

Mapping Pathways within Italian Autonomist Marxism: A Preliminary Survey

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Abstract

Borio, Pozzi and Roggero (eds.) 2005 have characterised *operaismo* as ‘neither a homogenous doctrinaire corpus, nor a unitary political subject’, but rather ‘multiple pathways with their roots in a common theoretical matrix’. Starting with a diagram drawn up by Primo Moroni in the 1980s, this paper will explore a number of the ways in which those paths might be mapped out, in terms of key categories and projects, above all for the years that follow 1979.

Keywords

post-*operaismo*, *operaismo*, autonomist Marxism, class analysis, class composition

By the early eighties,¹ with the previously close bonds between labour process, movement and theory seemingly broken, the political project known within Italy as *operaismo* [workerism] appeared to have been smashed ‘into pieces’.² At that point, whatever remained appeared to be, outside the work of a few isolated individuals, largely a matter of historical curiosity. As Valerio Evangelisti later recalled, by that time

all the best militants were in jail or on the run, we found ourselves with hardly any theorists... there were few comrades left, the young people who earlier had been with us in consistent numbers (if not all of them) distanced themselves. The response to such a situation was the social centres – but in the sense of their

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference on Immaterial Labour, Multitudes and New Social Subjects: Class Composition in Cognitive Capitalism, Cambridge University, 29–30 April 2006. I would like to thank two anonymous referees for their critical comments and Sergio Bianchi and Derive Approdi for permission to reprint the map by Primo Moroni. All mistakes are my own.

2. A translation of the title of Preve 1984.

negative side, of an almost natural tendency, where the social centre became an oasis, a ghetto, even if that wasn't true in every case.³

A decade later, however, the picture had changed significantly within Italy. The preparedness of many in the movement of squatted centres to emerge from their shells and engage with other social forces was matched by a growing intellectual curiosity amongst new generations of young activists: in part for the practices and ways of seeing that emanated from the *operaista* experience, but even more so for the contemporary work of some of that tendency's survivors. This contemporary theoretical production commonly offered an avowedly 'post-operaista' outlook, which viewed the very different circumstances of the nineties through new categories such as multitude and immaterial labour (or retooled categories, as in the case of general intellect). By the beginning of the present decade, this interest in the writings of Italian theorists such as Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno and Franco 'Bifo' Berardi had become evident in the English-speaking world as well, whether on the streets with the so-called 'anti-global' movement, or at the sales counters with the publishing success of *Empire*. Furthermore, the interest within and without the academy for such theorists has also opened a certain space for a new generation of writers/translators/commentators.⁴ To put it in Enda Brophy's words, the resurgence of interest in the work of some former participants in *operaismo* may well testify 'to the fact that far from being anachronistic, autonomist thought has demonstrated a tremendously resilient ability to mutate along with the times'.⁵

The purpose of this paper, then, is to provide some leads for those interested in exploring in further detail what has happened within Italian 'autonomist Marxism', particularly amongst some of its components less well known in the English-speaking world, since the defeats at the end of the seventies. The picture can at times be a confusing one: for example, while the likes of Negri, Virno and Berardi are (for all their differences) now commonly grouped together as 'post-operaisti', some of their most trenchant critics likewise trace their roots to Italian workerism. Even amongst 'post-operaismo', as a first attempt to 'map' this camp has noted, it is important to acknowledge the 'plurality' of stances.⁶ And, as will be seen, any such discussion will at times

3. Evangelisti 2002, p. 18.

4. See, for example, the contributors to Henninger, Mecchia and Murphy (eds.) 2007 and Dowling, Nunes and Trott (eds.) 2007, along with the issues of *The Commoner*, <www.commoner.org.uk>.

5. Brophy 2004, p. 297.

6. Aringoli 2002, p. 75.

oblige a journey beyond the Italian context. As many writers have indicated,⁷ ‘autonomist Marxism’ has never been a purely Italian phenomenon, and its international diffusion is one of the most distinctive aspects of its development since 1979. If nothing else, this paper will seek to engage in some sort of preliminary reconnoitre of the Italian experience, survey the broad lay of the land, poke around in a few nooks and crannies, and from all this compose questions worthy of those braver souls prepared to venture further in exploring what (if anything) from these experiences may be of relevance today.

But, first, a few cautions concerning labels. If it is common for those who have puzzled over the question to equate Italian ‘autonomist Marxism’ with many of the threads stemming from *operaismo*, it is also worth remembering that a) this label is not typically embraced within such strands; b) these threads hold quite divergent views as to the relationship between their current work and the workerism of the sixties and seventies. Berardi, for example, prefers to speak of ‘compositionism’⁸ (referring to the method of reading class composition), while Negri is emphatic that fundamentally new forms of social relations demand a break with conceptual frameworks developed in a different era, starting with *operaismo* itself. Turning to the person who first coined the term ‘autonomist Marxism’ – Harry Cleaver – one finds that his own usage implies something broader than *operaismo* and its aftermath.

What gives meaning to the concept of ‘autonomist Marxism’ as a particular tradition is the fact that we can identify, within the larger Marxist tradition, a variety of movements, politics and thinkers who have emphasized the autonomous power of workers – autonomous from capital, from their official organizations (e.g. the trade unions, the political parties) and, indeed, the power of particular groups of workers to act autonomously from other groups (e.g. women from men). By ‘autonomy’ I mean the ability of workers to define their own interests and to struggle for them – to go beyond mere reaction to exploitation, or to self-defined ‘leadership’ and to take the offensive in ways that shape the class struggle and define the future.⁹

Within such a framework, it can be argued that what made Italian workerism distinctive as a tendency was its formal obeisance to the notion of class composition, even if this commitment was more often honoured in the breach by some of the *operaisti*, for whom it remained ‘secondary to “Great Political Theory” (on the state, the party, the revolution, class, general intellect, and so on)’.¹⁰

7. See for example, Lotringer and Marazzi 1980, Bianchi and Caminiti (eds.) 2007, and many of the interviews conducted by Borio, Pozzi and Roggero (eds.) 2007.

8. Berardi 1998, pp. 147–53.

9. De Angelis 1993.

10. Bologna 2003, p. 97.

How cohesive, then, was Italian workerism, even in its heyday? The extensive primary research carried out since the late nineties by Guido Borio, Francesca Pozzi and Gigi Roggero bears out their characterisation of *operaismo* as ‘neither a homogenous doctrinaire corpus, nor a unitary political subject’, but rather ‘multiple pathways with their roots in a common theoretical matrix’.¹¹ Speaking at a moment when the tendency had seemingly reached its nadir, Sergio Bologna offered the following thoughts on this ‘common theoretical matrix’:

I believe above all that *operaismo* was an exaltation – sometimes uncritical – of the working class, but also a great exaltation of power. *Operaismo* was born, not by chance, with *Operai e capitale*. It’s not clear which was greater: the paean to the working class, or that to the capitalist capacity of subsuming this working class from the point of view of its components. So it was not by chance that many of its theorists later became theorists of the State, and today are only theorists of governability. And I don’t believe that we can call the latter traitors, because this eulogy of capital’s power [*potenza*] is a risk within *operaismo*, which later became the eulogy of the power of the political as such, of the autonomy of the political. This is an extremely coherent consequence, I believe. It is not some leap, a moment of transformation: in my opinion, it is a logical consequence.¹²

