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Planning for Conflict

Matteo Mandarini and Alberto Toscano

In February 1945, *Look* magazine produced a didactic cartoon synopsis of Friedrich Hayek's seminal polemic against the introduction of economic planning in Western states, *The Road to Serfdom* (1944). The cartoon, which would also be distributed as a pamphlet to the workers of General Motors, and has been recently reissued by the Institute of Economic Affairs (Hayek 2005), takes the reader in eighteen captioned images from an initiating crisis: "War forces national planning: To permit total mobilization of your country's economy, you gladly surrender many freedoms"; through to the totalitarian denouement: "Your disciplining is planned... If you're fired from your job, it's apt to be by a firing squad", accompanied by the stylized depiction of an execution. Though domestic and geopolitical urgency seems to have been drained from the question of planning, it is hard to gainsay the persistence of the liberticide specter crudely raised by Hayek and his propagandists, or, among the more economically-minded, the lingering effects of the calculation debates that set the course for neoliberalism's long march through the institutions. The antinomy of Market and Plan which made for a kind of ideological gigantomachy in the first half of the twentieth century has largely been displaced in our turbulent and rudderless present by the tension between globalization (TPP, NAFTA) and national interest (MAGA), both conceived in strictly intra-capitalist terms. Thus, while 'planning' as such still seems stigmatized in the mainstream, a desire for a return of the state as an economic agent is rearing its head, albeit in often ill-defined or incoherent forms, usually tinged with a reactive and nostalgic nationalism. Meanwhile, the timid shoots of an alternative economic policy from the Left are principally oriented toward public ownership and financing – understood as means to temper the market by democratizing economic decision-making and stem the tide of inequality – but planning as such does not seem to be on the progressive agenda (Blackburn 2018; for a stimulating alternative view, see Dyer-Witheford 2013).

The ebbing of faith in the spontaneous virtues of market-coordination – what Hayek rather pompously christened "catallaxy" (1973) – is not just a product of the

protracted effects of the crash of 2008. It also signals a realization of the vast scale of political intervention, intra- and inter-firm coordination, and infrastructural investment required to reproduce the “spontaneity” and “freedom” of the market – the focus of much of the Global Value Chains literature. As the former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis starkly observes: “The vast majority of economic decisions have long ceased to be shaped by market forces and are now taken within a strictly hierarchical, though fairly loose, hyper-cartel of global corporations. Its managers fix prices, determine quantities, manage expectations, manufacture desires, and collude with politicians to fashion pseudo-markets that subsidize their services” (Varoufakis 2018). It is no accident in this respect that the turn of both managerial focus and critical attention to the world of logistics, now widely viewed as critical to the operations of contemporary capital, has been accompanied by a sometimes grudging reflection on the agency of states in advancing the ‘logistics revolution’. If the twentieth-century rhetorics, aesthetics and reality of the plan were always closely associated to the domain of massive infrastructural projects – from Soviet electrification to the German *autobahn*, from the Tennessee Valley Authority to the Volga Canal – what are we to make today of such notionally gargantuan efforts at economic initiative and coordination as the PRC’s Belt and Road Initiative?

One approach to these developments, which we have explored elsewhere, is to repurpose an intuition from Henri Lefebvre’s writings of the 1970s, namely the idea of a “logistical state” (Toscano 2014b). This implies not only the critical role of the state in the production of the spaces required for capital accumulation, but also characterizes the processes of abstraction and fragmentation that such a tendency entails – what Lefebvre captured with the suggestive idea of a *homogeneous-broken* space (Lefebvre 2009: 202). What we wish to attend to here is not so much the spatial but the political dimensions of the issues arising from the articulation between the agency of the state, the infrastructural demands of logistics, and market economics. While the twentieth-century struggle between Plan and Market, playing out on a broad spectrum ranging from mathematical models to propaganda operations, can justly be seen as a titanic battle between grand political narratives, it can also be regarded, especially in practice, as the opposition between two modes of

neutralization of the political: the suppression of workers' agency by the command economy, on the one hand, and the immunization of the domain of market transactions from collective control, on the other. In this sense, the One Belt One Road and the PRC qua logistical state initiative could be seen as the ironic sublation of the Market/Plan antinomy under the aegis of systematic depoliticization (Grappi 2016).

