**Riccardo Bellofiore & Massimiliano Tomba: On Italian Workerism**

by [Economisti di classe: Riccardo Bellofiore & Giovanna Vertova](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Economisti-di-classe-Riccardo-Bellofiore-Giovanna-Vertova/148198901904582) on Wednesday, 04 May 2011 at 12:35

Massimiliano Tomba

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The following is the English translation of the AFTERWORD (by R. Bellofiore & M. Tomba) to the Italian publication of Steve Wright's book on Italian workerism (Storming Heaven), by Edizioni Alegre. It was presented at the Fifth Historical Materialism  Annual Conference  "Many Marxisms‟, 7–9 November 2008, at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. The translation was provided by our friend and comrade Steve Wright.

The session was organized as follows

**WORKERISM: A GENERATION LATER**

Chair: Alberto Toscano

Massimiliano Tomba & Riccardo Bellofiore

**What actuality for operaismo?**

Steve Wright

**Revolution from above? Money and class composition in operaismo**

Matteo Mandarini

**The politics of fate, the fate of politics**

A report on line is here:

[**http://leniency.blogspot.com/2008/11/second-annual-conference-report.html**](http://leniency.blogspot.com/2008/11/second-annual-conference-report.html)

The paper was submitted to the journal, which did not find it suitable for publication. Max and I, of course, knew beforehand that ours was a kind of "Archival" material, an intervention in an ongoing debate. Indeed, we explicitly presented it as such. HM judged however that the paper did not worked as an article in itself, also because (according to them) "operaismo" is not well known, or even is completely unkwown, in the Anglo-Saxon debate. This may be a reason why the journal is publishing since many, many years articles of important aithors in that tendencies. We thought that this could have been an occasion for discussion, but evidently we were wrong. May be our provocation was not very well constructed, after all ...  However, here it is the paper, for those who want to read our arguments.

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**Afterword**

**Riccardo Bellofiore**

**Massimiliano Tomba**

The new millennium has seen the revival of a growing interest in operaismo. as testified by the republication not only of histories, but also of some classic texts. These latter have until recently been impossible to find, either because their print run was long exhausted, or else had been sent to be pulped at the end of the seventies. The international success of Michael Hardt and Toni Negri’s book Empire, which has been translated into many languages, has contributed to this revival of interest. Empire came out in 2000, not long after the mass challenge to the WTO in Seattle of November 1999, followed in turn by the blockades of the WEF summit in Melbourne of September 2000, of the World Bank in Prague the same month, and then the G8 counter-summit in Genoa of 2001. Throughout the nineties, too, there had been uprisings linked to price hikes for food and against the overwhelming power of the IMF.

These are only some of the events that have come to assume symbolic power. None was a simple repetition of what preceded it, and each experimented with forms of political innovation. A new generation was forced to come to terms with the dynamics of capitalist globalisation, with the casualisation of work, with the metamorphoses of the old as well as the new economy. It was prodded, therefore, to seek new forms of both political analysis and intervention. Moved by this need, some young militants discovered operaismo. And it is from this perspective, too, that Steve Wright’s history of Italian operaismo needs to be read. A book written by a scholar living on the other side of the world to the province of Europe, and perhaps for this reason, the best on a topic that is no antiquarian matter.

Sergio Bologna is right when he says that operaismo, linked to the ‘fordist’ historical context of the sixties, in Italy, would never have been rediscovered without the theoretical work of a generation that provided a bridge between the intellectuals of that time and younger generations: without the work of transmission and contamination of those experiences undertaken by comrades like Primo Moroni, without the attempt to read the dynamics of so-called ‘post-fordism’. Indeed, what is probably most fascinating about operaismo is its refusal of any air of defeat, its ability to read social dynamics from the point of view of political subjectivities and class insurgencies. This is an authentic ‘attitude’ that seeks, today as in the past, to produce a series of reversals in perspective, able to open new possibilities of political analysis and action.