Nor did this dichotomy disappear with the parting of ways that saw Mario Tronti and others embrace the Italian Communist Party at the end of the sixties. Berardi has shown in some detail the manner in which these two spirits played themselves out within Potere Operaio after the Hot Autumn,¹³ while, back in the mid-seventies, Bologna – who had already chosen a different political trajectory to the likes of Negri – would conclude that a permanent contradiction existed between political organisation and class autonomy.¹⁴ And, if some of those who championed the project of class autonomy in this period placed their emphasis upon the role of the party, others, like Yann Moulier Boutang, saw things somewhat differently: ‘Naturally what I liked about the invisible party of Mirafiori was not the party but rather the invisibility’.¹⁵

Ironically, one of the strongest affinities binding those who have shared in the tradition of *operaismo* is precisely a contempt for traditions – particularly ‘revolutionary traditions’. After all, it was a commonplace within the workerist

11. Borio, Pozzi and Roggero (eds.) 2005, pp. 34–5.

12. Bologna 1986, pp. 461–2.

13. Berardi 1998, pp. 117–22.

14. Bologna 1978, pp. 29, 39.

15. Moulier Boutang 2002, p. 7. The ‘party of Mirafiori’ was a metaphor for the vanguardism of the mass worker, popularised in early seventies by Negri.

literature of the sixties and seventies to exalt the discontinuities and leaps both in struggles and in ‘working-class science’, in organisational projects no less than theoretical developments. To put this in the words of Tronti’s classic text *Operai e capitale*, all great discoveries – ‘ideas of simple men which seem madness to the scientists’ – have been made by ‘dangerous leaps’, by breaking ‘the thread of continuity’.¹⁶

As with the relationship between autonomy and power, however, this notion of discontinuities could be taken in quite different directions: at one extreme, perhaps, there was Negri’s argument in the early eighties celebrating ‘Communist transition [as] absence of memory’¹⁷ (and the abandonment of the dialectic as a useful explanatory tool of social antagonism); at the other Peppino Ortoleva’s insistence a few years earlier, in reference to class antagonism in the United States, that

the hegemony of capitalist culture, and its version of American history, does not translate into a *tabula rasa* of the ‘collective memory’ of the American working class. A store of working class traditions remains, but it is the patrimony not of the American proletariat as a whole, but rather – disarticulated and sectionalised – of individual groups of workers, of rank-and-file union experiences etc.¹⁸

In trying to take some preliminary stock of all this, before 1979 and after, it will be impossible to survey the terrain properly without reference to the work on *operaismo* by Borio, Pozzi and Roggero, published in 2002. Their book *Futuro Anteriore* provides a rich (and at times provocative) overview of key themes within Italian workerism, while its associated CD-ROM of nearly sixty interviews (a selection of which have likewise been published in book form) is the richest single documentary source to date of reflections from participants in the *operaista* experience.¹⁹ What follows, then, will draw not only on materials produced across the arc of time from 1980 to 2005, but also some of the reflections captured in the fieldwork of Borio, Pozzi and Roggero. Along the way, it will also seek to illustrate a point made in Enda Brophy’s excellent survey of ‘*operaisti* after *operaismo*’. Recounting an important conference held in Rome in 2002, called in part for the launch of *Futuro Anteriore*, he reminds us that for all the talk of a ‘common tradition’ after 1979,

16. Tronti 1971, p. 12.

17. Negri 1981, p. 52.

18. Ortoleva 1974, p. 52.

19. Borio, Pozzi and Roggero (eds.) 2005. See Wright 2007 for a discussion of a number of those interviews.

[d]eep differences over key issues of theory and practice have further distanced some of the protagonists of those years from each other, a process which had already started by the end of the 1960s as the level of social conflict in Italy escalated.²⁰

Maps

How to map the fallout from the *operaismo* of the sixties and seventies? A number of different enterprises spring to mind here: maps constructed in terms of tendencies, or of projects, or of categories. As regards the first approach, Chris Wright has produced a very interesting chart of ‘different tendencies within libertarian Marxism’, which is useful in situating autonomist Marxism against a broader political and intellectual history (Figure 1). Originally designed to accompany an online text archive now hosted at libcom.org, the stress is placed upon ‘track[ing] unique contributions in theory and practice’, while acknowledging that ‘these are not perfect matches and the relations are in fact much more complex’. Wright’s map differentiates between ‘Operaismo (1960–72)’, ‘Autonomia (1972–80)’, and ‘Autonomist Marxism’, while indicating the influence upon each of other currents, such as the Johnson-Forest Tendency. Turning to an accompanying discussion document, however, it becomes clearer just how complex some of the relationships have been. Take relations within the English-speaking world between ‘open Marxism’ and autonomist Marxism. As Wright himself indicates,

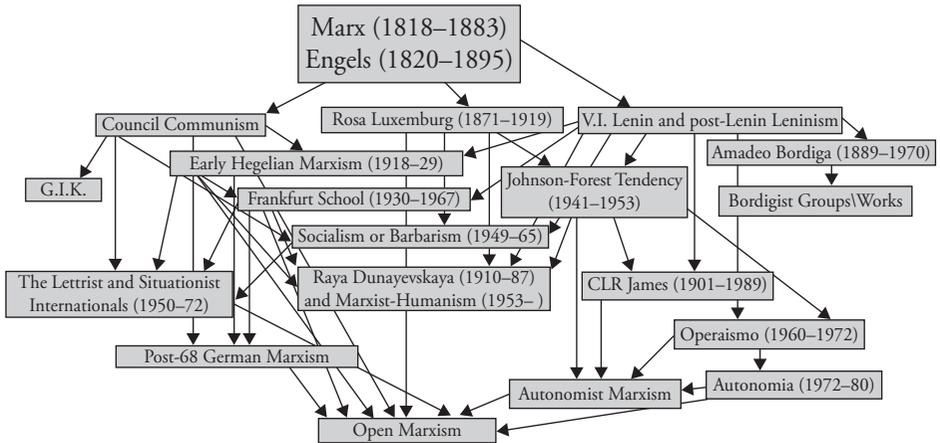
[d]epending on who one talks to, Open Marxism includes autonomist Marxism or autonomist Marxism includes Open Marxism, though the separation over the importance of Hegel and the question of dialectic seems to provide a basic grounds for differentiating the two tendencies.²¹

Another limit in organising a map in this manner is apparent when we seek some correlation between ‘tendencies’ on the one hand, and individuals or collectivities on the other. For example, where might we situate Primo Moroni – a quintessential ‘libertarian Marxist’ – within such a diagram? For, rather than moving from tendency to tendency over time, as more than a few have done in their political trajectory, Moroni’s work was long infused by various strands of what he himself once called ‘this indefinable area that stretches from the Bordigists to the proto-situationists, the councillists, to the

20. Brophy 2004, p. 279.

21. Wright n.d.

This is a rough “family tree” of the different tendencies within libertarian Marxism which we hope will help people navigate the texts of the site. These are not perfect matches and the relations are in fact much more complex, but it may help people to move through the site. Due to his influence on several tendencies within libertarian Marxism, we include V.I. Lenin in the diagram (but not Social Democracy as a whole, even though it influenced Luxemburg, Lenin and the original council communists.) The idea here is not to mention every group, but to track unique contributions in theory and practice.



internationalists, the anarchists, to the anarcho-communists, the libertarian communists’.²²

All of which leads to a map that Primo Moroni drew up sometime in the late eighties (Figure 2). Moroni had something of a flair for the visual representation of information: those who have seen his maps charting the placement and displacement of social centre spaces in Milan will already be familiar with his handiwork.²³ The ‘map’ here, however, is different: it seeks to show the connections between the major expressions of revolutionary media in Italy for the thirty years that followed the workers’ uprising in Hungary. In doing so, it aims to tell a story across time about space: not so much geographical space – although that too is hinted at, in part – but rather that kind of ‘space’ that spawned talk of an ‘area’ of autonomy during the seventies.