Must planning be synonymous with the alienation of and from politics, or, conversely, the monopolization of politics by the planner-state? In this paper, we want to reframe a contemporary return to economic planning in the age of the logistical revolution through an archaeological detour which will consider the practice and theory of planning in the early years of the Soviet Union. The decade following the October Revolution of 1917, and especially the institution of the New Economic Policy (NEP, 1921-28), can be fruitfully explored to reveal a different figure of the plan, one which is not to be grasped through the neutralization of the political or its monopolization by the state, but which can best be understood as a kind of *planning for conflict*. This approach to economic planning explicitly problematized rather than elided the articulations between the political and the economic, party and unions, proletarians and peasantry, or managers and workers. Contradictorily, even tragically, this figure of the plan posed the question of what it means for economic planning to contend with the persistence of class struggle, as well as to refuse fantasies of the subsumption of the economic by the political, or vice versa. Today, as free-marketeters fall back on mercantile utopias ("global Britain") and "free markets" are quietly replaced with logistically planned supply chains, the industrialization debates of the Soviet era might well be usefully revisited. To this end, we will first explore the class politics of planning as they were elucidated in the period of the NEP, to then turn more explicitly to the ways in which class conflict, especially in logistical sectors (railways) could not be tolerated by the Soviet logistical state, terminating the halting efforts to maintain a place for political conflict and class struggle within the horizon of the plan. The paper will conclude with some reflections on whether some conception of planning open to, and even welcoming of, enduring antagonisms could be imagined for the present.

Between Science and Will

Throughout the 1920s in Soviet Russia, planning was not merely an issue of socio-economic organization, a strategy of resource allocation; it was saturated with political and ideological class struggles (Bettelheim 1976). For Marxism, class is more than a sociological category, a category of Science, so to speak, of knowledge and theory; it is equally a category of the Will, of practice and political subjectivity. In capitalizing these two terms, we wish to emphasize the way they can also fall asunder, fetishized into dichotomies, assigned to strictly delimited realms of thought and action. As we shall see more precisely below, with the onset of the first of the five-year plans the NEP's tense articulation of Science and Will was disassembled and ossified. This contrasts with one of the critical tendencies in Marxist thought with which we wish to align ourselves – one that runs from Lukács and Gramsci to Althusser and Tronti – that holds these terms in articulated tension. We also hope that the elucidation of their distinctive features and of their articulation can help us uncover the extent to which planning, as encountered in the guise of business logistics, is itself suffused with articulations of Science *and* Will that gainsay the contemporary disavowal of politics (Hui 2006; Brown 2015). While a more nuanced heuristic – for instance the one advanced in Italian *operaismo* through the distinction between political and technical class composition – could allow for a more fine-grained materialist analysis, it would miss the centrality of ideological struggle in this period. The aim here, then, is not to outline a developmental progression in forms of planning – such as from First Five-Year Plan, to Second, to Third... to Business Logistics – with all the risks of historicist relativism and linearity this comports, but to try to outline the systemic interrelations and political implications of each attempt at *stabilization* of social formations in which the discourse and practice of planning intervenes.¹

¹ See the illuminating discussion in Marramao 1975, on the contrast between linear, historicist accounts of the relations between theory/practice – in which real movement and theory ‘reflect’ one another – and those, such as the one we attempt here, that seek to provide a relation between the ‘*structural morphology*’ of a mode of production – including the historical time of the specific social formation – and the ‘*process of constitution* of the political terrain’ (Ibid: 106), the immanent contradictions of which are elicited by the critique of political economy. History then appears not as a sea within which events are borne and unfold in linear fashion but is *constructed* by the ‘*systemic character*’ (De Giovanni in *ibid.*: 107) of a specific social formation and the contradictions that mine it (115-17).

While planning was integral to the Soviet understanding of development from the start, discussions of planning in the early Soviet period require a caveat, since during War Communism (1918-1920) and even beyond it might be best described as 'a fitful hand upon the reins rather than a curbing and steering of the team ... a propaganda phrase rather than an economic force' (Dobb 1966: 337). There were, however distinct phases to planning. In the course of War Communism, planning – largely in the guise of centrally-dictated requisitions – served the subordination of the entire economy to victory in the civil war against the Whites (Dobb 1966: 97-124). By the time of the NEP, planning was typically linked to specific sectors, industries or trusts, and involved no single economic plan (Carr 1970: 521ff; Friedrich Pollock in Dobb 1966: 338). As was especially underscored by Marxist interpreters, returning to the debates on planning amid the crises and conflicts of the 1970s (Cacciari 1975; Bettelheim 1976), the conflictual figure of planning was designed both to expand the working class, which would be drawn out from the countryside into expanding heavy industries, and to subject workers to 'factory schooling' in view of collective discipline and empowerment (Lenin 1965: 391-2, see also Lih 2008: 522-24). Moreover, productive capacity would develop *in competition with* private enterprise. As part of this, trade unions could be envisaged as organs of worker representation *against* capital *and* the state – a position articulated by Lenin in the trade union debate against those such as Trotsky who demanded a regimentation of the trade-unions by the state, or, conversely, a subordination of state policy to trade-union demands (James 2009; Bettelheim 1976: 384-8). While accompanied by a thematizing of ongoing class struggles in the revolutionary state, the NEP demanded that even socialized industries and trusts maximize profits – and so conform to the Market (Allen 2003: 91).

