

ANTONIO

NEGRI

MARX IN MOVEMENT



TRANSLATED BY ED EMERY

Marx in Movement

Antonio Negri

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Operaismo in Context

Translated by Ed Emery

polity

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Contents

Introduction: Marx in <i>operaismo</i> , a Long Road	1
Part I From the Mass Worker to the Social Worker	
1 Archaeology and Project: The Mass Worker and the Social Worker	11
2 On Recent Trends in the Communist Theory of the State: A Critical Review	39
3 Labour Value: Crisis and Problems of Reconstruction in Postmodernity	76
Part II Workers and Capital Today	
4 Marx and Labour: The Path to Disutopia	85
5 The Capital–Labour Relationship in Cognitive Capitalism <i>Antonio Negri and Carlo Vercellone</i>	100
6 The Organic Composition of Capital Today	111
7 General Intellect and the Social Individual in Marx’s <i>Grundrisse</i>	122
Part III Polemical Considerations	
8 <i>Operai e capitale</i> Fifty Years On: What Has Happened in the Working Class since Marx? <i>Antonio Negri and Mario Tronti</i>	143

9	On Tronti's Autonomy of the Political	156
10	Post- <i>operaismo</i> ? No, Just <i>operaismo</i> !	166
	Notes	177

Introduction

Marx in *operaismo*, a Long Road

In *operaismo* [workerism],* the reading of Marx is done from a particular viewpoint, which is that of the class struggle, and this means that such a reading takes as its starting point the cognitive interest of communist militants involved in the class struggle. Marx is, as it were, an open book from which processes of inquiry [*inchiesta*], theoretical research and political intervention by communists can draw their tools, which change with the passing of time in the long continuity of revolutionary political excavation. In workerism Marx is addressed in an open reading; his books are periodically selected or privileged when they are found to be particularly relevant to the development of the class struggle and to the changes that take place in its composition.

I can start from an set of initial questions. What is workerism's relationship to history? What is the 'historical materialism' of workerism's key writers? The answer is simple: in workerist writings you do not find any teleological, finalist or positivist historicism – the kind of historical view that points to the victory of the working class as necessary, close at hand, and inscribed in the nature of working-class struggle. History is the *historicity* of its subjects, seen as being in a state of continuous transformation, which is based on transformations in living labour – in its relationship with machines and with cooperation; and another thing that needs to be considered is the subjectivation and accumulation of the institutions that represent the composition of the working class at any given time.

* Translator's note: For the purposes of this volume I use 'workerism' as a translation of *operaismo* in some chapters, although it has slightly negative overtones in English.

If one relates the practice of this materialist approach to the reading of particular texts by Marx, one finds a shift right at the origins of workerism. At the beginning the tendency was to focus on volume 2 of *Capital*, which analyses the relationship between factory and society and the transition from extraction of surplus value in the factory to its accumulation at the level of social circulation. Then there was a shift to volume 3 of *Capital*, where the analysis moves up, to the level of the abstraction of value and to analysis of globalization; and it was followed by a shift to volume 1 of *Capital*; to the *Grundrisse*, where the historical theme of the subjectivation of struggles is the principal starting point of analysis; and also to the pages of the ‘Fragment on Machines’, at a point where analysis led to an identification of cognitive labour and general intellect as being central to the mode of production. In this way workerism was able to enrich itself with a number of points of view that were homogeneous, albeit different, and that enabled it to keep up with the historical changes in the nature of the class struggle.

It is with this freedom that, with the passage of time, the whole of Marx’s teaching is appropriated by workerist writers and put at the service of struggles. In the nascent phase of workerism, Raniero Panzieri, writing about the concept of social totalization, invokes Lukács against the perversion of Marxian thought represented by the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. Indeed the latter is seen as being engaged in a quest for equilibrium in what was understood as *the plan of capital*. Subsequently Mario Tronti rediscovers and popularizes Marx’s inventive concept of class struggle as falling within the concept of capital and of capital’s totalization of the social. The concept of capital is understood as the concept of *a relationship* in which living labour prevails as a form of movement within the struggle over exploitation. Struggles are the engine of development, and the counterpower of the working class is the destituent soul [*l’anima destituente*] of all capitalist power and the proletarian constituent power [*potenza costituente*] of all revolutionary production. With Romano Alquati, the process of workers’ inquiry gives arms and legs to these early workerist institutions, emphasizing the connection between living labour and the technical composition of capital and beginning to describe analytically the relationship between struggles and machinery in each phase of development of working class subjectivity, while Sergio Bologna and Mauro Gobbini, already in this first cluster of theoretical and political work, are highlighting the form of the relationship that the life and the ethical and ideological–political behaviours of the proletariat (in the social and political composition