22. Cevro-Vukovic 1976, p. 33.

23. Moroni 1986.

Working Class Autonomy and the Crisis: in the latter anthology, the names of leading militants are added to the jumble of political organisations and publications that attempted to challenge the hegemony of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) during the seventies.²⁴ Moroni's map, by contrast, is both more austere in its presentation and more intricate in its detail. As it shows clearly, if the broad array of journals established in the sixties rarely lasted more than three or four years, they spawned a lush outburst of publications in the seventies – although, in many cases, not before an interregnum when party-building projects predominated within the Italian far Left. And, as the forest of arrows highlights, the cross-fertilisation between many of these projects was continuous and often 'virtuous' (that is, the arrows do not by any means represent only a parting of ways within particular circles, but, in some cases, connections through joint projects or even overlapping membership).

A careful examination of Moroni's handiwork suggests a number of other things worthy of note. The first, which is perhaps not so obvious to begin with, are the three vertical columns that constitute the map. Looked at more closely, it becomes possible to discern, on the left of the chart, projects associated in some way with the libertarian and/or counter-cultural sensibilities within the Italian radical Left: from the situationists and *Collegamenti* on the one hand, to *Re Nudo* and *Radio Alice-Atraverso* on the other. Another column on the right records projects whose lineage can be variously traced (bearing in mind the significant breaks involved in each stage) from the PCI through to *Manifesto* and then the Roman autonomists (and Tronti's associates of *Laboratorio Politico* make an appearance here for good measure). In the middle column there is 'the central trunk' of *operaismo*, passing from *Quaderni Rossi* and *Classe Operaia*, via *Potere Operaio*, to a host of autonomist publications such as *Rosso*, as well as *Primo Maggio* and other enterprises (many of which were linked in some way to Moroni's bookshop Calusca).

The second point is that, to Moroni's mind at least, the most important expressions of revolutionary media in Italy by the mid eighties – those difficult years characterised earlier by *Evangelisti* – were largely on the broadcasting front. There are some notable exceptions, but all the same it is radio stations such as *Onda Rossa* and *Radio Proletaria* in Rome, *Sherwood* in Padova and *Onda d'Urto* in Brescia that are to the fore. Worthy of note too are 'radical metropolitan events' associated with punk, a movement with whose exponents Moroni would develop an extraordinary affinity during these years.

24. Lumley 1991, Red Notes 1979.

Why labour over this map? One reason is that it may be worth considering what can be learned by attempting to extend Moroni's map forward twenty years, into our own decade. Any such effort would need to address the radical media that became so important by the nineties: not simply the internet, but also the new generation of publications that circulated at that time, alongside the networks of electronic bulletin boards (often associated with individual social centres) that interpenetrated with those journals. A very partial mapping of the early nineties would note publications like *Luogo Comune*, *Klinamen*, *Riff Raff* in Padua (but also the journal of the same name – but not orientation! – in Turin); *Altreragioni*, some of whose editors had been active in earlier publications such as *Primo Maggio* and *Sapere*; the workplace-oriented *Incompatibili*, with its mixture of leaflets and reflective essays. Nor should we forget the likes of *Virus* in Turin and *Zeronetwork* in the Veneto, both of which attempted to make accessible, to those not online, debates and reflections circulating in the European Counter Network and other electronic forums. Some old stalwarts from the seventies would also be there, such as *Collegamenti* and, for the first part of the decade, *Autonomia* (Padua). Last but not least, this flowering on the media front was also fuelled by a new engagement between a younger generation of activists and participants from movements of earlier decades. Whereas in the eighties, as Sandro Mezzadra recalled, it was 'rather difficult' to establish links with such people – 'a bit because many of them were in prison or out of the country, a bit because the others (at least in my experience) were not particularly disposed' – now the social centres and other movement spaces hosted a range of seminars that enabled just such encounters.²⁵ On the journal front, both *Altreragioni* and *Derive Approdi* (which regrouped some of *Luogo Comune's* participants with a rather broader circle) epitomised this new encounter between those formed in the sixties, and those who entered politics only afterwards.

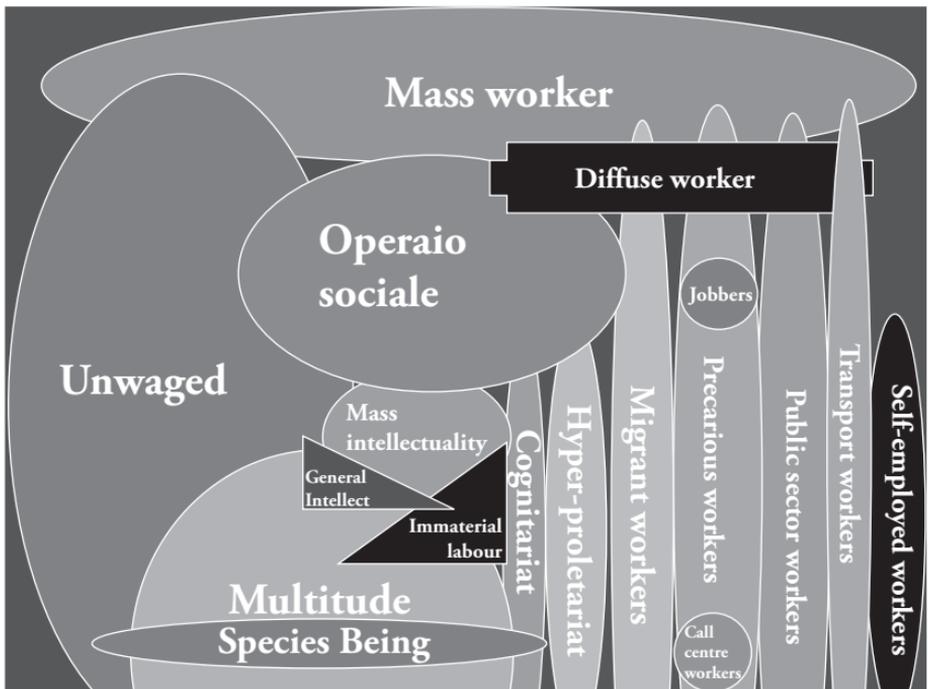
At the same time, it may be that a different kind of mapping is needed, one that attempts to trace out the development of particular categories and concepts since the eighties. For example, a review of some of the key categories used to understand the nature of social subjectivity over the past generation or so of *post-operaisti* might start with a category popularised by Negri and others in the seventies – *operaio sociale* – and end with multitude, the dominant term for the past decade or more within this broad array of political thought. And, while they continue to be used, and are of interest in their own right, other terms, such as mass intellectuality and general intellect, can also be seen as

25. Mezzadra 2002, p. 7. Two typical examples of such seminars are Bologna et al. 1993 and Tripodi (ed.) 1996.

bridges from *operaio sociale* to multitude: especially in the late eighties and early nineties, when movements such as the Pantera within higher education prompted some circles to engage in new reflections concerning the nature of intellectual labour.