When Mario Tronti, in ‘Lenin in England’, read workers’ passivity, non-collaboration with unions, standoffishnes and refusal, as ‘organised passivity’, ‘planned non-collaboration’, ‘polemical standoffishness’ and ‘political refusal’, he was on the one hand preparing new lenses with which to read new working class behaviours, and seeking on the other new modalities of reading marked by a strongly performative value. Tronti did not intend to produce an objective reading of reality, but rather effects on that reality. The illusions of an objective historiography were demolished by Marx in what is perhaps his most brilliant text, The Eighteenth Brumaire – an example of historiography from the workers’ point of view, aimed not at photographing reality, but at producing a new reality.

Many of operaismo’s historiographical works deserve to be republished and reread with care. In a section significantly entitled ‘Tronti in Deutschland’, Steve Wright mentions important works such as Sergio Bologna’s essay on the German council movement, Ferruccio Gambino’s reconstruction of workers’ struggles in Britain, as well as Karl Heinz Roth’s book The Other Workers’ Movement and Gisela Bock’s writing on the IWW. Wright’s book is one of the few that grasp the importance of this historiographical innovation, an innovation that would continue into the seventies with the journal Primo Maggio, which sought to develop a new militant history, subordinate to struggles. Placing the relationship between history and memory at the centre, Primo Maggio anticipated the battle against historiographical revisionism in the following years, while placing the accent upon proletarian memory, against the refusal of memory celebrated by Negri in his writings of the early eighties.

In the sixties Tronti founded what became, in its grandeur but also its limits, the workerist ‘gesture’ of overturning: the necessity of a partisan reading – simultaneously a partisan intervention – in the processes underway and in the given situation. During the same period, Romano Alquati refined the methodology of ‘co-research’, and articulated the discourse on class composition: that is, on the forms of behaviour that arise when particular figures of labour-power are inserted in specific processes of production. This element would become particularly significant, and while not all operaisti would attribute primary importance to class composition, Steve Wright makes it the red thread of his history of workerism. The analysis of class composition and co-research were amongst the fundamental ingredients of a workerist mode of conducting ‘enquiry’, intended to establish collaboration between intellectuals and workers. And it was sometimes capable of keeping its promise, as demonstrated with the Comitati operai of Porto Marghera, an experience recently debated at a conference held in Mestre together with the old protagonists.

But the history of Italian workerism was not quite a monolithic bloc that developed in a linear fashion, even if the ‘ideological’ operaismo of the sixties and seventies (the decades upon which Steve Wright’s narration concentrates) can appear so. Workerism’s development is worth following for one very simple reason. For a certain generation, operaismo was an inevitable reference point – more than that, a genuine, inescapable legacy – whatever the disagreements concerning specific aspects. At the same time, the branches that followed, that gave life to the various ‘post-operaista’ lineages of the last thirty years, cannot easily be separated from their origins, and their successive limits are rooted precisely in the contradictions of the workerism from which they originated.

If we examine the classic figures of the operaista pantheon – Mario Tronti and Toni Negri (but also, at least in part, Raniero Panzieri, whom Wright also examines, while not addressing the history of Quaderni Rossi after the split with Classe Operaia) – it is not difficult to identify some of workerism’s undoubted strong points. In the first place, the break with the ‘stagnationism’ that constituted an ulcer within the traditional Italian left, in particular the Italian Communist party (PCI) (some important internal dissidences excluded), leaving it incapable of grasping the country’s lively capitalist growth, including the ‘economic miracle’ itself. Along with an attentiveness to the non ‘backward’ nature of economic (but also social) reality, there was a rich theoretical innovation: the theorisation by Tronti of the labour-power/working class duality, rediscovered through a reading of Marx. As a consequence, operaismo broke with a good part of the received tradition of the Second and Third Internationals, with its economistic and passified vision of workers. More than this, Tronti also opened the way to a new theory of crisis (in certain ways, if you like, a theory of collapse): a ‘social’ crisis, premised immediately on the capital-labour relation, lights years away from the various and competing mechanistic visions of crisis (from disproportionality to underconsumption, to the tendential fall in the rate of profit).