in which we analyse them) establish with the *technical* dimensions of labour of the proletariat in the history of the struggles. The *political composition* of skilled workers is thus defined in relation to their relative independence of the control exercised by the employer (in the machine system), whereas the (Taylorized) mass worker would be completely crushed in the new *technical composition* of Fordism. In this way, the methodological understandings contained in E. P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* are actualized in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century transition to the highest and most extreme form taken by industry. All this was in the 1960s.

In the early 1970s a new phase already opens in workerist research, and it is built around the formidably anticipatory work of Maria Rosa Dalla Costa, Alisa Del Re, and other women comrades working on the issue of reproduction. The movement for wages for housework shifts the analysis from the factory to the home, from male workers to their families, and captures, in the social dimension of exploitation, the specificity of the exploitation suffered by woman – as mother, as daughter, as careworker, as first agent of social reproduction. This is an explosive moment in workerist research. In this way workerism comes to be massively a part of *feminism* and, in addition to proposing areas for the liberation of women, it builds those mechanisms of research and critique of the *patriarchal power* that make possible the expansion of the concept of surplus value and exploitation to society as a whole, far beyond the factory. This shift, in turn, makes it possible to widen workerist analysis, extending it from production to reproduction. This then led to a second cluster of studies, accompanied, as always, by experiences of militancy and intervention and exemplified in the work of Luciano Ferrari Bravo, Ferruccio Gambino, Sandro Serafini (and, next, of Karl Heinz Roth and Yann Moulier) on the socialization of living labour and on the mobility of labour power. The radical critique of schemas of reproduction in the light of historical research, the invention of an *alternative* history of the working class, and the revisiting of slavery and colonialism in the light of the development of capitalism thus come to constitute a new terrain of analysis.

By now we have moved definitively beyond some of the Eurocentric limits of the initial programme of theoretical workerism. From the perspective of the work carried out during these years (moving into the 1980s), the workerist analysis indeed broke with the old socialist classification of economic periods and modes of production, tracing a line of development of capitalism that included colonialism and slavery as *determining* and *internal* elements. The critical and subversive

analysis of patriarchy had allowed us to view the systemic links of the processes of exploitation and proletarianization ‘through command’ – and, in this context, to tighten the analysis of the production of goods and of the reproduction of forms of command for social exploitation.

A third phase of workerist development began in the 1980s and 1990s, when Christian Marazzi, Paolo Virno, Maurizio Lazzarato and Carlo Vercellone (among others, and with continuous and bold contributions from Sergio Bologna and the journal *Primo Maggio*) began to investigate the new technical composition of social labour [*lavoro sociale*], starting from the dissolution of Fordism and the birth of neoliberalism and stressing the monetary and financial mediations in post-Fordism, as well as the combined phenomena of *precarization* and the *cognitive figure* of living labour as fundamental elements that characterize the current phase of capitalist development. And then there were the studies of Michael Hardt, Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson on global migration and the international dimension of the class struggle, with multiplications that were now becoming viral.

* * *

It is within this framework that, in this book, I document my own contribution to the development of workerism, and in particular to the transformation represented in the transition from the mass worker to the social worker [*dall’operaio massa all’operaio sociale*]. I would say that, with my work, I have liberated the method and concept of living labour from the dialectical cages that kept it confined to the factory. In fact it should be noted that, even when the inquiries and the practices of struggle testified to the fact that the front of the class struggle had expanded to other figures of living labour that were extraneous to the factory (women in domestic and care work, ethnic minorities crushed at the bottom of the social hierarchy, students and scientific researchers now subjected to the productive order of capitalism, etc.) – and so even when it seemed that the path to a definition of living labour on the social terrain was finally open – people were not able to imagine the independence of a *new, living figure of living labour*, totally social, whose productive composition was not fixed by belonging to the factory. The reasons for this were an insufficiency of research and a kind of reverential ethical timidity in the face of the glorious tradition of the struggles of factory workers. The situation became more serious when that inability to recognize the new stemmed from a refusal to imagine any ‘technical composition’ of productive labour other than that which the Third International had proposed for the class as ‘political composition’ (perhaps cor-