The picture that emerges from the effort of trying to encompass the gamut of those ways of seeing touched in some important way by *operaismo* and its fallout, is a broad panoply of social figures (Figure 3). The next section will briefly explore each of these categories in turn, since they can tell us a lot about developments within the fallout from *operaismo* since 1980 or thereabouts. For the moment, we can note that whatever else, most are recognisable as class figures, implying particular relationships with capital.²⁶ In its earliest use, perhaps, ‘multitude’ might have been more ambiguous in this sense – but there were always exponents of the term who have insisted on its class nature (for example, the editors of *Derive Approdi*), while Negri has also been heard in

Figure 3



26. If what follows focuses upon the contours of certain class figures, I have tried in Wright 2007 to explore more explicitly the relationship of some of them with(in) capital – for example, as spelled out in the debate around the efficacy (or otherwise) of post-Fordism and general intellect as explanatory categories. On this score, see also a number of the other contributions to Dowling, Nunes and Trott (eds.) 2007.

recent years arguing that multitude is a class category. The next part of this paper, then, will review some of this material, conscious that much remains to be done in developing a proper understanding of the wealth as well as limitations of the various threads that have descended from *operaismo's* collapse a generation ago.

After 1980

The first class subject in Figure 3 is the 'mass worker', the great protagonist of Italy's 'Hot Autumn'. Here, some of the most fascinating work was carried out in the aftermath of the 1980 FIAT defeat, often by editors of the journal *Primo Maggio*, culminating with Marco Revelli's magisterial history of *Lavorare in FIAT*.²⁷ But can the mass worker be dismissed as a subject of purely historical interest? Guido Bianchini once pointed out that '[t]he end of development in one place is development elsewhere',²⁸ and the past twenty years have certainly seen mass workers place their stamp upon a range of once 'peripheral' social formations, from Korea to South Africa. Another important exploration of class composition after 1980, again spearheaded by some members of *Primo Maggio*, concerned workers in the transportation sector: indeed, the journal's work in this area can be seen as anticipating significant cycles of struggle that continue into the present day. As with the mass worker, however, much of the attention paid over the past twenty years to the significance of transport workers in terms of class struggle has typically been the work of other political tendencies.²⁹

While *Primo Maggio* would finally close its doors in the late eighties, a number of its editors have continued with research into working-class history. Bologna, for example, has produced studies of German workers and Nazism, as well as the development of class composition in Italy. As always with historical research conducted by exponents of the 'school of class composition', contemporary political concerns were never far away.³⁰ Indeed, for Bologna, much of his most important labour-related research since the eighties has addressed a social subject quite removed from those examined by *operaismo* in its glory days: the self-employed worker, whose numbers in Italy had increased

27. Revelli 1989.

28. On Bianchini see Lauso Zagato's interview in Borio, Poggi and Roggero (eds.) 2005, p. 334.

29. For a recent consideration of the continued strategic importance of such workers see Silver 2003.

30. See, for example, the 'Preface to Second Edition' of Bologna 1996.

markedly by the early nineties. As he put it at one of the public meetings called to discuss the research of Borio, Pozzi and Roggero:

Self-employed labour, to go back to a theme dear to my heart, is no longer capable of that conflict of which *operaismo* conceived: that is, of workplace conflict [*conflitto sindacale*] as conflict *par excellence*. Not because it is not so disposed subjectively, but because the structure of the relations of production has changed. So a pedigree workerist [*l'operaista doc*] would cancel self-employed labour from the list of subjects, and treat it as the multitude's swamp and Vendée.³¹

In the mid-eighties, many surviving Italian 'pedigree workerists' took heart from the COBAS phenomenon, wherein networks of unofficial rank-and-file groupings primarily based in the public sector (first and foremost, railway staff and teachers) challenged both their employers, and the traditional role of unions in representing employees' interests within the wage relation. While articles on the COBAS can be found across the ex-workerist and left-libertarian press of the time, it was in those journals with a particular focus upon the paid workplace, such as *Collegamenti*, and *Incompatibili*, that the most space was devoted to the new groupings, along with the so-called alternative unions which rubbed shoulders with them in the nineties. With similar movements appearing in France and Spain, the question of such workers' struggles against restructuring – their potentialities for extension into the private sector, the corporatist temptations which they faced – meant that the circumstances of public-sector employees were often to the fore within concrete class composition analyses carried out in the years that spanned the mid-eighties to the early nineties.³²

As Paolo Virno has argued, the experiences of the 'Movement of '77' left a vast range of questions unanswered, questions which would resurface again from the eighties around discussions of social conflict in a time of so-called 'post-Fordism'.³³ In terms of the meaning of political recomposition, such questions included matters of representation and organisation; in terms of changes within class composition, they included the growing importance for capitalist accumulation of labour processes apparently outside the Fordist workplace régimes that had engendered the mass worker. One of these key concepts raised in and around 1977, only to make a significant resurgence in the last decade, is that of precarity. The matter continued to concern the likes of *Collegamenti* and *Primo Maggio* into the early eighties, where attention was often centred upon

31. In Gambino et al. 2002, p. 5.

32. There is an enormous amount of literature relevant to this topic. For an overview of the broader issues as they stood in early 1990s, see Soriano 1992.

33. Virno 2004, Part 4.

those employed on short-term work projects provided for government authorities.³⁴ In terms of a continued practical reference point for this concept within Italy, the struggles of precarious workers wove themselves in and out of a number of broader social conflicts as the eighties progressed, starting with the education sector. By the mid-nineties, ‘precarity’ had become a theme taken up by a section of the social centres movement (an early manifestation of the Tute Bianche was as activists around casualised working conditions) with whom a younger generation of workerist-influenced theorists were engaged.³⁵

The exploration of casual workers’ experiences was also a central theme for a German circle that took up class-composition analysis in the eighties.³⁶ Some of the editors of *Wildcat* later explained this process to John Holloway as follows:

In the beginning of the 1980s the cycle of factory worker struggles was over, but for many young people it was inconceivable to adjust to wage labour and to work away at a job until reaching pension age. Additionally, we ourselves refused to strive individually through a professional career for a better place in the capitalist hierarchy. Out of this grew the practice of jobbing: to do any old shitty job for a short time, in order then to have time for ourselves, for political struggle and for pleasure. In formal terms, we worked under conditions that would later be characterised by the sociologists as ‘precarious’ in the sense of being vulnerable to one-sided measures by capital. But it was even easier then to use the regulations of labour law and the welfare state for our own needs.³⁷

This initial stance shifted significantly as the decade advanced. Elsewhere, amongst the various fragments of workerism, a variety of stances emerged on the question of precarious labour. For example, one former member of the North-American journal *Zerowork* could be heard arguing in the mid eighties that a critical engagement with the informal economy might also provide a ‘basis for social autonomy’. In contrast, Sergio Bologna’s comments at a 1984 Canadian conference on *operaismo* and *autonomia* characterised the notion of ‘precarious labour as self-liberation’ as no more than a passing phase, doomed to extinction with the shakeout of the informal economy itself.³⁸

Circumstances surrounding casual or precarious work would be rather different again by the late nineties, when a younger generation connected to *Wildcat* developed links with small groups elsewhere in Europe and initiated

34. See Scarinzi 1982, Scarinzi 1983.

35. See the work of Andrea Fumagalli concerning guaranteed income, for example Fumagalli 1998.

36. See, for example, *Karlsruher Stadtzeitung* 1984.

37. *Wildcat* 1997.