By the eve of the First Five-Year Plan, this changed radically. Once Stalin posed the question "Whose government are you: a workers' and peasants' government or a kulak and Nepmen's government?" (Stalin 1929: 262), one issue had already been settled: should Soviet industrialization be advanced through the Market or the Plan? The conflict between these "principles" – of planning versus "spontaneity", or "socialist accumulation" versus the "law of value" – which underpinned and

animated the NEP, was to be terminated. A kindred fate was met by the view that state and party could not be flatly identified with the working-class in the protracted transition out of “state capitalism” (Toscano 2014a). These two “principles” of Market and Plan, which had been held together in an uneasy, conflictual articulation during the NEP – constituting a rivalry necessary for development at a time when industry had fallen so far behind where it was in 1913 (Davies 1990) – were now disarticulated and geographically demarcated by the borders of the Soviet Union, as if the Market could be expelled from a territory where the Plan reigned supreme. At issue at the start of the First Five-Year Plan was how to establish the “new tasks of reconstructing industry and agriculture on the basis of Socialism” (Stalin 1929: 240). This certainly involved struggles, conflicts, even an “intensification of class struggle” (254), but these took place *within the framework of socialism* – and on the basis of the Party leading the struggle against “capitalist elements of town and country” (241). The question was no longer one of Market *and* Plan in irreducible and generative conflict; but rather that of setting Socialism against Capitalism *as distinct systems* in a zero-sum game.

This was a radical break with the NEP, whose time-limited character was clear from its designation as a “retreat” (Lenin 1922) from the excessively sharp imposition of socialist measures characteristic of War Communism. With the five-year plans, came the call for a “tightening of labor discipline, of developing socialist emulation”, made famous by the later Stakhanov Movement (Stalin 1935; Davies 1989: 256-61), as well as for the “thorough revision of the methods of the trade unions and the Soviet apparatus” (Stalin 1929: 240). Whereas under the NEP the unions were paradoxically envisaged as protecting workers from the workers’ and peasants’ state, by the time of the First Five-Year Plan (1928-32), the historic trade union leader Tomsky was removed from his position in the trade union central council – alongside other “Right deviationists” – for “setting the trade unions against the party” (Shvernik 1934: 63 – discussed in Carr and Davies 1974: 598-99).

It would be too simple to see this shift as merely opportunistic, the duplicitous actions of a would-be dictator in-the-making. The “slogan of *self-criticism*” (Stalin 1929: 239) and of “purging the Party” and “fighting the bureaucracy”, form part of what was being reconceived as “*necessary links in the single, continuous chain which is called*

the offensive of Socialism against the elements of capitalism" (240). This was framed as a battle between rival Wills incarnated in warring socio-economic systems. As the "General Staff of the proletariat" (Stalin 1921: 1973), the Party was the molder of class Will and required "purification" to carry out its task.

On what grounds could Stalin and his adjutants claim this shift of terrain from the NEP, when the market was still the context within which planning took place? As Robert C. Allen states, on 1 October 1928 the "First Five-Year Plan replaced guidelines with directives"; this substituted "output targets for profits as the principal enterprise objective" (Allen 2003: 91). This "administrative shift" brought about certain practical consequences, amongst the most momentous were the end of cost controls and relative unconcern for negative profits - in the guise of "soft budget constraints" where deficits are covered by other agencies or not considered a block on a department's operations (Kornai 1986). No longer being guided by profitability meant that the working class was no longer working under capitalist imperatives. This, then, was no mere ideological shift. If no longer subject to the rate of exploitation, how could the workers be "exploited" by a state, by a system "in the hands of the working class" (Stalin 1931: 352)?² If that were the case, then what role then for unions? Were they not more logically to be conceived as *agents* of labor discipline, uniting freedom and necessity, since in carrying out the Will of the (purified) Party of the workers they were submitting to a discipline they, via the systematic application of the Plan, had "themselves" set? Science was now subordinated to Will, but a rational Will, assured by a purge of the Party that would serve to establish the unadulterated presence of the class and its interests within the Party. Parenthetically, it is important to note that while Stalin was hardly the first to call for the 'purging of the party' or for 'labour discipline' (see, for instance, Lenin 1921), the context was entirely different. Unlike under the NEP, for Stalin socialism was the framework within which development was taking place and hence workers by resisting directives would be challenging socialism itself (for a detailed discussion of the 1929-30 purges, Davies 1989: 61-2, 117-

² Pradesh Chattopadhyay highlights one important aspect of this claim: 'What strikes one in this early soviet concept of socialism is a predominantly juridical approach to socialism, in which a specific type of ownership form, and not the specificity of the production relationship, becomes the principal for characterising the new society' (2004: 230). See also Davies 1989: 163.