Tronti was, in many senses, the central (if not the only) figure of the operaismo of the sixties, who needs to be located, as Steve Wright does, in a relationship of continuity/rupture between Panzieri and Negri. As for Panzieri, here it is sufficient to underscore three aspects of his reflections within the experience of Quaderni Rossi. Before anything else, the strong emphasis on the non-neutrality of the productive forces and machinery: an intuition that was not only original, but liberating. Secondly, the invention of the category of ‘capital’s plan’: the idea, namely, that ‘total capital’ was able to plan both the economy and society as a whole. However problematic this category, with it Panzieri rightly dealt a death blow to the the traditional left vision of socialism, understood reductively as the summation of state ownership of the means of production and planning. Finally, the method of ‘enquiry’: knowledge of workers’ reality demanded a cognitive method (that was also political intervention and struggle) independently of the analysis of capital.

The limit of capital, for Panzieri, was not ‘objectivist’, but lay if anywhere in labour. Not, however, as an integrated part of capital, but in the measure to which it has the capacity to produce political contents in struggles. Here, broadly, is the point of departure for Tronti who, in starting from Panzieri, then breaks with him (we are thinking above all of Operai e capitale). There are two marxisms, argued Tronti: marxism as science of capital, and marxism as revolution. Marxism as science views workers as ‘labour power’. It is a theory of economic development, in which labour is seen from the point of view of capital, and is fully integrated within the latter. Against this, Marxism as revolution views workers as ‘working class’, as labour that actively, and therefore also politically, refuses to be incorporated by capital.

Here we can locate the distant origin of a forcing of this thesis later typical of Negri. Reading Marx’s theory of value politically, in the spirit of overturning that distinguishes operaismo, Tronti wanted to pose labour power first, capital second. From this it followed that capital was not only conditioned by labour power, but that the latter constituted the measure of value even before production. This occurred in the wage relation, where capital faced not the individual worker, but the working class, and therefore class conflict, that preceded, provoked and produced the capitalist relation. If in Tronti this leads to a sort of political measure of value, its definitive liquidation will be given thereafter, in the assertion that every human activity (and non-activity) is productive of value. Labour will be hypostasised in its presumed independent ontological reality, ‘naturally’ antagonistic, implicitly and intrinsically productive of value before its inclusion in capital. And capital will be reduced to a merely reactive reality that lives increasingly by autosuggestion. Here not only the political composition of the class comes before, and determines, its technical composition, but the very power of capital is increasingly stripped down to nothing more than pure ‘command’. In the process it loses every feature of "objectivity" (Marx's “fetish character”), to the point where the capitalist reply to antagonism simply unifies and homogenises labour (materially and politically), at the time simplified in the abstract figure of the ‘mass worker’ (later on in ‘operaio sociale’, cyborg, etc.) – with the illusion that capital, in the end, works for us (an error that over time will transmute from tragedy into farce). The performative act still remains, but now increasingly akin to the postmodern way of constructing discourses upon discourses, of forced discourses upon forced discourses.

Before returning to the author of Empire, however, at least one other significant point of Tronti’s framework needs to be remembered, one that will profoundly mark both operaismo and post-workerism. According to the author of Operai e capitale, antagonism, through which the workers rise out of the dimension of labour power and enter the dimension of working class, is concretised in ‘struggles over the wage’, when these demand increases that outstrip productivity, and in the ‘refusal of labour’ within immediate production. In the absence of these two dimensions of struggle, labour is reduced to mere variable capital. Steve Wright’s book is precious in identifying the couplings through which this ‘wage-ist’ version of class conflict – typical of operaismo – unravels over time. Clearly, the operaismo under discussion here – no less than Negri himself, up until the mid seventies – recognises workers as subjects in struggle, irreducible to the dimension of labour power, always exclusively in so far as their antagonism is immediately subversive. Capital’s reply to struggles over the wage or to antagonism in the workplace is no less than capitalist development itself. This simply generalises the capitalist condition from the factory to society, strengthening the working class and radicalising the revolutionary face off between the two classes. Struggles within this crisis are overturned into development, which is translated in turn into capital’s incessant antagonistic overcoming.

