and preserving every collective identity, thereby accepting the logic of individualization permeating capitalist civilization. Freed from material rooting in a part — a part that is obviously a contrast to another, an ‘enemy’, but a part that is always also a ‘we’, not an ‘I’, just as the hostis is never an inimicus— freedom resolves only into the freedom of the ‘last man’, into the selfish freedom of the democratic human, in the endless pursuit of individual happiness of the ‘mass man’ lost in the spectacle of merchandise. In this vein, attacking one of the most classic slogans of the Sixties and Seventies movements, he said, “The private is not political. Never. To become public, it must transvaluate, transcend itself, move out of the individual to become collectivity” (Tronti, 2015b, p. 34). It is precisely from this perspective — a perspective calling into question the mysterious process by which the individual must ‘transcend itself’ to ‘become collectivity’— that Tronti’s interest in political theology and the dimension of spirituality can be fully understood.

Tronti clarified the roots of this choice, not just stylistic but also thematic, which leaned towards spirituality: “Capitalism has made a desert inside the human being, has severed the roots of the soul in the person: this is the cultural reason for conflict, a new political form of struggle, that none of the few remaining anti-capitalist forces engage in” (2015b, p. 224). Faced with the triumph of the democratic human, spirituality constitutes for Tronti the only cultural force capable of making it known that “there is something immeasurable, unquantifiable, not subject to instrumental reason, infinite even as indefinite, not expressible in numbers, laws, codes, and especially today in images” (Tronti, 2015b, p. 227). Spirituality then truly becomes the last katechon, the “last and definitive frontier of resistance to the aggression from the outside world [...] the first, deepest, incisive, and effective cultural point of attack against its current sense of order, against the present democratic domination of consciences” (Tronti, 2015b, p. 227).

The Destiny of 'My Part'

In the pages of *Workers and Capital*, Mario Tronti wrote, 'the working class is not 'the people'. But the working class comes from the people. And this is the basic reason why all —like ourselves— who adopt the working class viewpoint no longer need to "go out among the people: We ourselves come from the people"' (Tronti, 2019, p. 253). Many years later, he explained that this was not just a metaphor but also an autobiographical reflection. "The 'rude pagan race' is me", he wrote. Tronti was born into a working-class family, a family 'of the Roman people' that worked at the General Markets and lived in the Ostiense District. And, as he recalled, if his 'political-theoretical' roots lay in the Turin workers, his 'historical-human' roots lay instead in Roman workers: "present workers' struggles come from the distant past of the popular tradition, and I'm with them" (Tronti, 2006, p. 19). "All revolts, insurrections, heresies, social, political, even religious, all insurgencies of insubordination from below, stand behind me as my own past" (Tronti, 2021, pp. 23–24).

Throughout his theoretical-political experience, Tronti never wavered in claiming his original belonging and never failed to qualify his perspective as a perspective of his 'part'. Therefore, when he wrote that his 'own destiny' was "that of my part, that of the part I belong to, its historical determinateness, its situation in the world, and therefore its time-now, against which I measure myself daily" (Tronti, 2006, p. 17). Tronti is not simply expressing a political belonging or the centrality of a militant commitment preserved throughout a lifetime. The comprehensive enquiry into the tasks of the 'free spirit' cannot be understood without recognizing that, in Tronti's discourse, the presupposition is always the assumption of partiality, the claim of belonging to a part. Recognizing one's destiny and reflecting on 'one's own destiny', for Tronti, was always the assumption of the historical conditions of a part, a collective 'we', which is never, and cannot be, a 'whole' in the Hegelian sense. Thus —precisely because Tronti was not a 'political thinker' but a 'thinking politician'— the acknowledgement of 'one's own destiny', the acknowledgement 'of my part', was the prerequisite for any reflective work. It was the only gateway through which the 'free spirit' could pass.

