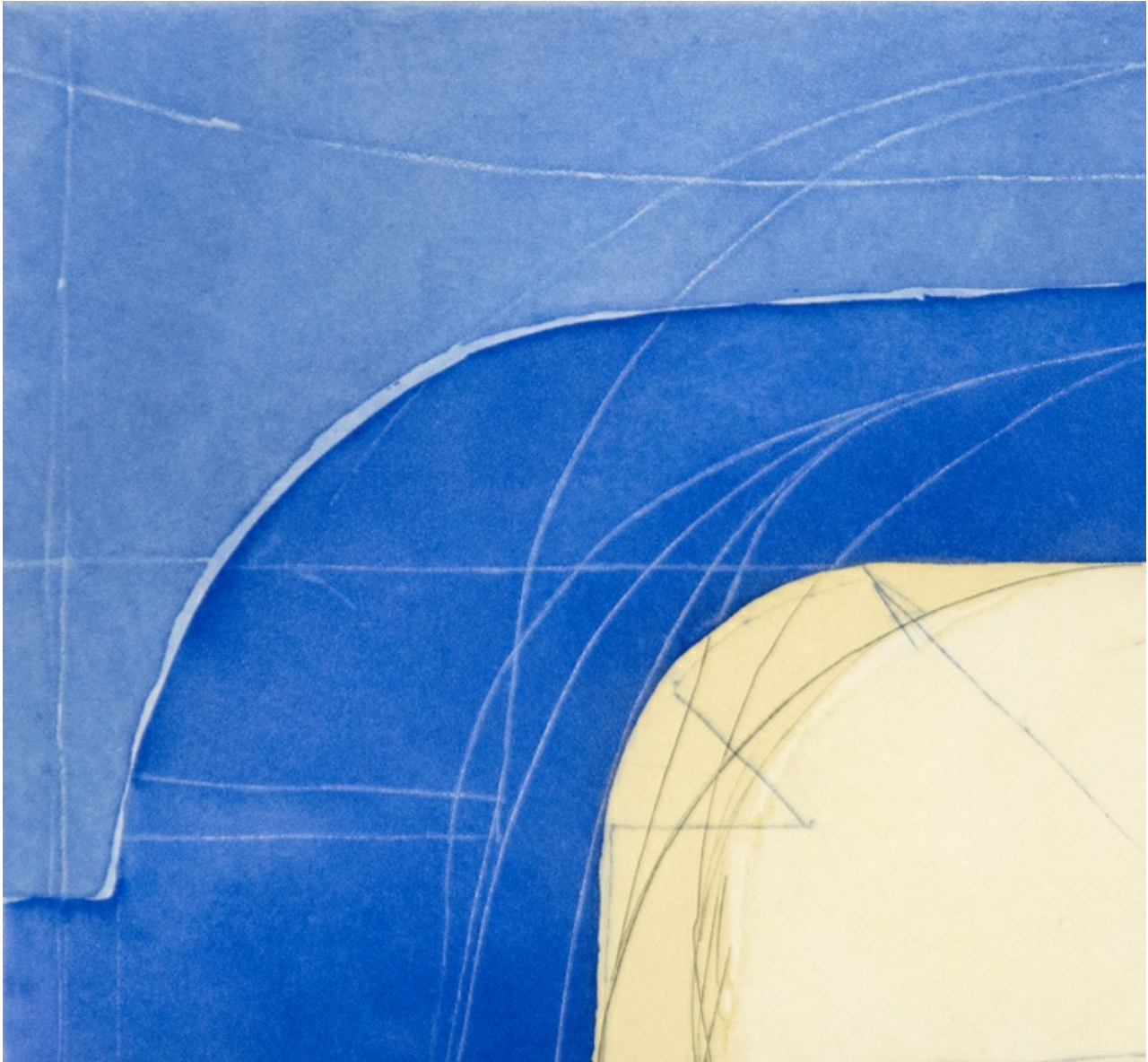


# A Betrayal Retrieved: Mario Tronti's Critique of the Political

[viewpointmag.com/2020/02/25/a-betrayal-retrieved-mario-trontis-critique-of-the-political/](https://viewpointmag.com/2020/02/25/a-betrayal-retrieved-mario-trontis-critique-of-the-political/)

Andrew Anastasi

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Richard Diebenkorn, *Blue Surround*, 1982, detail.

*This essay introduces the English translation of Mario Tronti's "The Autonomy of the Political," a 1972 seminar presentation and discussion.*

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Today the left confronts an old dilemma: the problem of the capitalist state. But the situation, as always, is exceptional. If working-class achievements, socialist governments, and the elusion of communist transition have fed the flames of debates over the form and function of the state for more than a century, contemporary struggles fuel unprecedented fires.

Many movements today regard the state as a terrain of struggle rather than a handy tool or an impenetrable fortress. In the United States, where anticapitalist politics are on the rise, left organizations have mushroomed in part by traversing local campaigns and seizing on the widespread appeal of a democratic socialist candidate for president, one who advocates not only reforms but also, however ambiguously, a “political revolution.” Meanwhile, the socialist leadership of the UK Labour Party has recently suffered a crushing defeat at the ballot box, but not before John McDonnell advanced a proposal to operate both *within* and *against* the state. This approach was distinguished by its grasp of the state as a field and as an adversary, a possible vehicle for socialism as well as an obstacle to the latter’s realization.<sup>1</sup>

Bernie Sanders’s prospects are difficult to forecast, and the Labour left has not, for the moment, achieved the preliminary passage to state power on which much of its ambitious program would seem to rely. At the same time, elected executives do not exhaust the state. Recent events in Bolivia and Venezuela, for example, have underscored that socialist transition will be brutally contested perhaps especially in places where the left achieves victory via the ballot box.<sup>2</sup> Supported by U.S. intervention and other hostile forces from abroad, capitalists in these countries have demonstrated their capacity to use branches of nominally socialist or social-democratic states to recompose the might of their class in horrific ways.