38. Mattera 1985, p. 129, Bologna’s comments can be found in Bifo et al. 1986, pp. 227–8.

a workers' enquiry into conditions for call-centre workers.³⁹ While their efforts would provoke controversy in some quarters,⁴⁰ they can also be seen as an important spur to a new – and welcome – round of enquiry and co-research undertaken in recent years.⁴¹ In terms of movements, work around precarity has likewise been fundamental to the networks that have made such a success of EuroMayDay of late. Then, again, as Angela Mitropoulos has argued, if precarious labour has in fact been the norm rather than the exception during the capital relation's history, then perhaps, in certain cases, 'the recent rise of precarity is actually its discovery among those who had not expected it', given their blindness to longstanding hierarchies within waged and unwaged labour.⁴²

In the seventies, 'migrant worker' was almost another way of saying 'mass worker' within the *operaista* lexicon, and a number of studies on the subject appeared in the *Materiali Marxisti* book series and elsewhere.⁴³ As Yann Moulier Boutang makes clear, however, even during workerism's heyday, the differing circumstances between Italy and elsewhere paid short shrift to any attempt to transpose insights mechanically from one social formation to the other, particularly in terms of understanding what migration might mean for the process of class recomposition:

I have not yet spoken of an encounter that was decisive for me: that with the comrades of immigration. In fact the question of immigration interested our Italian comrades, especially those of P[otere] O[perai]. Italian immigration was interesting as a mode of propagation, but it was not the theoretical problem of immigration as a fracture [*spaccatura*] within class composition, as a real problem of the latter. I remember that it was difficult to explain to our comrades at FIAT or to Romano Alquati that having 22 nationalities is not the same thing as having one Italian working class: even if there were Italians from the South, it was something different. And when 300 Tunisians were hired at FIAT in '73, I remember perfectly that I said to Alquati, to Toni and to others that this phenomenon needed to be watched closely, because it was very important. That they did not was, I think, a great error...⁴⁴

39. Kolinko 2002.

40. See *Aufheben* 2004.

41. Apart from a number of articles in *Posse*, see also Brancaccio et al. 2005.

42. Mitropoulos 2005.

43. See for example Serafini et al. 1974, Ferrari Bravo (ed.) 1975, Roth 1976.

44. Moulier Boutang 2002, p. 3. He adds: 'to my mind, even if it is naturally easy to revise history, still everything that followed, this radicalisation of the white working class, including the CUBs, then the Brigade Rosse and the other armed groups, happened, when the invisible party was no longer such within the class composition, because it had already dissolved into various situations, and the bosses had a plan to decompose everything completely, to defeat it. I don't remember how many immigrant workers there were at the time, but certainly in the FIAT

Moulier Boutang's own work has long centred upon workers and migration. And in Italy itself, particularly since the beginning of the nineties, there have been a number of important studies of migrant workers undertaken by those informed in some way by the legacy of Italian workerism. Some of the researchers concerned, such as Sandro Mezzadra, view matters from perspectives not inconsistent with the broad *post-operaista* framework; others, such as Gambino and Devi Sacchetto, can be numbered amongst those least sympathetic to what has come to be styled 'post-workerism'. In its detailed dissection of the dissolution and reconstitution of communities in the wake of the Balkan wars, Sacchetto's study of *The North-East and its Orient* drew upon the work of Moulier Boutang and others to illustrate the proposition that 'the more-or-less free movement of migrants is a struggle against the labour market'.⁴⁵ For Sandro Mezzadra, it was likewise an encounter with the research of Moulier Boutang, alongside his own political work in Genoa, which brought home an understanding of migrants as active agents, rather than simply passive victims at the mercy of their circumstances.⁴⁶ According to Mezzadra, the circumstances of migrant workers can be seen as emblematic within contemporary class composition, so long as one avoids reductionist temptations:

We cannot get rid of 'generalizing' concepts precisely because we are aware of their limits, which are the limits of a commonality which cannot be stressed at the expenses of the plurality of peculiar subject positions which defines the composition of living labor. In this way we can talk for example of migrant labor as a subjective figure which shows an element of commonality which is shared by the whole of contemporary living labor (that is, a general attitude to mobility and flexibility, the subjective counterpart of the 'flexible regime of accumulation' described for instance by David Harvey), without for this reason on the one hand sacrificing the subjective and objective peculiarity of the experience of mobility by migrants, and without on the other hand forgetting the radical diversity of migrants' experience itself.⁴⁷

Thus far, the social subjects explored have each had a certain sectoral specificity, for all the claims that might be made on their behalf in terms of commonality. Before turning briefly to the category 'multitude', I want to address two concepts that others with an *operaista* past have engendered in their efforts to construct a more global reading of class composition today. The first of these

defeat of '80, they were already an important variable in the territory. It's a shame, because we truly could have organised things and changed this dynamic a bit'.

45. Sacchetto 2004, p. 262. See also Gambino 2003.

46. Mezzadra 2002, p. 11.

47. Mezzadra 2005, p. 2. See also Neilson and Mezzadra 2003.

is the ‘hyper-proletariat’, a term coined by Romano Alquati. Long a subterranean influence within some of the social centres in Turin, Alquati’s writings have continued to appear, largely through small publishing houses, across the eighties and nineties.⁴⁸ Alongside detailed reflections upon the techniques of co-research, his work has advanced a distinctly original approach to class analysis, the origins of which can be traced back to his ruminations in the seventies on the proletarianisation of intellectual labour. For Alquati, the hyper-proletariat must be understood as ‘a great meta-class’ that today is instantiated in a range of moments. So many moments, in fact, that it seems to have disappeared, at least within the self-awareness of its members, who perceive themselves instead as part of ‘an enormous multitude’ made up of seemingly diverse (and sometimes counterposed) interests. Encompassing the unemployed and many of the formally self-employed, the hyper-proletarians, according to Alquati, currently endure circumstances wherein they ‘admire, exalt, copy, fetishise means (and technologies and machines in particular), even in work. They are convinced that means are more capable than they are. They are mistaken’.⁴⁹ For Alquati, nothing less than a ‘hyper-communism’ is needed to achieve ‘the suppression of the hyperproletariat, even as multitude’.⁵⁰

Franco Berardi’s notion of the ‘cognitariat’ has certain points of convergence with Alquati’s work, especially in the attention paid to the subsumption of intellectual capacities to capital, as well as its curiosity as to what that subsumption might mean for the psyche. But, like other *post-operaista* approaches, many of the most important premises informing Berardi’s outlook are quite alien to Alquati’s insistence upon retaining Marx’s category of value as a central explanatory device. Evolving from earlier reflections upon ‘*the virtual class*, that is the cycle of globalised mental labour’,⁵¹ Berardi’s is an optimistic view that sees possibilities for the self-organisation of ‘cognitive labour’ in the wake of the dot.com crash and global opposition to the current war in Iraq. His cognitariat is narrower, however, than the multitude: perhaps it is the ‘online’ facet of that immaterial labour described by Lazzarato and others. At the same time, Berardi’s analysis is far from being an uncritical celebration of so-called ‘virtual’ culture. As he argued in a 2002 interview,