42). In contrast, the NEP was a policy enacted for a transitional socio-economic form – “state capitalism” – that required that one of the ‘main tasks’ for the trade unions be “to protect in every way the class interests of the proletariat in its struggle against capital” (Lenin 1922: 185). Bearing in mind that state enterprises were themselves subjected to the profit motive, the “struggle against capital” would also be taking place in the “socialised sector”.

The question then of Socialism versus Capitalism, Plan versus Market, was increasingly understood in terms of Socialism’s subordination of Science to the *efficient* expression of the Will of the working class – as shaped and interpreted by the Party. This was most evident in the ability of socialist accumulation to escape the “incurable diseases of capitalism” (Stalin 1931: 352), poverty, crisis, unemployment – thanks to its greater efficiency in supplying the needs of the population: “The superiority of our system lies in that we have no crises of over-production, we have not and never will have millions of unemployed, we have no anarchy in production; for we are conducting a planned economy” (352-3). Leaving aside the hyperbole, it is clear that the superiority claimed here is that of Science as subordinated to the Will of the class via the Party: *as a system* socialism is more efficient, less wasteful, better organized, less prone to breakdown.³ Stalin was also asserting a clear superiority of planning over the NEP’s “mixed economy”, due to the latter’s inability to substantially reduce unemployment by absorbing surplus populations in industry, which for much of the period remained below 1913 levels (Carr and Davies 1974: 483ff; Carr 1970: 388ff; Dobb 1966: 189-91; Ellman 1979: 158ff; Barber and Davies 1994: 82-105). However, the critical point for our argument, is that the plans were *competing* with international

³ This ideal horizon of socialist efficiency would ultimately buckle under the cumulative weight of the irrationalities of Soviet planning practices, many of which had to do with planning being calculated with physical values, leading to notorious absurdities, such as – to quote a retrospect from the dying days of historical communism: ‘enterprises, producing unnecessarily heavy equipment since their targets were specified in tons. Transport organizations, similarly, would find their efforts measured by ton-miles, giving them no incentive to ensure the shortest journey. Authors are paid by the length, not sales, of their books. No rational pricing system exists. Of course products have prices, but the latter have an inert character, not altering however much or little of the good was produced, and not bearing any clear relationship either to productivity or to the prices of other goods. As a consequence market gardeners in the Caucasus could find that it made sense to fly to Moscow with their produce (because air travel is cheap relative to fresh produce), or collective farmers could find that it made sense to feed their pigs with subsidized bread’ (Blackburn 1991: 45)

capitalism on the basis of a claim to the superior efficiency of socialism in the use and allocation of resources.

As a result of this shift in party-state-class relations in the wake of the overcoming of the profit motive, it became a Bolshevik duty to study the “art of management” in order to become “true leaders of industry, true masters of the business” (Stalin 1931: 354). The relative, historically-conditioned “backwardness” of Russia could now be overcome within ten years at a “Bolshevik tempo [...] a high Bolshevik tempo of construction” (356, 357). Technical, “bourgeois tools” could be appropriated and turned by socialist Will to socialist construction, which would – thanks to the “planning principle” – overcome the inefficiencies then so evident in the crisis to which the “principle of spontaneity” (Carr and Davies 1974: 667) had led international capitalism of the 1930s (Day 1981).

It is worth citing Stanislav Strumilin’s report (March 1927) to the State Planning Commission (Gosplan) on the aim of the first plan. The plan seeks to achieve “such a *redistribution* of the existing productive forces of society, including both labor power and material resources of the country, as would secure to the *optimum* extent the expanded and crisis-free reproduction of these productive forces *at the most rapid possible rate*, with the aim of the *maximum* satisfaction of the current needs of the working masses and bringing them *very rapidly* to the full reconstruction of society on the principles of socialism and communism” (Strumilin 1928a, and discussion in Carr and Davies 1974: 838, 905-8). Carr and Davies add that this “transformation would be brought about through ‘engineering projects’, involving a system of realistic and interconnected quantitative targets which strictly corresponded to available resources, and were built up by combining, in ‘successive approximations’, the draft plans of each industry or each economic sector” (Carr and Davies 1974: 838). This situation was – paradoxically – one where, under what Stalin termed “Socialism”, planning came to formally resemble what we today call business logistics. For planning’s soft budget constraints served to advance the efficient allocation of resources in the service of quantitatively determined economic growth without resulting in over-production – two of the core aims of contemporary logistics, as identified by Bonacich and Wilson (2008: 4). Typically, under capitalist social relations, workers are only employed to the

extent that the value that they produce is higher than the value expended in hiring them. Markets allocate resources in such a way that this “balance” is maintained. Soft budget constraints (as well as the attack on equilibrium models, Carr and Davies 1974: 842-48; Cacciari 1975: 117-26; Stalin 1929a) allowed firms to increase output at a level in which they produced more than would be *profitably* sold. But by insisting on firms increasing output targets, this drew workers out of the countryside – where structural unemployment was high – and put them to work in expanding modernizing heavy industries in urban centers (in a pitiless version of the “socialist primitive accumulation” earlier promoted by Preobrazhensky).