Tronti quickly drew back from reducing class struggle to a struggle over the wage that would leap the mediation of the party and politics. The journal Contropiano began publication in 1967, and Tronti returned to the ranks of PCI, while keeping the accent almost exclusively on wage struggles. The sequence typical of ‘ideological’ operaismo – antagonism within and against capital / leaps in capitalist development / ‘recomposition – was reproblematised, however, since the passage from workers’ struggles to capitalist development was no longer automatically given. Between the workers and capital opened the space of politics: better, of the Political. Producing capitalist development in the wake of workers’ struggles required intervention from above: it was not spontaneous, it had to be imposed on capital by the ‘workers’ party. This is the time of tactics and the party. If the ‘autonomy of the political’ can be glimpsed on the horizon, at the end of the sixties the wage as ‘independent variable’ was conceived in ways not so different from Napoleoni’s reflections in Rivista Trimestrale. In both cases, the conflict over distribution opens to, and becomes the instrument of, an arbitrary and groundless intervention in the sphere of politics and the state: a sphere that is parasitic of struggles, from which it must inevitably separate itself, demanding their subordination.

Moving from the same trunk, but along a different path, is Toni Negri, who proposes an original development of Marx’s theory of crisis that is brilliant, in its own way. Disproportionality and overproduction both depend upon changes in the conditions of valorisation that necessarily determine continuous upheavals within those exchange ratios that make equilibrium possible, exploding sooner or later as crisis: this is the Marx of the nineteenth century. The twentieth century opens with the October revolution, which translates into reality the risk that the struggle in the factory will transmute – once again, and immediately – into the struggle for power, spreading everywhere like wildfire. This process breaks up the class composition of the craft worker, giving life to the ‘mass worker’, through the production of that sequence Taylorism-Fordism which Negri (like nearly all of workerism) reads in a non-problematic way. In this way class decomposition is once again negated, because crisis and restructuring come to be indistinguishable from the development of capital – and the reunification of the antagonistic subject, which is the other side of the coin. The massification of workers in itself recomposes them as working class. Keynesianism is nothing more than the bourgeois attempt to translate the now inevitable autonomy of the class within capital into a stimulus for demand, fighting off the tendency towards stagnation connected to organisational and technological innovations. In the process, Keynesianism seeks to subordinate the independence of the wage to the goal of productivity, and so guarantee balanced and proportional development.

Here, in Negri’s work, we see the return of the theoretical-political centrality of the wage, seen as an ‘independent variable’ when it has been uncoupled from productivity. This occurs within the context of the transition from absolute to relative surplus value, seen (contentiously) as mutually exclusive. ‘Necessary’ labour, if understood in the traditional sense as production for subsistence, now tends towards zero. At the same time, the wage as an ‘independent variable’ instead maximises ‘necessary’ labour, here understood as the reappropriation of income separated from labour. Distribution is reduced to a mere relation of force. Wage struggles make the social relations of production explode, squeezing surplus labour. During the same period, some young followers of Sraffa, positively quoted by Negri himself, likewise called for a ‘standing fast’ on the wages front, imposing on capital the road of innovation in response to the profit squeeze. Certainly, though, the language, intentions and categories were far from similar. The passage matures from planner State to crisis-State, when public spending becomes wage spending of the factory-State. Exploitation and perception of the wage reflect each other: the demand for wages, and then for income, are for Negri simply an attack upon capital and the State. The capitalist response, which combines inflation with outsourcing, in reality sets the whole society to work. According to this way of seeing things, typical of Negri in the middle of the seventies, no substantial modification of the reality of the labour process is possible, only a deepening of the structure of command.