[t]he idea of the cognitariat, and of the ‘cognitarian’ as a member of the cognitariat, is connected to the idea that during the last years, perhaps the last decade, we lost

48. For example, see Alquati 1994.

49. Alquati 1997, pp. 86, 89.

50. Alquati 2002, p. 14.

51. Berardi 1998, p. 189.

touch with our body – with our social body, and our physical, erotic body. Net culture and all the new forms of digital production and new media have erased our relationship with our social body. But at the time of social and economic crises we are forced to take account of the fact that we do have a body, that in fact we do have a social and a physical body. Cognitarians are the workers of the virtual production. There is a moment when they can become aware of the fact that they are not purely virtual, they are not purely economic, that they also are physical bodies.⁵²

The central role of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in shaping and popularising the term ‘multitude’ is unquestionable. Along with its counterpart ‘Empire’, multitude has been adopted as an explanatory tool by a range of circles in Europe and beyond. Not surprisingly, and again like Empire, it has also been the subject of considerable controversy: not only in the eyes of those left currents that continue to see the world through the lens of Marxist and Leninist orthodoxies, but also for many in what might be termed the libertarian and antagonistic Lefts. These debates are well-known, and the literature on the subject is already extensive. What is more relevant for the discussion here are the sometimes complex, yet discernible bonds that link multitude to a number of earlier categories, from *operaio sociale* to mass intellectuality. Trying to unravel that lineage leads to a number of debates in both Italy and beyond, involving not only Hardt and Negri, but also the likes of Paolo Virno, and many of the authors who have been associated in some way with the journal *Derive Approdi*. With Virno, for example, there are nuances that resonate differently to some of those central to Hardt and Negri’s work: amongst other things, Virno wants to address what Arianna Bové and Erik Empson have called ‘the dark side of the multitude’.⁵³ And it would be remiss not to mention at this point Nick Dyer-Witheford’s rereading of the categories multitude, general intellect and immaterial labour through the prism of Marx’s concept of species-being, which has also been advanced by critical engagement with the work of Hardt and Negri.⁵⁴

The last category concerning social subjectivity may well be the least known of those under discussion, at least within Italy itself (although some forums, such as the nineties journal *Altreragioni*, provided space for arguments emanating from this camp). During the Hot Autumn, Potere Operaio had surmised that behind régimes of feudal rights in Italian agriculture might be found very modern relationships of power between capital and labour. Challenged within its own ranks over the significance of reproduction for class

52. Berardi 2002.

53. Virno 2004, Bové and Empson 2002.

54. Dyer-Witheford 2005.

conflict, the majority within Potere Operaio was unable to make a similar leap in either theory or practice.⁵⁵ On the other side of the Atlantic, however, the implications of this new politics would be taken rather more seriously. Since the late seventies, alongside workerist feminists such as Leopoldina Fortunati, Maria Rosa Dalla Costa and Silvia Federici,⁵⁶ and in the light of mass struggles over reproduction and land, North Americans associated first with *Zerowork* and then *Midnight Notes* have offered an original reading of class composition that, in positing the centrality of unwaged work (whether in the home or in subsistence farming) has paid particular attention to struggles over debt, energy, and enclosures.⁵⁷ It also involved a critique of those positions within *Zerowork* that, like *post-operaismo* in later times, argued that capital had somehow slipped loose from the yoke of value relations. As George Caffentzis explained to the Greek circle TPTG:

Once you saw that the unwaged sector of the working class is really the foundation of the accumulation process then a new priority inevitably develops.... Introducing unwaged workers is not a matter of a contest over who is of 'more or less importance' or of who is more or less exploited, but of having a better understanding of what keeps capitalism alive. Once you bring into focus the largely unwaged part of the reproduction cycle of labor power, then your politics change dramatically. You immediately have to deal with divisions and hierarchies that are often neglected by working class movements and are even engineered into working class organizations. One merely has to glance at the scandalous history of working class racism and sexism to get the point.⁵⁸

Unpacking the category 'unwaged', while no simple matter, would be a useful future exercise. Nor can it be assumed that all who privilege this category agree upon the politics bound up with it: for example, there have been significant differences amongst workerist feminists concerning demands such as 'wages for housework'. More recently, writers such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa have come to rethink the nature of class relations in the light of indigenous movements' efforts to reclaim a non-capitalist relationship with the land, raising questions far beyond Potere Operaio's tentative reflections. If anything, the unexpected arrival of the Zapatistas on the global scene has only further

55. Wright 2002.

56. Fortunati 1995, Dalla Costa 2002, Federici 2004. See also issue 12 of *The Commoner*.

57. Alongside the efforts of *Midnight Notes*, we can also note the work carried out since the late seventies by Harry Cleaver, covering a range of topics from the politics of debt to engagement with the Zapatistas. A useful overview can be found in the preface to the second edition of his *Reading Capital Politically* (Cleaver 2000).

58. TPTG 2001.

stimulated work around these perspectives, which can now be found online at websites such as *The Commoner*.

So there you have it: a whole menagerie of social figures, many of which overlap in content while often differing in meaning. This raises another question: is all of this primarily about the search for a privileged layer within class composition, one that can assert its hegemony over the class as a whole? Monty Neill and other members of *Midnight Notes* have long been emphatic on this score: if much of the *operaismo* of the sixties and seventies entailed efforts ‘in analyzing or searching out class vanguards’, ‘to do a class composition analysis’ today means ‘not to locate a new vanguard, but to help the many class sectors come together’ in ‘the class struggle to cease to be proletarian’.⁵⁹ One useful future exercise, therefore, would be to interrogate the various accounts of the social subjects above from this perspective. Another would be to explore the contemporary meaning of the old workerist category of ‘cycle of struggles’ and its relationship to ‘development’. Can an ongoing dialectic still be posited between the two, as some world systems theorists have done? Or has the bond connecting them snapped forever? In either case, what are the implications for a project of social autonomy aimed at dissolving the capital relation altogether, rather than surviving within it as amenably as possible?

Only connect

‘Only connect’, opening up channels of communication internationally, this is at least as urgently on the Italian agenda in the 1980s as it was in the early 1960s – in spite of a new dimension of massive arrests, authoritarian threats, and attempts to atomize collective interests.⁶⁰

With these words, Ferruccio Gambino closed his brief 1981 account of Italian links to other revolutionary experiences since the days of *Socialisme ou barbarie* and *Correspondence*. And if, thanks to this and other texts, we now know something about such engagements, a lot more work needs to be done in tracing the role of those individuals like Gambino, Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Ed Emery, Harry Cleaver, John Merrington and others who – before and after 1979 – provided gateways through which reflections upon workerist theory and practice could pass in and out of the English-speaking world.⁶¹

59. See ‘Part V. Class Composition and Developing a New Working Class Strategy’, in Neill et al. 1996.

60. Gambino 1986, p. 198.

61. See Cleaver 2001, Linebaugh 1997, Bologna 2003, Gambino 2002.

If interesting work was undertaken by *operaismo*-influenced writers in a number of other countries during the seventies, these tended nonetheless to be overshadowed by developments within Italy itself. That situation changed after 1979. While much translation was undertaken of certain Italian materials in the early eighties – in many cases inseparable from solidarity work with those authors in prison – one of the consequences of repression from 7 April onwards was a heightened geographical expansion in theoretical reflection and research marked by some kind of *operaista* perspective. In part, this stemmed from the diaspora of intellectuals in exile: above all to France, but also elsewhere in Europe or the Americas. But it was also the case that the reverses suffered by exponents of autonomist Marxism within Italy drew attention – for those who still cared – to the work of their compatriots in other places.