Formally then, with the aim reduced to quantitative expansion and efficient employment of resources, business logistics and Soviet planning from the late ‘20s to late ‘40s come to enjoy an uncanny affinity, despite the different “key performance indicators” to which each is subordinated (profit versus output). Both foreground the efficient allocation of resources as core aim. The conflictual model of the NEP thus makes way for labor discipline and competitive pressure over innovation across branches. While the (First, Second, Third...) Plans do not require the marginal product to equal or exceed the wage, it could be noted that business logistics are happy to leave some resources uncounted and unallocated, expelled from the productive circuit. Be it as surplus populations or ecological waste, these externalized and negatively “socialized” resources are structurally important for optimizing the operations of logistics. The Plan, by contrast, does more than merely encourage the absorption of the total population, it subordinates it to its own “efficient” operation. Efficiency and quantitative growth are the operative categories of technical progress under both “systems”, Market and Socialism (as evidenced by business logistics and five-year plans, respectively). But profit or output are in both cases “choices” to which the unfolding of technical means of coordination are ultimately subordinated, notwithstanding the qualitative difference between reaffirming a structural imperative of the capitalist mode of production and opting for another principle of organisation and criterion of value.

That is not to say that very stark distinctions, even at the level of purely formal analogies, do not remain. These can best be understood via the shifting articulations

of Science and Will. Within "Socialism", the "'metaphysics' of planning" (Carr and Davies 1974: 842), saw "geneticists" arguing for the necessity of uncovering "economic 'regularities' in the national economy which justified prediction about future trends [...] and to extrapolate the data derived from them into the future development of the economy was the essence of planning" (Carr 1970: 526). Here, Science takes precedence: the Plan developed by revealing the inherent ("genetic") "objective tendencies" of the national economy (Vladimir Groman 1925: 151-66, discussed in Carr 1970: 526-30). Arguably, this involved implicit recognition of the Market principle, since throughout the preceding period planning had co-existed with petty-bourgeois rural production and retail trade, and hence the "tendencies" and "regularities" registered were those of the market-system. Against this stood the "teleologists" who stated that planning must set out from "what can be indicated in advance by positing it as a goal" (Carr and Davies 1974: 840). The task of the planner was, as Strumilin stated, to take the "collective will of the producers" (Carr and Davies 1974: 840) and mold it. To that extent, planners needed to set targets dictated by the "General Staff" of the working class.

Here too the distinction between primacy of Science or of Will is in no way as clear-cut as it might first appear. While the hierarchy shifts – either Will subordinates Science or vice versa – neither side could do without the other, as was generally recognised (Carr 1970: 528; Carr and Davies 1974: 840-50; Nove 1969: 132; Spulber 1964: 101-12). It was only as planning advanced, and those skeptical of its very possibility were defeated, that the struggle between teleologists and geneticists became politically much more charged – until the latter became identified with Right deviationists and tried as Mensheviks. At this point Science is explicitly subordinated to political aims and demands – with targets set intentionally far in excess of anything achievable, but nevertheless to be pursued with all necessary means. The frenetic voluntarism that became synonymous with the Stalinist politics of production could here reach stunning pitches of idealism, as in this 1927 declaration from Strumilin himself, in an article for the Soviet journal *Planned Economy*: "Our task is not to help economic science, but to transform it. We are not tied to any law. There is no fortress

that the Bolsheviks cannot storm. The question of rhythms of development depends on the will of human beings" (quoted in Ellenstein 1975: 223).

From 1929 onwards, the difference between Socialism and Market was framed by Stalin and the Party as one over Will, and of which class could best assert it. As embodied in consecutive five-year plans, the tasks of planning would be set by the "international" (i.e. geopolitical) and "class position" the Soviet Union found itself found itself in (Strumilin 1928b, see Carr and Davies 1974: 841). In other words, it was the Will of the working class – as *effectuated* in the Plans and exclusively interpreted by the Party – which was pitted against the Will of the international bourgeoisie and its states. This meant Science and "all other auxiliary means", would be mere "servants" (Strumilin 1928b) in the service of that competition between Wills. The political Will of Socialism was to unfold itself in the Plans, in the effective (and *more efficient*) rolling out of the Plans, expressing the conflict between Market and Plan as *competition* between rival systems – hence, ironically, according to a Market-like logic.