Having reached this point, it’s clear that Negri – building directly upon foundations provided by Tronti himself – has given life, with undoubted visionary powers, to a workerism with strongly irrational characteristics, as Steve Wright himself indicates on a number of occasions. This is an operaismo that develops in a self-referential manner, almost without further relationship to the social reality it seeks to draw upon and express. Development, crisis, revolution are now the same thing. It is pointless to seek mediations, or to claim verifications of reality, in an idealist and subversive apparatus that is self-reproducing, and where reference to the concrete has no other function than to validate a purpose-built philosophy of history. To be honest, these flaws can be detected from the beginnings of operaismo. Classe Operaia judged as paltry the results of the struggles of 1962-63, when in actuality these bestowed some empirical validity upon the category of the wage as an ‘independent variable’ in distribution that led in turn to a violent reaction on the part of the system. Potere Operaio forced the Hot Autumn and its aftermath into the straightjacket of a wage-centred vision, failing to see that the struggles of 1968-69 directly attacked the intyensity of labour that the ‘restructuring without investments’ of the mid sixties had already stretched to breaking point – at the same time also posing constraints to the full exploitation of the potential increase in the productive power of labour. It is not surprising, then, that a few years later Potere Operaio failed to recognise the “deconstruction” of labour through which capital responded to class struggle within the sphere of production.

 It’s true that the ‘mass worker’ assumed an increasing significance within Italy’s postwar development. But it does not follow from this, as part of Potere Operaio hypothesised, that this figure could dominate and subsume other strata of the class composition. Increasingly from the seventies onwards, however, the schema for reading capitalist and antagonistic dynamics was ossified and projected forward. The ‘mass worker’ ceded its place to the ‘socialised worker’, to the ‘cyborg’, to the so-called ‘cognitariat’ or even, coining a category lacking all meaning, to the ‘immaterial worker’. The method was, and is, the same: always and come what may, identifying some ‘tendency’, focussed at its most advanced point upon a sector which assumes strategic significance, and upon which a new political ‘wager’ is staked. The whole theoretical system is thus politically geared towards new figures, declared hegemonic in the process. These figures are said to express new forms of conflictuality on which to place a new bet**.**

Toni Negri recalls that without the reading of the Grundrisse, many workerist texts would not have been possible. The Grundrisse, translated into Italian in 1968-70, became a sort of bible of the movement of the seventies. Workerism was, in many ways, a marxism of the Grundrisse. Certainly, this is a text that can in many senses be unavoidable and liberating, but only if read whilst conscious of all its limits and backwards, via Marx’s Capital. Instead, operaismo read the Grundrisse against Capital. And if Panzieri, against numerous passages in Capital and the Critique of the Gotha Program, discerned in the Grundrisse a model for passing directly from capitalism to communism, Tronti judged the Rough Notebooks to be more politically advanced than either the first volume of Capital or A contribution to the  Critique of Political Economy. But if Tronti attributed these political outbursts to a formal reason, to a more rough Marxian exposition, not yet constrained into a rigid logical disposition of arguments, the Negri of Marx Beyond Marx discovered in the Grundrisse the action of a revolutionary subjectivity not yet trapped in Capital’s objectified categories. The Grundrisse became not only the most advanced text, but also the text that contained a surfeit of subjectivity to deploy against the reified state of Capital’s categories. For many epigones, such as the enthusiasts of cognitive labour, only the Grundrisse exists – and of this, perhaps only a few pages, those of the ‘Fragment on Machines’.

