Storming Heaven

Storming Heaven

Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism

SECOND EDITION

Steve Wright

Foreword by Harry Cleaver
Afterword by Riccardo Bellofiore and Massimiliano Tomba

PlutoPress
www.plutobooks.com

First published 2002; Second edition published 2017 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

The afterword by Riccardo Bellofiore and Massimiliano Tomba first appeared in the Italian edition of this book, published by Edizioni Alegre, whom we thank for their permission to reprint it here. The text has been translated by Steve Wright.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 9991 1 Hardback
ISBN 978 0 7453 9990 4 Paperback
ISBN 978 1 7868 0116 6 PDF eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0118 0 Kindle eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0117 3 EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England

Simultaneously printed in the United Kingdom and United States of America

Contents

Introduction

The cusp of the new century has seen something of an upsurge of the anti-statist left in Western countries and beyond, as part of a broader movement against global capital. If much of this resurgence can rightly be claimed by various anarchist tendencies, autonomist Marxism has also encountered renewed interest of late (Dyer-Witheford 1999). Given that the core premises of autonomist Marxism were first developed in Italy during the 1960s and 1970s, now is an opportune time to examine their origin and development within the stream of Italian Marxism known popularly as *operaismo* (literally, 'workerism').

By the late 1970s, *operaismo* had come to occupy a central place within the intellectual and political life of the Italian left. While its impact was most apparent in the field of labour historiography, discussions concerning the changing nature of the state and class structure, economic restructuring and appropriate responses to it – even philosophical debates on the problem of needs – were all stamped with workerism's characteristic imprint (Pescarolo 1979). Nor was its influence confined simply to circles outside the Italian Communist Party (PCI), as the attention then paid to its development by leading party intellectuals – some of them former adherents – made clear (D'Agostini 1978).

None the less, workerism's weight remained greatest within the tumultuous world of Italian revolutionary politics, above all amongst the groups of Autonomia Operaia (Workers' Autonomy). As the three major political formations to the left of the PCI plunged into crisis after their disappointing performance in the 1976 national elections, Autonomia began to win a growing audience within what was then the largest far left in the West. When a new movement emerged in and around Italian universities the following year, the autonomists were to be the only organised force accepted within it. With their ascent, workerist politics, marginalised nationally for half a decade, would return with a vengeance.

Curiously, these developments then engendered little interest within the English-speaking left. While the rise of Eurocommunism in the 1970s made Italian politics topical, encouraging the translation both of Communist texts and some of their local Marxist critiques, the efforts of the workerist left were passed over in silence. Little, indeed, of workerist material had at that point been translated at all, and what was available – pertaining for the most part to *operaismo*'s 'classical' phase during the

1960s – gave a somewhat outdated view of its development. It is not surprising, therefore, that on the few occasions when reference was made to workerism in the English language, it was often to a caricature of the Italian tendency. Despite this, workerist perspectives did succeed in touching some sections of the British and North American left. The advocates of 'Wages for Housework', whose controversial views were to spark a lively debate amongst feminists (Malos 1980), drew many of their arguments from the writings of the workerist-feminist Mariarosa Dalla Costa. In a similarly iconoclastic vein, the male editors of *Zerowork* set about reinterpreting contemporary working-class struggles in the US and abroad from a viewpoint strikingly different to those of other English-speaking Marxists (Midnight Notes 1990). Yet even these endeavours, while worthy of note in their own right, were to contain nuances quite different to those of their Italian counterparts, and could shed only limited light upon *operaismo* as it had developed in its place of origin.

Ironically, it would take the dramatic incarceration in 1979 of most of Autonomia's leading intellectuals for workerism to finally attract some attention in the English-speaking left. Once again, unfortunately, the image that emerged was a distorted one, focusing almost exclusively upon the ideas of one individual. Certainly, as the most intellectually distinguished of those arrested, and the leading ideologue of a major wing of Autonomia, Antonio Negri's views were of considerable importance. When *operaismo* was filtered via French theorists such as Deleuze and Guattari, however, as became the fashion in certain circles, the resulting *melange* – if not unfaithful to the development of Negri's own thought – served only to obscure the often fundamental disagreements that existed between different tendencies within both workerism and Autonomia. The paucity of translations has been remedied somewhat over the past two decades, with the appearance of anthologies such as *Radical Thought in Italy* (Virno and Hardt 1996), alongside some useful if brief introductory texts (Moulier 1989; Cleaver 2000). Still, the equation by English-language readers of workerist and autonomist theory with Negri and his closest associates remains a common one.