The destination Tronti arrived at in the last phase of his reflection left many of his most passionate readers and even his most convinced admirers dissatisfied. In a passionate confrontation with Tronti, Negri recently pondered the "Tronti enigma", that is, the reasons that led Tronti to abandon the theoretical framework of *Workers and Capital* to arrive at the autonomy of the political in the crucial transition between the late Sixties and the early Seventies. The solution to the 'enigma', according to Negri, does not seem difficult to unveil: 'It consists of the shift in the 'point of view' from inside/against

capital, to inside the Party with the proposal to impose its hegemony on capitalist development; in the profound discontinuity between the Tronti of *Workers and Capital* and that of the 'autonomy of the political', essentially, then, "shifting the source of power and the initiative of class struggle from bottom to top" (Negri, 2022, p. 48).

Perhaps the 'enigma' Tronti faced in the Sixties and Seventies was not just about the relationship between class and the party. Perhaps, as seen in the previous pages, Tronti's real 'enigma' was represented by the relationship between the factory and society and, therefore, the insoluble contrast between a dimension in which the working class could demonstrate its autonomy from capital and a dimension in which, instead, the workforce returned to fragment into a myriad of 'mass men', incapable of opposing any resistance to the advancement of capitalist civilization. In a passage from *Workers and Capital*, it was stated, "*Spontaneism* belongs always and only to 'the masses' in a generic sense and never to the workers of the big factories" (Tronti, 1963/2019, p. 62). This phrase fit organically into the proposal based on the idea of the political centrality of the factory working class and could therefore initially sound like a simple variation on the workerist (and anti-Gramscian) theme of the specificity of factory struggle compared to the 'popular struggle'. However, behind that provocatively 'workerist' formula, and beyond the seemingly conventional homage to the iron discipline of the working class, one could recognize a crucial motif of all Tronti's reflection, which the Roman thinker revisited, especially in his most recent writings. Reflecting again on the ambivalences of the workerist experience, Tronti invited to recognize in the working class of the large factories in the Sixties and Seventies —and thus what, not without paradoxes, was defined as the 'mass worker'— a bulwark against 'massification', as a barrier against the emergence of the 'mass man' entirely shaped by the consumer society, as a brake against the march of the Nietzschean 'last man' (Tronti, 1998, p. 201). In *Noi operaisti* [*We Workerists*], for example, providing a definition of 'worker aristocracy' far removed from the derogatory one inherited from tradition, he wrote:

The large factory is the opposite of the non-places, which configure the consistency, or rather the inconsistency, of the post-modern. The large factory is the classic of the modern. The concentration of workers in the workplace determined the masses, without making a mass. What was called the working masses, both unionally and politically organized, were in turn the opposite of the processes of massification, induced by productions, consumptions, communications, precisely of mass. The working class has been called, and has truly been, the avant-garde of the working masses. In this sense, it can be talked about, more precisely, concerning

the use of political concepts, as the aristocracy of the people. The symbolic image of the collective worker directly led to this idea because it implicitly held it within itself. It escaped the tragic alternative that the twentieth century had historically materialized: either the authoritarian personality or the democratic mass. (Tronti, 2009, p. 95)

These motifs emerged openly only much later in his writings, but as seen, it is not entirely improper to hypothesize that they were already present at the foundation of Tronti's reflection in the Sixties or that, even earlier, they had directed the break with historicism. Perhaps only by recognizing how the terror of the 'mass man' and the nightmare of the massification process have constituted the constant problematic of Tronti's research is it possible to reinterpret the entire theoretical experience of the father of Italian workerism from a new perspective. The shock of 1956 shattered the framework of historicism and the myth of Soviet socialism, indicating to the young Tronti the necessity of thinking about social transformation in a different way than how it had been conceived by Leninism. More than a testimony of the failure of the Bolshevik Revolution, 1956 represented the confirmation of socialism's inability to transcend the logic of the capitalist mode of production. If such an acknowledgement led other intellectuals to detach themselves from Marxism, moving towards liberal or 'neo-Enlightenment' positions, for Tronti, it meant instead giving up conceiving the worker conflict within an (at least entirely) eschatological perspective. And perhaps, starting from such a shock, the young Roman theorist began to conceive of the antagonism between capital and the working class—as well as between society and the factory—not in terms of a contradiction destined to be dialectically overcome, but rather as an unsolvable opposition, as a conflict destined to reproduce constantly. Many champions of workerism and post-workerism would not have shared (and perhaps not even grasped) Tronti's rupture with this passage, thus continuing to conceive social transformation and the capital-labour conflict largely in line with the eschatological and Promethean declination of the Marxist tradition. All of Tronti's reflection—and therefore not only the phase of 'political autonomy' but even the properly workerist phase of the Sixties—seems constantly marked by the recognition of the idea that the conflictual polarity between capital and the working class cannot be dialectically surpassed by a superior synthesis guaranteed by the 'rational' management of society. Precisely due to such a rupture, Tronti had to acknowledge the immanence of the capitalist social organization and thus the process of 'massification' that emanated from it. And the nightmare of the 'mass man'—a nightmare that emerged only very late in Tronti's writings—was somewhat the inevitable consequence