Having transformed the Grundrisse into the book of the ‘tendency’, Negri could now outline certain equations: convinced that the multitude is to the metropoly as the working class was to the factory, he could deduce the passage from the hegemony of the factory working class to the hegemony of the multitudes in the metropolies. Everything that destroyed the Fordist wage society – productive subjectification, the globalization of markets, worldwide financial integration and automation, the affirmation of the knowledge economy – places a new social figure at the centre, in a universe where the nexus between wages and productivity would now be impossible to establish. For this Negri, now beyond workerism, all forms of labour are socially productive. If the industrial labour of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has lost its hegemony, in the final decades of the twentieth century ‘immaterial labour’ assumed the key place. The General Intellect becomes hegemonic in capitalist production, cognitive immaterial labour becomes immediately productive. The ‘cognitariat’ is the fundamental productive force that makes the system function.

Even before developing any critical considerations of these stances, it is clear how such positions contribute to and nourish, within the young generations of the nineties as well as those closer in age to ourselves, an indifference towards working class labour: transforming hatred against work into an indifference, when it is not an aversion, towards a working class deemed residual and reactionary in its attachment to jobs. At the same time, these positions impede the perception of new forms of labour productive of value, because they cancel concrete reality by substituting a stereotype in its place, dissolving the quite material forms that today characterize the fragmentation of labour employed by capital into an indistinct and indeterminate category. The immediate production of value as place both of conflict and antagonism, and of capitalist hegemony and cooperation, are never truly addressed, as if they never existed. The capitalist labour process as ‘contested’ terrain is missing, which means that workers when they work are missing as well: if they are not insubordinate, they are labour-power; if they are working class, they are against labour. ‘Ideological’ operaismo only sees them when they demand wages, or when they negate the performance of labour: the rest of the time, they are the same thing as machines. In the absence of labour as such, attention to the real characteristics of capitalist restructuring, to the effective and efficacious modes of political intervention against the class of workers, is missing as well. What remains is a total blindness to what is authentically new in contemporary capitalism.

In this workerism, antagonism is transformed into the movements of a hegemonic, mercurial subject, while the forms of conflictuality of subjects no longer considered hegemonic from the point of view of the tendency become residues, memories in a Fellini film. A rather different discourse, clearly, can be seen in the work of other authors who have played an important role in operaismo, such as Vittorio Rieser, Romano Alquati, Ferruccio Gambino, Sergio Bologna, Marco Revelli and others still. Theirs is a workerism that could be called ‘materialist’, one that succeeds in escaping the meanderings of ‘ideological’ workerism. And yet it has been the latter that has succeeded in imposing itself in the imaginary as workerism tout court, generating various post-operaista threads that have cancelled the memory of others. Rather than following the hegemonic subjects of a presumed tendency, it would be more useful today to start from the bodies and minds incorporated in the monstrous and deadly mechanism of a self-valorisation that renders simultaneous the tempos of exploitation. A process that, without the historicist image of stages, encompasses both relative and absolute surplus value, increasingly combining various forms of surplus labour and labour extraction into the same productive weave, from high tech to new forms of slavery spreading within a world globalised today by capital. Here the leaps in the productive force of labour are inseparable from the accelerated intensity of labour, from the push to lengthen the social working day.

If Steve Wright’s book brings to light the irrational drifts of one part of operaismo, it also demonstrates the richness of experiences that the memories of post-workerist literature too often overshadow, when they do not simply forget them. What seems precious to us about Wright’s book, which is why we have supported its translation into Italian, is its capacity to trace the operaismo of those women and men who have conducted struggles – within labour as it is, and against the initiative of a spiritualised capital. Exemplary, from this point of view, are the pages concerning the struggles against harmful, deadly working conditions, or the struggles at FIAT, that demonstrate how the operaismo of male and female workers were more advanced than the reflections of the current’s theoreticians. Notable too in the book is the capacity to draw out the subterranean experience of that ‘rational’ operaismo that entails not only Primo Maggio, but also continues into the nineties with Altreragioni.