What then is workerism? Within the Marxist lexicon, it is a label which has invariably borne derogatory connotations, evoking those obsessed with industrial workers to the exclusion of all other social forces. Such a broad definition, however, could be applied with equal justification to many others of the political generation of 1968, and does nothing to pinpoint the specific properties of *operaismo*. The latter's origins lie, rather, at the beginning of the 1960s, when young dissidents in the PCI and Socialist Party first attempted to apply Marx's

critique of political economy to an Italy in the midst of a rapid passage to industrial maturity. In this they were motivated not by a philological concern to execute a more correct reading of Marx, but the political desire to unravel the fundamental power relationships of modern class society. In the process, they sought to confront *Capital* with 'the *real* study of a *real* factory',* in pursuit of a clearer understanding of the new instances of independent working-class action which the 'Northern Question' of postwar economic development had brought in its wake (De Martinis and Piazzi 1980: v). In the words of Harry Cleaver, such a political reading

> self-consciously and unilaterally structures its approach to determine the meaning and relevance of every concept to the immediate development of working-class struggle ... eschew[ing] all detached interpretation and abstract theorising in favour of grasping concepts only within that concrete totality of struggle whose determinations they designate. (Cleaver 2000: 30)

The most peculiar aspect of Italian workerism in its evolution across the following two decades was to be the importance that it placed upon the relationship between the material structure of the working class, and its behaviour as a subject autonomous from the dictates of both the labour movement and capital. This relationship workerism would call the nexus between the technical and political composition of the class. 'Slowly, with difficulty', Mario Tronti had proclaimed in 1966,

> and in truth without much success, the Marxist camp has acquired the idea of an internal history of capital, entailing the specific analysis of the various determinations which capital assumes in the course of its development. This has led justly to the end of historical materialism, with its hackneyed *Weltgeschichte*, but is still a long way from assuming, as both a programme of work and a methodological principle in research, the idea of an internal history *of the working class*. (Tronti 1971: 149)

This book traces the development of the central trunk of *operaismo*, which passed through the experience of the revolutionary group Potere Operaio (Workers' Power). In doing so, it seeks to gauge the analytical efficacy of that tendency's most distinctive category – class composition

* While the Italian original of this text reads 'the real stage [stadio] of a real factory', I believe this to be a typographical error.

– by measuring it against the emergence of new forms of political mobilisation during and after Italy's postwar economic 'miracle'. Rightly or wrongly, workerism saw itself engaged in an assault upon the heavens of class rule. To its mind, the only valid starting point for any theory that sought to be revolutionary lay in the analysis of working-class behaviour in the most advanced sectors of the economy. More than anything else, it was to be this quest to discover the 'political laws of motion' of the commodity labour-power which came to mark workerism out from the rest of the Italian left of the 1960s and 1970s.

At its best, the discourse on class composition would attempt to explain class behaviour in terms long submerged within Marxism, beginning with that struggle against the twin tyrannies of economic rationality and the division of labour. At its worst, *operaismo* would substitute its own philosophy of history for that of Marx's epigones, abandoning the confrontation with working-class experience in all its contradictory reality to extol instead a mythical Class in its Autonomy. At first inextricably linked, by the 1970s these rational and irrational moments of its discourse had, under the pressure of practical necessities, separated into quite distinct tendencies. By that decade's end, workerism's project had fallen into disarray, much like those who dared to build the Tower of Babel. And while it did not end well, the grandeur and the misery of its collapse offer important insights to those who continue to seek a world without bosses.

Two decades after 1968, Paul Ginsborg (1990), Robert Lumley (1990) and others would offer fine accounts of the Italian social conflict of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the movements and outlooks bound up with it. To date, however, there has only been one book-length account of workerism as a distinctive stream within postwar Italian radical culture (Berardi 1998). Like its author, I believe that, of all the elements specific to *operaismo*, those relating to its thematic of class composition remain the most novel and important. Noting that for workerism this concept had come to assume the role played within Italian Communist thought by *hegemony*, Sergio Bologna (1977d: 61) would none the less caution that it is 'ambiguous. It is a picklock that opens all doors.' To discover how this tool was forged, and to assess the extent to which it might yet be of service, is the purpose of this book.