rectly in the case of Leninism, but certainly wrongly in Stalinism). In consequence, even when the technical composition of Fordism had come to an end, had exhausted itself, it was still maintained in theory, because people could (and would) not go, in the political sphere, beyond old organizational forms that were the political counterpart of Fordism. What disasters – repressive and reformist – that desire for continuity (or rather for more of the same) had created in the shipwreck of ‘real socialism’ and its party offshoots! Hence it was only by destroying that identitarian and repressive – let alone mystificatory and reformist – enclave that the irreducibly revolutionary nature of the Marxian definition of the class could be actualized. This meant dissolving the political practice and the ideology of the mass worker and proceeding straight to the analysis of exploitation in the socialization of living labour (e.g. networks of cognitive and care work that subsequently went on to become activist groupings, political platforms). This is the theoretical and practical contribution that, since the 1970s, I have tried to make to the development of class struggles. I think I managed to impose this truth.

* * *

In the first part of this volume, ‘From the Mass Worker to the Social Worker’, I offer three articles that illustrate the transition from the first to that second form of technical and political composition of the proletariat, which took place during the 1970s, and my commitment to defining it. ‘Archaeology and Project’ (1981) summarizes what happened; this piece represents the result of my research in those years. The next article, on how left-wing state theory reacted to the crisis that followed the American administration’s decision in 1971 to cancel the Bretton Woods agreements, dates from 1974. It seeks to show how the transformation of production relations had a direct influence on the transformation of the structure of the state and how class struggles (in the transformation of the mass worker into a social worker) profoundly affected the capital relationship and the capitalist composition of society. The underlying critical basis of this piece is a dialogue with the work of Claus Offe, who during those years gives the best of himself to analysing these same questions.

In the initial plan for this volume, three other articles of mine, written in the early years of my involvement in Marxist workerism, were to be included in Part I; these will now be published in the next volume of this collection. Two of them, ‘Keynes and the Capitalist Theory of the State’ and ‘Cycle and Crisis in Marx’s *Capital*’, are pieces from 1967–8 that illustrate two points of approach in workerist

research on the Marxist theory of the state and on the critique of the social market economy. In them I deepen the analysis of the homogeneity and mirroring of the Fordist mode of production, of the Taylorist labour process, and of the Keynesian state machine. The third, 'State, Public Expenditure and the Decline of the Historic Compromise', dates from 1975 and focuses on a topic that was discussed among Marxist theorists in the early 1970s – that is, at a time when the problem of reproduction appeared dramatically as a problem of public debt under the pressure of workers' struggles.

The third and final article in Part I was written in the same period and deals with value theory. It opens to the study of the political practices of the new subjectivities, in other words to counterpower dynamics and to the development of constituent power [*potenza costituente*], practices that bring about the destruction of the relationship of equilibrium that bourgeois political economy prescribes for the extraction of profit. The very possibility of this equilibrium is radically contested here in the name of that theoretical discovery that the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s opened to: *historical verification*. Historical verification consists of the *dispositif* of the constituent cooperation of living labour, a process that had become central to the formation of the social worker. 'From the mass worker to the social worker' [*dall'operaio-massa all'operaio sociale*] can also be expressed as 'from the *self-valorization* of the mass worker to the constituent *cooperation* of the social worker'. It is on this *dispositif* that the new revolutionary power of the cognitive proletariat would subsequently be based; and the cognitive proletariat, by recognizing its own productive autonomy, removes any dialectical link with the command of capital.

* * *

The title of Part II is 'Workers and Capital Today'. Under this title I gather some materials that I consider important for reading Marx in the current phase of the class struggle.