France, of course, assumed a pre-eminent role early on as a centre for the unfolding theoretical aftermath of *operaismo*, especially with the sustained engagement between Negri, Deleuze and Guattari. By the end of the eighties, the French connection would be taken to a new level with the founding of the journal *Futur antérieur*, which also involved an encounter with others (such as Jean-Marie Vincent) whose background lay in Trotskyism.⁶² Other enterprises attempted in exile proved less fruitful, recounts Alisa Del Re, ‘due to the differences we had interiorized at the end of the Seventies’.⁶³

In the Britain of the late eighties and early nineties, there were resonances with the so-called ‘open Marxism’ of John Holloway, Werner Bonefeld and others, some of whose theorists also made explicit reference to earlier council-communist traditions. Within Italy, in the early eighties, the journal *Metropoli* can be seen with hindsight as something of a precursor of *post-operaismo*, bringing together figures (such as Virno and Berardi) whose paths had often been quite separate in the times of *Autonomia organizzata*. Prison, too, proved a space that sometimes enabled new intellectual and personal bonds, closing pre-existing distances based upon political alignment or age, forging friendships between the likes of Sergio Bianchi and Luciano Ferrari Bravo that would have their own significance in the years to come.⁶⁴

Growing access to the internet complicated the picture still further a decade later. By then, we can also see efforts to bring understandings of autonomist Marxism developed elsewhere to bear upon the Italian scene. Here is how Massimo De Angelis recalls the early days of the journal *Vis-à-vis*.

62. See Negri 2005. More recently, the website of the French-language publication *Multitudes* has hosted a variety of materials that continue and extend some of the work of *Futur antérieur*, while making increasing numbers of texts available in English.

63. Del Re 2000.

64. See Wright forthcoming for a discussion of intergenerational relations within the Italian radical Left of the eighties and nineties.

I thought that, just as the impact of *operaismo* and Italian Marxism represented a breath of fresh air for American Marxism, opening it to the thematics of subjectivity, repositing in Italy a series of works from American autonomist Marxism (which was sensitive and open to a series of thematics left in the margins by us) could in return contribute positively to going beyond musty old diatribes and rigid political and theoretical attitudes.⁶⁵

Whether that particular exercise proved successful remains a matter of debate. On the other hand, as Enda Brophy has pointed out, for more than a decade there has been an engagement between certain English-language writers in communication studies, and some Italian theorists identified with *post-operaismo*. Perhaps the emblematic text here on the English-language side is Nick Dyer-Witheford's *Cyber-Marx*, published in 1999.⁶⁶ From the Italian side, Franco Berardi – whose own reflections frequently percolate into English via media-activist channels intrigued with his work in Telestreet and elsewhere – has demonstrated a similar interest in Dyer-Witheford's writings. Less well known amongst English-language readers, yet of great relevance in this regard, is Christian Marazzi's work on the place of language in contemporary production, collective identity and conflict.⁶⁷

If the threads of autonomist Marxism had become even more diffuse by the nineties, there were nonetheless some fora which served as points of encounter. Without question, the most successful of these was the journal *Derive Approdi*, which, for much of its existence, was an important crossroads for encounters between different viewpoints from the many strands stemming from *operaismo* – and the place of a certain contamination and dialogue between them and other experiences. In its final issues, *Derive Approdi* extended its gaze beyond Italy, to examine social conflicts across the globe in the wake of the 'movement of movements'.⁶⁸ For its part, the journal *Altreragioni* challenged restorationist and revisionist sentiments within historiography, while devoting much space to discussions of war and migration, as well as new work régimes and the struggles they inspired.

In their account of *operaismo*, Borio, Pozzi and Roggero argue that, at its peak, the tendency established a mechanism through which the ideas of a small band of theorists were transmitted, via a diffuse layer of cadres, to a

65. De Angelis 2002, p. 4.

66. Dyer-Witheford 1999, Chapter 9.

67. See Marazzi 1994, Marazzi 2002. A section of the first text can be found in Henninger, Mecchia and Murphy (eds.) 2007.

68. *Derive Approdi* is now a publishing house printing and reprinting a rich catalogue of *operaista*, *post-operaista* and other texts.

broad mass movement.⁶⁹ Whatever the accuracy of their assertions, no one could seriously advance such claims about the relationship between the theoretical strands of Italian autonomist Marxism and the movements that have emerged since the eighties. All the same, certain linkages can sometimes be traced, especially since the nineties. But while the differences amongst certain autonomist-Marxist frameworks during the nineties paralleled in part differences within the revived Italian movement itself, anyone with personal experience of such matters can say how imperfect such resonances could sometimes be. To take one example: by the mid-nineties, a growing affinity could be detected between Antonio Negri and the political formation descended from the dominant autonomist faction in the Veneto twenty years before. On one fundamental level, however, that of self-defined political identity, important contrasts could still be seen, with Negri continuing to claim the mantle of communism, while the circles around Radio Sherwood and the 'rete autonoma del nord-est' explicitly abandoned that label.

Finally, it must not be thought that many of the connections being established or re-established after 1979 were only the work of threads emanating from the central trunk of *operaismo*. In the eighties, *Collegamenti* translated materials not only from *Wildcat* in Germany, but also *Processed World* in the US. Alongside the importance it assigned to struggles in Africa, *Midnight Notes* on the East Coast expressed an early interest in the Swiss autonomist movement, while the book *Bolo'Bolo*, by a Swiss editor of the journal, found a certain resonance with *Processed World* on the West Coast. And, in Britain, one of the most consistent interlocutors with *operaismo* and its aftermath has been the editorial collective of *Aufheben*, a journal whose sensibilities are informed by left communism as much as anything else.

Wrapping things up for now

My answer is, 'it depends'...⁷⁰

I would like to end on a provocative note: first with some thoughts about the varying understandings of a few other key terms and texts, then with some comments taken from the interviews carried out for *Futuro Anteriore*. There

69. In terms of the first groups, Borio, Pozzi and Roggero speak of 'that restricted number of subjects with an effective autonomy of research and capacity for political proposition' (2002, p. 40). Elsewhere Borio has spoken more bluntly of 'a few people who could be counted on the fingers of one hand'. See Cuccomario et al. 2002.

70. Alquati 1993, p. 1.

are a number of points of references that, whatever the passage of years, remain as crucial markers for understanding what has happened in so-called autonomist Marxism since 1979. Let us start with Marx's 'Fragment on Machines', which first made its appearance in Italian in the pages of *Quaderni Rossi*. Here, it is hard to resist saying the following: 'Tell me your views on the "Fragment on Machines", and I'll tell you your views on everything else'. Many readers will have encountered some or other *post-operaista* treatment of this text – perhaps that provided by Paolo Virno, which dovetails with his reading of Marx's category 'communism of capital'⁷¹ – and can discern easily enough the political consequences that stem from those interpretations. But there are other, lesser-known readings that also deserve consideration. Some may also be aware of Alquati's continued insistence that the key consequence of Marx's line of argument in this section of the *Grundrisse* is that capital cannot escape socially-necessary labour-time's function at the heart of its own valorisation.⁷² But what can we make of his assertion, back in 1977, that follows?