1

Weathering the 1950s

'So-called *operaismo*', noted Antonio Negri a year or so before his arrest in April 1979, had emerged above all 'as an attempt to reply politically to the crisis of the labour movement during the 1950s' (Negri 1979a: 31). A worldwide phenomenon, this crisis proved especially serious in Italy, where the crushing of revolutionary Hungary and the collapse of the Stalin myth dovetailed with a domestically induced malaise already hanging over much of the left. Together these dislocations were to become the primary concerns of a new approach to Marxism which would both anticipate the Italian new left of the 1960s and provide the soil from which workerism itself would directly spring.

THE PRICE OF POSTWAR RECONSTRUCTION

The 1950s were a period of profound transformation for Italian society. The aftermath of the Second World War left much of the economy, particularly in the North, in a state of chaos. Industrial production stood at only one-quarter the output of 1938, the transport sector lay in tatters and agriculture languished. A combination of inadequate diet and low income (real wages had fallen to one-fifth the 1913 level) meant that for large sectors of the population, physical survival overrode all other considerations. Yet by the end of the following decade the nation's economic situation was startlingly different, with dramatic rises in output, productivity and consumption: Italy's 'miracle' had arrived with a flourish (Clough 1964: 315; Gobbi 1973: 3).

Even as those working the land declined in number, the rate of growth in the agricultural sector actually increased slightly between 1950 and 1960. From the middle of the decade, as secondary industry began to develop extensively, excess labour-power was encouraged to embark upon an internal migration from countryside to city, and above all from South to North. While important new investments in plant were made in Italy's North-East (petrochemicals) and South (ferrous metals), the tendency remained that of concentrating large-scale industry in the traditional Northern triangle formed by Genoa, Turin and Milan. The most dynamic sectors located here were those bound up with the

production of a new infrastructure: housing, electricity, petrochemicals, ferrous metals and autos. Industrial production had already matched prewar levels by the end of the 1940s; by 1953 it had jumped another 64 per cent, and had almost doubled again by 1961 (Lieberman 1977: 95–119). All of which moved one writer in the March 1966 issue of the *Banco Nazionale del Lavoro Quarterly Review* to note that

> the prodigious progress made by the Italian economic system in recent years, a progress the like of which has never been seen in the economic history of Italy or any other country. (De Meo 1966: 70)

Not that such growth sprang from a void, or that its progression had been linear, smooth. The fundamental premises of the 'miracle', instead, were established in the late 1940s only after a massive shift in the relations of force between the major classes. Italy's industrial base may have been profoundly disorganised in 1945, but as De Cecco (1972: 158) has pointed out, 'the situation was not at all desperate, especially in comparison with other [European] countries'. While neither the social dislocation caused by the war nor Italy's continuing dependence upon the importation of raw materials could be dismissed lightly, it was also true that much of the country's prewar fixed capital remained intact, or had even been enlarged due to wartime demands. If any major obstacle to accumulation existed, therefore, it was the working class itself. For many workers, and particularly those Northerners who had seized their workplaces during the struggle against Mussolini and the Wehrmacht, the future promised, if not the imminent advent of socialism – although this too was heralded in many factories – then certainly major improvements in work conditions and pay, along with a greater say over production in general. While it was hardly a return to the heady days of 1920, this new-found power within the labour process also allowed workers to flex their muscles beyond the factory walls, leading to freezes upon both layoffs and the price of bread. Yet no matter how restrained in reality, such assertiveness was still more than the functionaries of Italian capital were prepared to concede; for them, the path to postwar reconstruction could only pass through the restoration of labour docility. (Salvati 1972; Foa 1980: 137–62)