For all the poverty of such a conception of socialism – in which "workers' control" is reconceived in terms of its efficient subordination to an over-arching Plan served up to it – it is worth noting its acknowledgment of the non-neutrality of Science. That is, it escapes a naïve value-free reduction. For, while Science is impotent to decide over (i.e. to will) a hierarchy of values, it does operate within a context in which values operate in conflict with one another, in practice subsuming Science as a form of intellectual labor within a specific value-hierarchy of human practices within which it too has an assigned place (Cacciari 2006: xiv-xxxi). This serves to distinguish planning – even in its ideological Stalinist form – from the self-conception of business logistics. The vulgar vanguardism and voluntarism of the hyper-politicized Plan helps to mark out the distinction starkly. For in business logistics subjective Will – if it appears at all, for instance in the reflexive legitimations of management practices – does so only as subordinated to a value-free Science, or neutral technique, as if the latter's "very 'purity' could translate itself into an ethico-political model" to the "elimination of the very possibility of conflict" (xxi) – where "conflict" is to be understood here as a contrast between irreducibly antagonistic values incarnated in subjects of Will who affirm them. By reconceiving Science's operations *as if* they were

entirely technical, disinterested, “objective” terms, business logistics seeks to evacuate itself of the sources of conflict. This is evident, for instance, in the way that Supply Chain Management literature considers disruptions to the seamless circulation of goods and services to spring from a series of technical hitches, choke points or bottlenecks. They do not come from rival interests or “Wills” in conflict. There is no question of rival subjects – at most of competitive agents scoping out advantages. There is but one material and managerial “process without a subject”, and the task of logistics is that of smoothing its operations. While it is important to challenge such a disavowal of antagonism across supply chains, as has been done in some excellent investigations of contemporary logistical conflicts (e.g. Moody 2017, Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness 2018), there has been little work on why subjects have been “disappeared” from the *analysis* of the supply chain, if not from its management.

A State of Struggle, or, Lenin after '68

One of the purposes of returning to the pronouncements of the likes of Stalin and Strumilin, their image of the Plan as apotheosis of a proletarian Will, is to defamiliarize a debate that can take for granted an economistic *depoliticization* of the antinomy between Plan and Market. The grim irony of the Stalinist fetish of the Five-Year Plans is that even remaining at the level of its own discourse – which is to say, leaving aside the sheer violence meted out against industrial, peasant and coerced labor that marked the reality of planning – its hyper-politicization of the economy as subject to the Will of the workers’ party-state required an extreme depoliticization, in the guise of an alienation and monopolization of revolutionary subjectivity (and ultimately, the *politicide* of the Old Bolsheviks *tout court*).

The Italian architectural theorist and historian Manfredo Tafuri, coming from the same intellectual milieu of *operaismo* that gave rise to some of the most insightful historical analyses of the politics of planning (such as Di Leo 1971, Asor Rosa 1971, Perulli 1971, Cacciari and Perulli 1975), identified elements of this political alienation of the working class in the aesthetics of the plan that so galvanized Soviet avant-gardes in the 1920s (see Toscano and Kinkle 2015, from which some of the arguments below are drawn). In the films of Dziga Vertov, the graphic work of El Lissitzky, the

photographs of Rodchenko, or the collages of Gustav Klutssis, Tafuri registered an attempt “to manage one’s own alienation” by fusing artistic work with the all-encompassing imperatives of productivism. The avant-garde would thus accompany and exacerbate the elision of the working class in the guise of its political supremacy, the Will become mere Fetish: “It is the collective, the class, which is now called upon to become machine, to identify with production. Productivism is indeed a product of the avant-garde: but it is the project of the conciliation between Capital and Labor, operated through the reduction of labor-power to an obedient and mute cog of the machine as a whole” (Tafuri 1971: 51). The avant-gardes thus give succor to the ideological displacement of struggles that crisscross the party, the state, classes and trade-unions – the conflicted terrain of the NEP – onto the Manichean model of Plan versus Market, socialism versus capitalism, and of a state *fused* with its workers, such that a class adversary became *ipso facto* an enemy of the state. Such a displacement obliterated Lenin’s affirmation, however precarious, of the need not to erase the class within the plan, to retain an exteriority between the proletariat and the instruments of valorization of fixed capital.