Above all Marx is not speaking here of the future, but of the capitalist system of his time, of the factory as it already functioned then. He is not speaking in fact of the end of capitalist valorisation, but of a passage within the real subsumption of the textile industry towards the middle of the nineteenth century.⁷³

Another theme worthy of exploration is the borrowing from other social theories by strands emerging from the wreckage of *operaismo*. Some of this ground has been well-covered, particularly in terms of engagement with French theory (but how many commentators reach back before 1979 to examine *in detail* the French connection to 'Mao-dadaism' in Bologna?).⁷⁴ Other terrain is less well-known. For example: how did the category of post-Fordism become a fundamental explanatory device for so many of the ex-workerist strands after 1979? Unlike the debate within the English-speaking Left (much of it in the academy, especially in and around the world of radical geography),⁷⁵ where those who adopted this term as a useful explanatory tool often saw post-Fordism as a positive development for workers, former workerists in Europe have tended both to embrace the category while imbuing

71. Virno 2004, pp. 110–11.

72. Alquati 1997, p. 174.

73. Alquati 1977, p. 45. For a critique of Negri's abandonment of the category socially-necessary labour-time as a means of understanding contemporary capitalism, see Henninger 2007.

74. For two exceptions to this lack, see Morris 1978 and Mecchia 2006.

75. See the essays collected in Amin (ed.) 2001.

it with largely negative connotations.⁷⁶ Only Ferruccio Gambino, to my knowledge, has explicitly rejected the term as ‘a rather blunt instrument’. Thus, where others see the ‘smooth world’ of Empire, he sees a growing regionalisation of capitalist blocs within which a diversity of strategies are deployed to secure the subordination of ‘the labour factor’:

not the transition to a post-Fordist model, but a continuous recombination of old and new elements of domination in order to decompose labour power politically within a newly flexibilised system of production.⁷⁷

This notion of ‘a continuous recombination of old and new elements of domination’ is echoed in the work of an associate of Gambino, Massimiliano Tomba, who has sought to de-historicise and subject to critique the reading of formal and real subsumption that *post-operaismo* has developed from earlier workerist debates around Marx’s critique of political economy.⁷⁸

That so much remains in contention concerning *operaismo*’s legacy is thrown into relief by three brief fragments from the *Futuro Anteriore* interviews. The first observation belongs to Mario Dalmaviva, one of the many participants in the *operaista* adventure who deserves to be better known outside Italy, and who characterised the state of play back in February 2001 in these terms:

In my opinion there was a great social revolution in Italy. It didn’t become a political revolution as we had wanted, and yet it happened, and it prompted a ferocious reaction from the other side [*controparte*] that’s continued up until the present day. They won, but not only don’t they know where they’re going, they don’t even know where they are. The problem is that we don’t know either.⁷⁹

76. See Wright 2007, for a brief discussion of affinities and dissonances amongst *ex-operaisti* when addressing the theme of post-Fordism. Tajani and Roggero 2005 have provided a very useful summary of what, in the *post-operaista* debate, is seen as the key features of the transition to post-Fordism: 1) ‘the passage from a productive system based upon large vertically integrated production units to a territorially diffuse system of production, with reticularly articulated small units’; 2) ‘the growing weight of formally self-employed and independent labour, with the accentuation of various forms of flexibility, parallel to the progressive reduction of employed labour and growing casualisation of jobs’; 3) ‘the more general tendency towards the multiplication of employment regimes, even within situations of analogous work or equivalent job roles’; 4) ‘the increased requirement in the production process (including within large factories) for cognitive, relational, linguistic, communicative and other faculties (including those called “immaterial”); 5) ‘the refurbished importance of the IT revolution, as instrument and paradigm of networked production’; 6) ‘the structural permanence of quotients of employed labour deployed in the lowliest, most degrading jobs, often undertaken by male and female migrant workers in particularly oppressive conditions’ (pp. 153–4).

77. Gambino 1996.

78. See Tomba 2007.

79. Dalmaviva 2002, p. 12.

The second comment is from Alisa Del Re, one of the few female voices within what has always been a largely male enterprise,⁸⁰ and whose interview for *Futuro Anteriore* is the first so far to be published in English. A workerist feminist whose political and theoretical work charted its own distinctive course from the seventies, Del Re was also amongst those imprisoned as part of the notorious ‘7 April case’. Looking back over the past twenty-five years or so, she has this to say:

Today, when I hear of the feminisation of labour, affective labour or immaterial labour, I laugh: it feels like they are joking because we used to say these things every day in the ‘70s, when we imagined that there is a form of labour that is neither accountable nor measured and yet is what makes us reproduce the labour-power and allows for material production to take place, something without which material production is impossible. The fact that, when it was emerging, the movement never made these issues its own allowed the capitalist productive structure a great advantage that we are now chasing after, because all current debates on immaterial labour and, I insist, affectivity (Toni calls it precisely that, as well as ‘affection’) in production, are things that capital has already made operative. In this there is another issue that women have long debated and that in my view could correct from a theoretical standpoint this analysis of immaterial production: this is the issue of the body. This is not to say: ‘we have a body that we have to take care of because we have to be healthy, we are not happy with our body and so on’. Capital has already talked about this. Our argument is rather that production is certainly immaterial, but this cannot come into reality independently of bodies.⁸¹

The final words go to Paolo Virno. Reflecting upon the early nineties, when *Luogo Comune* and *Futur antérieur* developed different, yet in part complementary, social analyses – analyses dissected with typical aplomb by Ferrari Bravo⁸² – Virno identified certain important limits within some variants of the early *post-operaista* project.

Its attention was always directed more to understanding, for better or worse, some guiding lights, rather than truly facing up to the processes of class recomposition, with their ambiguity and character which, far from given, was often blocked.⁸³

80. Of the 58 individuals interviewed for *Futuro Anteriore*, five were women – probably a reasonable reflection of gender balance within *operaismo*’s history (although it must be said that not all of those interviewed, male or female, considered themselves to have been *operaisti*).

81. Del Re 2000.

82. See Ferrari Bravo 2001.

83. Virno 2002, p. 16.

In a subsequent discussion with the authors of *Futuro Anteriore*, Virno suggests that, since Seattle, there has been a growing ‘representation and self-identification’ of those layers of social labour-power closest to the movements against global capital: ‘mass intellectual labour, linguistic labour, precarious labour’, albeit often in an ‘ethical-symbolic’ sense. Noting that such layers have ‘exploded’ the chain of class figures traditionally identified by *operaismo* (professional worker, mass worker etc.), he draws us back to

one of the most interesting questions of the whole workerist tradition, even if it is rarely thematised as such: the form of struggle was the lynchpin [*soglia*] connecting the class’s technical composition and political composition, it lies at the heart of the various theories of organization. So the problem is how the movement can turn to the terrain of the relations of production and therefore how – on the level of migrations, of intellectual property, of the social working day – it can damage and bring down the adversary.⁸⁴

The book *Empire* famously presents the contemporary world system as one in which power is decentred – an assertion that has, of late, been subjected to increased questioning.⁸⁵ Whatever the truth of the matter, the time has come to examine critically the various threads stemming from *operaismo* in a similarly decentred way. Above all, this will mean judging each on its own merits as a contribution to comprehending contemporary global power relations as a whole – not simply those entailing ‘some guiding lights’ – and so in terms of how each such thread can best contribute to the collective project of ‘damag[ing] and bringing down the adversary’.

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