After their prominent role in the Resistance, the military defeat of fascism and Nazism in Central and Southern Italy ushered in a period of impressive growth for the parties of the left, from which the Communists – the current most firmly rooted in the factories – would benefit most of all. But the line which party leader Palmiro Togliatti proclaimed upon his return from exile in 1944 was to surprise and disappoint

many members who, however ingenuously, associated the PCI with the goal of socialist revolution. Togliatti was too shrewd a politician not to recognise the lessons that the Greek experience held out to anyone contemplating insurrection in post-Yalta Western Europe, but it would be wrong to think that international considerations restrained an otherwise aggressive impulse to revolutionary solutions. Building upon the tradition of party policy established with the defeat of the Communist left in the 1920s, the PCI leadership was to advance a course which sought to unite the great mass of Italians against that 'small group of capitalists' seen as objectively tied to fascism. Within such a strategy the open promotion of class antagonism could only be an obstacle. The aim instead was to build a 'new party', one capable of expanding its influence within both the 'broad masses' and the new government, immune to the 'sectarianism' of those militants who spoke bluntly of establishing working-class power (Montaldi 1976: 87–8). Nor did this course alter with the fall of Mussolini's puppet 'social republic' in the North. For Togliatti, the decisive arena for gains in post-fascist Italy was to be not the world of the workshop or field, but that of formal politics, where accommodation with other social groups was a prerequisite for participation. The conditions under which the PCI had entered government at war's end were not entirely to its suiting, yet there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of his admission that the leadership had gone ahead just the same

> because we are Italians, and above everything we pose the good of our country, the good of Italy, the freedom and independence of Italy that we want to see saved and reconquered ... (quoted in Montaldi 1976: 99)

And the party was to be as good as its word. As Franco Botta (1975: 51–2) has shown, in the immediate postwar period the PCI moved 'with extreme prudence on the economic terrain, subordinating the struggle for economic changes to the quest for large-scale political objectives, such as the Constituent Assembly and the Constitution'. Togliatti (1979: 40) put it thus upon his return from the Soviet Union: 'today the problem facing Italian workers is not that of doing what was done in Russia'; on the contrary, what was needed was a resumption of economic growth within the framework of private ownership so as to ensure the construction of a 'strong democracy'. Togliatti urged working-class participation in such a project of reconstruction, envisioning recovery 'on the basis of low costs of production, a high productivity of labour and high wages', in the belief that the effective demand of the 'popular masses', rather than the

unfettered expansion of free market forces proposed by liberal thinkers, would serve as the chief spur to economic expansion. (Quoted in Botta 1975: 57)

Would such an alternative model of development have been feasible in the 1940s? There is no simple answer to such speculation, although similar notions continued to inform the thinking of the left unions well into the next decade (Lange et al. 1982: 112; Ginsborg 1990: 188–90). What remains interesting is that, whatever the polemical tone of Togliatti's attack upon liberals like Luigi Einaudi, his own views on development shared more assumptions with such opponents than he realised. The most important of these affinities was the emphasis placed upon a substantial increase in productivity as the path to Italy's salvation. In practical terms, however, any rise on this score – which at that point in time offered employees the simple alternative of working harder or being laid off – could only be won at the expense of that level of working-class shopfloor organisation achieved during the Resistance. True children of the Comintern, for whom the organisation and form of production were essentially neutral in class terms, the PCI leadership saw no great problem in conceding – in the name of a 'unitary' economic reconstruction – the restoration of managerial prerogative within the factories. After all, wasn't productivity ultimately a problem of technique? The factories must be 'normalised', argued the bulletin of the Milan party federation in July 1945. The fact that new organs had been created which offered 'an ever-more vast participation and control of workers over production' could not mean the removal of 'labour' and 'discipline' from their rightful place at the top of the immediate agenda. Another party document from September of that year stated things more bluntly: 'the democratic control of industry by workers means only control against speculation, but must not disturb the freedom of initiative of senior technical staff' (quoted in Montaldi 1976: 259, 267). As one FIAT worker later put it:

> I remember straight after the war Togliatti came to speak in Piazza Crispi – and then De Gasperi came – and they both argued exactly the same thing; the need to save the economy ... We've got to work hard because Italy's on her knees, we've been bombarded by the Americans ... but don't worry because if we produce, if we work hard, in a year or two we'll all be fine ... So the PCI militants inside the factory set themselves the political task of producing to save the national economy, and the workers were left without a party. (Quoted in Partridge 1980: 419)