Writing in the midst of the same early 70s wave that accompanied the “crisis of the planner-state” (Negri [1971] 2005) as well as of the Leninist image of the party with an intense revision of the legacies of the “USSR in construction”, Robert Linhart’s *Lenin, the Peasants and Taylor* (1976) sought to locate in the economic directives of the (civil) war economy, and in the Bolshevik leader’s political theory and practice, the seeds of the kind of political alienation which, in Tafuri’s eyes, the avant-garde aesthetics of the plan contributed to. In a chapter of his book entitled “The railways: the emergence of the Soviet ideology of the labor-process”, Linhart recounts how, in the context of famine – that agrarian specter constantly haunting the Plan – the authoritarian, “Taylorist” turn in the organization of work was imposed on the sector that represented the vital hinge between production, services and administration, a sector whose dangerous disorganization was exacerbated by the very autonomous workers’ organization that had previously made it into a hub of anti-Tsarist agitating. Workers’ opposition now appeared as a kind of economic blackmail, all the more menacing in that it took place within the all-round crisis of the civil war. The

Bolsheviks, Linhart notes in a striking example of the bond between class struggle, fossil fuels and logistics masterfully mapped out by Timothy Mitchell (Mitchell 2011), were “almost instinctively attentive to everything that concerns communication, flow, circuits” (Linhart 1976: 118). The Soviet state could not but strive to become a logistical state. In the throes of revolution, the railways appeared as the nerve-fibers and life-blood of a “state in movement”; militarized centralization, planning and labor discipline were raised to the standing of imperatives – as evidenced, among others, by Trotsky’s “Order No. 1042”, viewed by Linhart as a milestone in state planning, and suggesting that the securitization and militarization of logistics is a precondition of the Plan properly so-called. As Linhart observes, “if there is an activity that must, by nature, function as a *single mechanism*, one that is perfectly regulated, standardized and unified throughout the country, it’s the railway system” (127-8). The “tragically” inevitable Taylorization of the railways both forges and deforms the USSR, especially in furthering the split, foregrounded by Linhart, between the proletarian as political subject and the proletarian as object of an iron discipline. Every cook can govern, but no railway worker can strike.

While Linhart found in the logistical imperatives spawned by famine and war the source of the political alienation that would congeal in the figure of the Party as the bearer of a Will embodied in the Plan, some of his contemporaries would turn to the NEP and the internal *détente* of class struggle and war economy of which it was the harbinger to find tools through which to rethink the articulation of political and economic struggles. Authors as unlike one another as Charles Bettelheim and C.L.R James turned to Lenin’s writings of the NEP period as materials through which to think the entanglement of socialist planning with the persistence of class struggles (and alliances) that could not, on pain of disaster, be reduced to the political monopoly of a working class whose Will was expressed without remainder by the Party. Interestingly, the context of the Chinese cultural revolution and decolonizing movements brought to the fore Lenin’s emphasis in his late writings (Lewin 2005) on the political problem of class articulation in the NEP. This was no longer to be simplistically understood as an alliance between state capitalism and the working class against petty-bourgeoisie and peasantry, but as a new political strategy

realigning the relation between workers and peasants, while concealing a realistic advance under the guises of an apparent retreat (Bettelheim 1976: 498-503; James 1977 and 2009). In Lenin's late and seemingly technical efforts to counter the party's bureaucratic over-reach and maintain the political agency of workers and peasants alike, one could discern the "beginning of a rupture" (Bettelheim 1976: 450) in the conception of the relation between party, class and economy in the revolutionary "state in movement". However precarious these elements of a new conception of political and economic struggles within the state may seem, especially since they followed shortly in the wake of the suppression of key dimensions of intra-party political life (not to mention the earlier suppression of pro-revolutionary parties), they are of great interest for how they contributed to a widespread effort, in the 1970s, to envisage the politics and economics of socialist transition as, so to speak, *planning for conflict*, rather than promoting a monopolistic hyper-politicization of proletarian Will accompanied by drastic depoliticization and eventual politicicide. Above all perhaps, this meant re-imagining the (revolutionary, transitional) state as a field of classed contradictions in which the political and the economic could never be synchronized without remainder.

Conclusion: From Struggle to Risk and Back Again

In an extremely rich debate hosted in the pages of the independent communist newspaper *il manifesto* around Althusser's critical theses on the relation of party and state, Étienne Balibar drew some of the methodological lessons from this radical rethinking of the relation between party, state and class struggle, a rethinking which largely meant thinking Lenin beyond "Leninism". Rather than thinking masses and classes 'outside' of the state, for Balibar it:

points to the necessity of analyzing, simultaneously and for each historical conjuncture, both the nature of the state relations on which the effectivity of the centralization of state power is founded [a centralization, we can add, writ large in the figure of the Plan], and the *level of antagonism* (or the index of political effectivity) of class struggles as they unfold. [...] [I]t is not a matter of thinking in terms of the inside or outside of the state, that is, of the "purity"

of antagonistic positions [...] but in terms of the *internal contradictions* of the system of state relationships (Balibar [1978] 2017).