Continuing today to press the tendency of the capitalist mode of production whilst awaiting liberation from development means increasingly accelerating the path towards a scenario of self-destruction, that which Marx himself dreads in the gloomiest pages of Capital. Today the liberation “of” labour and liberation “from labour” are again, tragically separated: the first is sucked into the horizon of the job to be defended, the second seems shipwrecked upon ecological concerns. This rendering becomes an open opposition when the job in question is work in a polluting factory, as has happened recently at the Petrolchimico plant in Porto Marghera, or as was seen in the tragedy of Thyssen Krupp, neither of which can be reduced to exceptional situations symptomatic of backwardness. Taking dangerous working conditions as a starting point, as the Marghera group of Potere Operaio did forty years ago, means putting up for discussion the deadly nature of the capitalist mode of production. This means, as Sergio Bologna has reminded us, addressing not only the toxicity of chemical production, but also the new forms of harmful, deadly working conditions, such as the lack of social life, the endless cigarettes, the psychic disturbances and the hemorrhoids of our ultra-modern knowledge workers.

The developmentalist schema that, according to some post-operaisti, has now led, after formal and real subsumption, to ‘total’ subsumption, presupposed then and now the liquidation of the notion of value and the extension of the notion of productive labour to the entire sphere of human activity (and also non-activity). This is a theoretical framework that has literally fallen from the sky, and that has yet to furnish an analytic. Rather, as Wright argues, with the figure of the ‘socialised worker’ Negri simply washed his hands of the difficulties facing the ‘mass worker’. But that schema presupposed, then and now, a stage-ist representation of capitalism, where to each form of subsumption there seems to correspond new types of revolutionary subjectivity: in this way the ‘mass’ worker steps aside for the ‘socialised’ worker, which leaves the stage in turn for the ‘immaterial’ worker.

This is a schema that, as anticipated, bears the stigma of a purpose-built philosophy of history– one that, not by chance, beyond its resounding antagonistic rhetoric, seeks to twist to its own advantage the analyses of the French ‘regulation’ school, in the process flattening this into a social-liberal reformism. When the ‘regulation’ school abandons marxism, becoming little more than an updated, bastard version of Keynesianism, the response of this post-workerism is little short of enthusiastic. Adding insult to injury, it translates basic income, now put forward by some regulationists like Aglietta, into a mere subsidy for casualised workers, paving the way for a lowering of living standards, to the reproduction of that Speenhamland system, about which it would be worth rereading not only Marx, but also Polanyi. In the process, this operaismo unwittingly favours capital’s current process of permanent restructuring.

The assumption of a paradigm of stages, that today as in the past characterises various tendencies of the workerist tradition, impedes an understanding of the reciprocity and synchronicity of different forms of exploitation, and mistakenly locates the centre of theoretical and practical critique outside labour. Within a conception of history that identifies a hegemonic subject able to drive the tendency onwards, one finds Tronti’s recent decadent-spenglerian vision of history, which defines the working class as the Pauline katechon that has constrained the devastating, levelling and depoliticising aspects of modernity. Here there is no sight of the motor of history, the class struggle that forced capital to respond continually through development: all that remains is history with a ‘minus’ sign at the front. This is, at bottom, the trajectory of those seeking refuge in the wake of defeat. Against this, Negri seeks to position himself on the terrain of the tendency by assuming the point of view of the hegemonic figure of labour, confining the rest to a secondary position, the upshot of which is a triumphalist vision that moves from victory to victory. All of which raises a question worthy of further discussion: is it possible that Tronti and Negri share the same philosophy of history, albeit in inverted form. For Tronti, the dusk of the working class subject loses the motor of history. For Negri, it is continually in search for new hegemonic figures capable of determining the tendency.

What is required is to return to the beginning: to the reconstruction of the conditions that make possible antagonism within and against capital, in a world that has not overcome the present order of things, but is rather the scene of the gigantic, planet-wide re-formation of the ‘working class’.