of the image of a capitalism capable of penetrating society, manipulating individuals, subjugating them with the spectacle of commodities.

Read from this perspective, the different sequences of Tronti's thought can be interpreted as new theoretical–political solutions, all internal, however, to the same vision of social dynamics. And perhaps all those different sequences can be considered filiations originating from a common katechontic matrix, according to which the revolution is not a 'going beyond' capitalism or a development of its productive potentialities for the benefit of the entire society but rather an attempt to 'restrain' development and its destructive tensions, and therefore a process that must be thought 'within' capitalist development, or better, parallel to it. In this way, it could indeed be understood that even the workerist season was an operation aimed at recognizing in the working class the consequence of capitalist development but at the same time, the possible katechon, the force capable of restraining capital, of holding it back, of 'civilizing' it. Without being able to find the socialist revolution as the terminal point of development, the Roman theorist sought, in the face of the advance of massification, different answers from those provided by the Marxist tradition, which largely assigned the 'rational' management of social organization to capitalist contradictions. For Tronti, 'science' could not aspire to conquer a neutral point of view but rather had to recognize the structural and ineliminable antagonism of capitalist society and position itself within that partial viewpoint expressed by the working class. Above all, it had to rediscover in the factory working class the barrier that had to prevent the victory of the Nietzschean 'last man.' The subjectivist reinterpretation of Marx, in which Tronti would have engaged starting from the essays published in the *Quaderni rossi*, can perhaps be interpreted as a sort of extreme heretical attempt to oppose the decline of European Kultur and to erect an extreme bulwark against the unstoppable *Zivilisation*. For this reason, one can glimpse in Tronti's reflection a fabric constituted by the nightmare of the 'new world,' by that nightmare that constituted the exact reversal of the Fordist vision of a society permeated by the logic of the factory. If it was the power of the economy and the impetus of *Zivilisation* that reduced the individual to an anonymous mass, Tronti would have constantly sought the antidote to *Vermassung* within the factory, in the working class of the large factories, in the collective force planted in the heart of the production relationship, conceived as the ultimate barrier to the advance of the 'last man.' And when the assumption of the 'concentration' of the workforce in large factories began to wane, Tronti inserted into his perspective a new reflection on the symbolic dimension of politics, a dimension that was essentially absent before but which, especially from the second half of the Eighties onwards, came to significantly enrich —and also complicate— the enquiry on the 'political'.

The solutions that Tronti offered throughout his reflection may appear unsatisfactory, inadequate and even counterproductive to many. Nevertheless, the enigmas that Tronti posed remain unavoidable. If one truly wants to take the challenge of the ‘sunset’ of politics seriously, and if one intends to traverse the ‘post-political’ (and ‘anti-political’) landscape marking the new millennium, the path to follow most probably remains the one that the ‘conservative revolutionary’ Mario Tronti indicated, starting with the necessity of rethinking the autonomy of the political by proceeding ‘beyond’ the dimension of the State and the grounds of institutions, but without renouncing the deposit of experiences that the past hands down to us. Without the ‘long knowledge of past things’ and the ‘detached understanding of present things’, Tronti wrote in 2021, “political action becomes dependent on the course of its time” (pp. 32–33). “Only if one comes from afar can one go far”, and—in Goethe’s words— “to be born again, looking at one’s past ideas as childhood shoes” is “the right way to be modern and ancient at the same time”, “free spirits against the present, armed with the memory of everything subversive that has existed in the past” (Tronti, 2021, pp. 32–33).

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