One should beware of falling into the trap, in other words, either of the Party as the “‘class consciousness’ of the masses” or, conversely, as the organizational and educational center of direction of the proletariat; either the Party “founded upon the ‘free association’ of its members, pure as individuals” or, conversely, the Party as “determined by the existence and of the state institutions”. In short, it is a mistake to think of the workers’ movement as “camping outside the city” of capital or of the state (Balibar [1978] 2017). The workers are subjected *in their very constitution* to the forms and structures of the State *and* of Capital. Hence, the political conflict that workers bring must be thought of as coming from within those same structures.

Attention to Lenin’s conception of the NEP as a kind of “planning for conflict” – to a moment before the forced identification of class, party and state under the fetish of the Plan – made acute sense at a moment when changes in class formation, the critique of actually-existing socialism and the crisis of the capitalist “planner-state” (Negri [1971] 2005) had upended Third Internationalist verities, and when the real subsumption of society by capital – understood as the tendential disappearance of social spaces truly outside of capitalist valuation – meant that the overcoming of capitalism could only take the guise of a process of the *formal subsumption of capitalism by communism* (Althusser 2016: 306-8). In this striking and unusual formulation from Althusser we can discern the intention to revive the kind of revolutionary realism that Lenin had articulated at the very end of his life. Can such a politics of planning still shed some light on our present?

In most respects, the contemporary logistical state cannot but translate conflict into the terms of risk or disruption. At its most allegorically extreme, as in the Spanish air-traffic controller’s strike of 2010, such a state of flows cannot but turn into a state of exception – with circulation workers in a liberal democracy corralled back to their screens at gunpoint. But the state no longer either imagines itself or operates as an arena for the mediation and articulation of (class) struggles (indeed, as the rise of Trump or Brexit suggest, it does not even seem to be able to mediate struggles among

the capitalist class). Ironically, among the few places (outside of marginalized radical or critical literature) that class struggles are registered explicitly is in the domain of logistical insurance. In 2013, *World Cargo News* reported that *The Strike Club*, the market leader in providing insurance for delays in maritime commerce, reported that:

in South East Asia, a port workers' strike has now dragged on for more than three weeks in Hong Kong, while Greece is currently in the spotlight as the seafarers' union is threatening strike action in protest at new maritime legislation that, it is claimed, will swell their current high unemployment number. It was against this background that the Strike Club's directors met in Singapore at the end of last week, where the managers reported higher levels of shore-related claims from a wide range of incidents. These included general strikes, port strikes, strikes by land transport operators, customs and pilots, as well as port closures, blockades by fishermen, physical obstructions and mechanical equipment breakdowns (quoted in Toscano 2014b).

But such struggles, along with their plebeian counterparts – as in the recent *gilets jaunes* movement in France – are no longer mediated by the state, whose own efforts at neutralizing political contestation have only served to exacerbate the tendencies to depoliticization that so mark the legal and material organization of the contemporary economy – with its sapping of sovereignty, delocalization of labor, erosion of rights, and fragmentation of solidarities. In a vein at once modest and speculative, we could say that any return to economic planning conceived as a problem for a radical left within a horizon of political power will require not just contending with the debates about the deficits of efficiency, rationality and democracy besetting classical figures of the socialist Plan (Blackburn 1991); it will demand revisiting the briefly lived efforts – elicited by extreme material, social and military duress – to imagine planning not as a neutralization of social and class conflicts but as a way of giving them *form*, of articulating the political and the economic without imagining they could ever be finally synchronized under one governing Will or homogeneous Science.

The NEP may well have been a “retreat”. Yet viewed from a contemporary horizon marked, at the interface of the political and the economic, by the abiding neutralization of transformative conflicts and the proliferation of simulacra of antagonism, we should perhaps affirm and valorize the way it challenged the

subordination of social and economic life to a single coordinating authority – whether party-state or market – while realistically underscoring the contrasting demands of each. This is all the truer at a time when the market is itself increasingly understood not as a “deregulated” space of “freedom”, but one that is at once coercive and requires in turn non-market regulative frameworks; whereas the state provides little salvation other than to market agents. How then are market and plan to be understood when markets are planned and plans marketized? Abstractions can – do – have material force, and that can lie precisely in their opposition, in the perception of the social and ideological force-fields structured by the conceptual polarities through which our political existence is mapped and organized. The logistical revolution has been accompanied, in the ideological domain, by the stark opposition between a capitalist utopia of untrammelled flows and an anti-capitalist utopia of emancipatory interruption, the blockade as epiphany (Toscano 2011). By excavating the figure of “planning for conflict” from the archives of socialism we have sought to contribute to the necessary effort to rethink the politics *of* and *in* the economy in terms of the persistence rather than the obliteration of antagonism. To paraphrase the now famous adage, we may not be able to imagine the end of capitalism, but it might still be useful to remember it.

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