In 1947, having invested so much energy in tempering working-class resistance to 'reconstruction', the parties of the historic left found themselves unceremoniously expelled from the De Gasperi government. Christian democratic political hegemony brought with it massive American aid, and the triumph of a model of industrial development that combined efforts to impose the unbridled discipline of the law of value in some sectors with selective state encouragement of others. In practice this involved production for the international market underpinned by low wages, low costs and high productivity; a sharp deflationary policy to control credit and wages; the elimination of economically 'unviable' firms, and the maintenance of high unemployment. To make matters worse for the labour camp, the union movement found itself split – with American and Vatican connivance – along political lines, enabling employers to open an offensive in the workplace against militants of the left parties and their union confederation, the CGIL (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro – the Italian General Confederation of Labour). (Ginsborg 1990: 141–93)

Closed in upon itself ideologically, its hard core of skilled workers disorientated by victimisation, the CGIL's isolation from the daily reality of the shopfloor would be symbolised by the loss in 1955 of its majority amongst the union representatives elected to FIAT's Commissione Interna (Contini 1978). Nor were the union's subsequent efforts to face up to its malaise helped by the significant changes then occurring within both the production processes and workforce employed in industry. Stimulated in part by the prospect of new markets which Italy's entry into the Common Market offered, investment in new plant by the largest Northern employers increased significantly in the second half of the decade (Lichtner 1975: 175–82; King 1985: 69–77). At the same time, the biggest firms began to recruit amongst a new generation of workers, men and women with little experience of either factory work or unionism. In all, Italy's manufacturing workforce would grow by 1 million during the years of the economic 'miracle'. At first these new employees were predominantly of Northern origin; as the 1950s drew to a close, however, entrepreneurs turned increasingly to the thousands of Southerners lured Northwards by the lack of jobs at home and the promise of a large pay packet (Alasia and Montaldi 1960; Fofi 1962; Partridge 1996). And just as such industrialisation only exacerbated differences between what had long appeared to be two discrete nations within Italy – the advanced North and semi-feudal Mezzogiorno – so too its benefits failed to extend themselves uniformly to all classes in society. As a consequence, the Italian labouring population which saw the 1960s draw near appeared markedly weaker and more divided than

that of a decade before, a depressing view to which the lag of wage increases far behind those of productivity paid further mute testimony. (King 1985: 87)

The ambiguous legacy of the historic left

That 'unforgettable' year of 1956, as Pietro Ingrao has called it, marked a genuine watershed in the history of the PCI. As the first cracks appeared in the Soviet Party's facade, Togliatti pronounced ominously upon certain 'dangers of bureaucratic degeneration' in the USSR, vigorously denouncing all the while the rebellious workers of Poznan and Budapest as tools of reaction (Bocca 1973: 618; Ajello 1979: 389–90; Togliatti 1979: 141). Formally committing the party to the 'Italian road to socialism' it had followed for years, Togliatti also used the occasion to stamp out those insurrectionalist tendencies that lingered on within the PCI (Montaldi 1971: 369). Firmly embedded in a Stalinist matrix, such elements constituted in their own distorted manner what little that remained of the PCI's original class politics. A whole layer of middle-ranking cadre, who viewed Khrushchev with suspicion – not for complicity in Stalin's tyranny, but for having dared criticise him at all – found themselves slowly eased from positions of responsibility. The 8th Party Congress ushered a new levy of future leaders into the Central Committee, as an even greater 'renovation' occurred in the PCI's important federal committees, with the overwhelming majority of *Komitetchiki* henceforth party members of less than a decade's standing (Ajello 1979: 427). Whilst the most prominent of the older 'hards' managed, in exchange for their silence on current policy, to remain within the PCI's leading bodies, the small number of militants and functionaries who objected to the new regime were simply driven out of the party (Peragalli 1980).

Thus, if PCI membership would decline overall by the end of the decade, with a noticeable loss of liberal intellectuals disenchanted more with international events than the party's domestic policies, there was to be no exodus by rank-and-file Communists like those which devastated Communist parties in the English-speaking world. Indeed, when the PCI did emerge from its uncertainties it was to do so as a much-invigorated force, the correctness of its postwar course as a national-popular 'new party' largely confirmed in the leadership's eyes (Asor Rosa 1975: 1622).

For the other major party of the left, by contrast, 1956 would be experienced as a fundamental break. Always a strange political creature, the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) had been born anew in the final days