I begin with a reading of the 'Fragment on Machines'. This is an invitation to accompany the prescient Marx, Marx the futurologist, in recognizing a figure of production and exploitation that we can all see to be present and topical today, after 150 years. The 'Fragment' shows Marx engaged in reading a new era in class struggle and open to a dystopian dimension that we have to transfer critically into our own reality. With this theoretical shift it is possible to arrive at the definition of a new proletarian subject – the *cognitive worker* – who attacks social exploitation in proportion to the development of the

mode of production, and yet with renewed power. The Marxian method – as reconstructed in workerism – shows here that it has a dual ability: to destructure the opponent and to find the figures of the to-come [*a-venire*] not in the ruins of power but in the struggle's constituent power [*potenza costituente*].

The second article translated in Part II presents the first original attempt at a cognitive definition of productive social subjectivity in the Marxian ontology of productive labour. This text, produced in the 1990s in collaboration with Carlo Vercellone, opens to the redefinition of labour power as an immaterial, biopolitical *cognitive power*, capable of appearing as power of cooperation – from time to time subjected but also resistant to, constituent of, and alternative to capital exploitation.

The next two articles in Part II are papers delivered at conferences in recent years, one in Paris, the other in Berlin, and they conclude my research on the organic composition (technical and political) of capital and class today. In both, I redefine what it means to practise intervention and investigation from the workers' point of view in today's conditions. The contribution that these texts make to workerism consists, in my view, in highlighting the *ontological basis* of the new productive power of social cooperation and, at the same time, the manner in which the 'social individual' (through whom capital extracts surplus value) has the capability of becoming a political force today. Entirely monistic in Marx's analysis, this nexus of economics and politics seems to constitute an enigma against which many theoretical lines have crashed, but in reality it is nothing but the most constant and determinate index of an immanentist, materialist journey that cannot be abandoned by revolutionaries.

* * *

Finally I include, as Part III, some materials that arose out of discussions with Mario Tronti and show that, contrary to what he claims, workerism cannot be read solely as his personal experience – a view that led him to assert that workerism came to an end in 1966, with the closure of the journal *Classe operaia*. I argue that workerism continues to exist well beyond that date and can be seen as a powerful instrument of revolutionary theory and practice that develops through new struggles and new inventions today. Is it worth making this claim? Maybe not, if it is true that, after 1966, Tronti spent the rest of his life crying over what he had done as a young man – as Daniel Bensaïd and Étienne Balibar have always maintained. It does not particularly concern me whether this was from nostalgia or from regret: the fate

of a person who opened a future of research but then soon retired from the struggles remains pathetic whether he did it from nostalgia or from regret (and I don't care which one it is), especially when he returned to doing political activity in the name of a worn-out tradition and in a party that was responsible for the social-democratic corruption and the present foundering of Italian and European political life. No, militant workerism, which is now a healthy trend among the younger generations, has never been able to live with that degradation. I repeat: the political defeat that workerism suffered in Italy at the end of the 1970s was rather the basis for an expansion of its influence on revolutionary culture worldwide. Workerism will never be a 'post-' phenomenon; it will always be key to understanding class struggle – or rather a new transition, from the *multitude* that lives within the crisis to a *new working class* that is rising up.

Antonio Negri, May 2020

Part I

From the Mass Worker to the Social Worker

1

Archaeology and Project[★]

The Mass Worker and the Social Worker

1 Functions and limitations of the concept of the mass worker

In the wake of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, the critique of Stalinism, which developed within the Italian labour movement above all, put into question the traditional conception of the trade union. This had become an area of key concern. In 1953, there had been a resounding defeat of the communist union at FIAT; in the years that followed, there were equally resounding defeats in line for the farm workers' unions and the public sector unions (railway workers, postal workers etc.). The fading (or downright disappearance) of any immediate prospect of a seizure of power and a series of confusions at the ideological level meant that the trade unions were being undermined as the transmission belt of the system; both their organizational form and their ideological basis were thrown into crisis. But this crisis did not affect the radicality of the working class. There began to appear a mass form of behaviour that was spontaneous, multiform, violent, mobile and disorderly – but that, nonetheless, was able to compensate for the lack of trade union leadership in ways that were both original and powerful – and while

* This English translation was originally published in A. Negri, *Revolution Retrieved: Selected Writings on Marx, Keynes, Capitalist Crisis and New Social Subjects, 1967–83*, ed. and trans. by E. Emery and J. Merrington, Red Notes: London 1988, pp. 102–15. Originally published in *Macchina-tempo: Rompicapi, liberazione, costituzione*, under the title 'Archeologia e progetto: L'operaio massa e l'operaio sociale', Feltrinelli: Milan 1982, pp. 149–69.

the union leaderships stuck to a repetition of the old forms, the working class reacted in ways that were autonomous. The union would call strike action and the entire workforce would go in to work – but then, after a week, a month, maybe a year, that same working class would explode in spontaneous demonstrations. The farm workers of the south also began spontaneous struggles. However, they had been defeated in the movement to take over agricultural land; they had been sold out by the government's agrarian reform, which condemned them to the poverty of having to work small holdings. As a result, the rural vanguards chose the path of large-scale emigration. This was a mass phenomenon – its causes and effects were complex, certainly, but its quality was political. Then things began to move: Milan in 1959, Genova in 1960, Turin in 1962, and Porto Marghera in 1963 – a series of struggles that pushed to the forefront of the political scene. This succession of labour struggles involved every major sector of industry and all the major urban concentrations. They were all more or less spontaneous mass events and revealed a degree of general circulation of modes of struggle that had not previously been experienced.

One might well ask for a definition of this spontaneity of the struggles. For, while it is true that the struggles were in large part independent of the control and the command of the trade unions (and the unions were sometimes not even aware of them), at the same time they appeared – and were – *strongly structured*. They revealed the existence of new working-class leaderships that were, as we used to say, 'invisible' – in part because many people simply didn't want to see them, but also (and mainly) because of their mass character, because of the new mechanisms of cooperation that were coming into play in the formation of workers' political understanding, because of the extraordinary ability to circulate of these new forms of struggle, and because of the degree of understanding (of the productive process) that they revealed. And, while these new forms of struggle were at first seen by most people as 'irrational', in the course of their development they gradually began to reveal a coherent project and a tactical intelligence that finally began to problematize the very concept of working-class rationality. Economic rationality? Socialist rationality? Rationality of the law of value? Rationality of trade union control? Rationality of law and order? And so on. In effect, in the form taken by these struggles we could identify elements that were directly contradictory to the whole structure of trade unionist-socialist ideology. The wage demands, and the extremes to which they went, contradicted the way in which, in traditional trade union practice, the wage had been used as a political instru-

ment, as a means of mediation. The partisan nature (egotism) of the struggles ran heavily counter to the socialist ideology of the homogeneity of working-class interests that had prevailed up until then. The immediacy and the autonomous nature of struggles ranging from wildcat strikes to mass sabotage, their powerful negative effect on the structures of the cycle of production, ran counter to the traditional view that fixed capital is sacrosanct, and also counter to the ideology of liberation of (through) work – in which work was the subject of liberation, and Stakhanovism or high levels of professional skill the form of liberation. Finally, the intensification (whether at group or at individual level) of heightened forms of mobility, of absenteeism, of socialization of the struggle, ran immediately counter to any factory-centred conception of working-class interests of the kind that has come down to us from the workers' councilist tradition. All this gradually uncovered, in increasingly socialized forms, an attitude of struggle against work, a desire for liberation from work – whether it be work in the big factory, with all its qualities of alienation, or work in general, as conceded to the capitalist in exchange for a wage.

The paradox of the situation was that this mass spontaneity, highly structured in itself, negated in principle the very definition of spontaneity. Traditionally, spontaneity has been taken to mean a low level of working-class consciousness, a reduction of the working class to simple labour power. Here, though, it was different. This *spontaneity* represented a very high level of class maturity. It was a spontaneous negation of the nature of the working class as labour power. This tendency was clearly present, and later developments were to reveal it still further. Thus anybody who wanted to analyse the new forms of struggle was going to have to be prepared to problematize the entire theoretical tradition of socialism. Within these struggles there were *new categories* waiting to be discovered.

And this is what was done. In the early 1960s, on the fringes of the official labour movement, a number of working-class vanguards and a number of groups of intellectuals active within the class struggle produced a theory in which the mass worker was understood as the new subject of working-class struggles.

On the one hand, their studies identified the *objective* characteristics of this class protagonist. These characteristics were determined as follows:

- within the organization of the labour process, by Taylorism;
- within the organization of the working day and of wage relations, by Fordism;