In countries where the right dominates the state apparatuses, as in contemporary Brazil or the United States, capitalists are deploying from these bases of operation to wreak havoc on whatever the left has managed to build – including the infrastructure of extra-parliamentary forces not vying for their seats. The right utilizes state channels to loosen climate regulations; terrorize migrants, people of color, trans people, and women; and embolden paramilitaries who diffuse the state’s repressive and ideological effects throughout society. Nor should we forget that capitalist state mechanisms are always busy decomposing collective political subjects through the routine deployment of the category of the individual.

In response to these challenges, today’s activists are experimenting with a panoply of tactics: fighting for non-reformist reforms, carrying out direct actions and sabotage at points of state repression, building dual- and counter-powers. Creative insubordination continues to multiply across the globe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and, accordingly, today the model of the economic “base” straightforwardly determining the politico-ideological “superstructure” is rarely peddled as a guide for Marxist practice. The relationship between the economy and what Mario Tronti has called “the political” is no longer taken for granted.

But when it comes to theory, the influence of a base-superstructure model persists. Indeed, this is largely the framework through which Tronti’s own theoretical production has been understood: as the natural outgrowth of a political decision to struggle within the Italian Communist Party (PCI), or to use Antonio Peduzzi’s formulation, as the “accompanying halo” which floats above an earthen core of practice.<sup>3</sup> But with the

international left tending to overcome mechanistic causality in practice, theory cannot be ethereal. It must explore the crevices of capitalist society cracked open by insurgent activity.

Many of us act together today under the shared assumptions that capitalist society will not collapse quietly, that a communist society is not inevitable, and that articulation and organization are necessities in the composition of revolution. The most creative Marxist thinking has always learned from struggles and from shifting relations between movements and institutions. If confronting the state has long been of tactical necessity, today's angle of approach calls for unique theoretical tools. And although history does not provide readymade answers, investigation always unsettles expectations.

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Mario Tronti first achieved renown in Italy in the 1960s for suggesting that workers' struggles propelled capitalist development.<sup>4</sup> But this militant Italian theorist of "class hatred" aroused a different sort ire in the 1970s, when he put forward another thesis, one that criticized "the tradition of so-called revolutionary Marxism" for failing to theorize the relation between the 20<sup>th</sup>-century capitalist state and contemporary political struggle.<sup>5</sup> For Tronti, Marx's own inadequate critique of politics had hypostatized into a sterile "tradition," which subsequently constrained the development of theory capable of orienting the workers' movement:

Sometimes, while working on an analysis, we come to the realization that this terminology, this conceptual framework does not help but instead harms us. We see that it represents a block for research, an obstacle that we must, from time to time, overcome. Let's take up, then, the path of renewal, renewing certain analytical and conceptual tools as well, at the risk of putting into question those to which we are most attached – not so much the Marxist tradition, but the classical paternity of this tradition: namely, the figure and the work of Marx himself.<sup>6</sup>

Tronti did not limit his reproach to a strawman "orthodox Marxism" to which others were devoted. In addition to reproaching Marx himself, Tronti's project of the 1970s entailed a thoroughgoing self-critique, one which involved rigorous scrutiny of both his own theses and the new "tradition" of *operaismo* they had helped to foster.

In "The Autonomy of the Political," newly translated into English below, Tronti problematizes the bases of even his own "Copernican Revolution."<sup>7</sup> If his contribution to Marxist thought in the 1960s had been to see the working-class struggle as the causal force behind changes in the relations of production, now the "reduction" of "the entire society to a factory" and the notion of the working class as "the single engine that drives everything else" would need to be rethought. Speaking to an audience of philosophers and militants in 1972, Tronti enjoined his listeners to reorient themselves toward a capitalist society "in which there are a number of engines running at the same time."<sup>8</sup>

This was his new project – underway from the end of the newspaper *Classe Operaia*, crystallized in this talk, and continuing for the better part of the decade – to elaborate a theory regarding “*the specificity of the political cycle with respect to the economic cycle.*”<sup>9</sup>

These suggestive remarks would be drowned out by the hostile response to another novel component of Tronti’s theorization. It was not his judgment of the absent political theory within Marxism that bewildered many of his comrades, but his proposals for how the Italian Communist Party (PCI) might relate to its working-class base and to the capitalist state.<sup>10</sup> To clarify, it might be useful at the outset for us to separate between three moments of Tronti’s theorizing in this 1972 text. We will call these moments his appraisal, his forecast, and his proposal for action.<sup>11</sup>

First, Tronti’s appraisal, which we have already begun to sketch above, is that *the political* – defined as the state institutions and the spaces of their administration, where administrators or cadre, functionaries or partisans may be working – possesses a history which is unique from the economic history of capital itself. For this reason, one can and must speak of the “autonomy of the political,” that is, a specific temporality of political institutions and of the “subjective activity of doing politics” with respect to the economic cycles of capital.<sup>12</sup> The autonomy of the political, always latent for Tronti, rears its head during phases of great political initiative that do not passively mirror economic development. This evokes Lenin as well as Roosevelt, as he would argue in the 1970 “Postscript” to *Workers and Capital*, when he was already well on the way to developing the position outlined in the text below.<sup>13</sup> Each demonstrated the autonomy of the political through political intervention, each on behalf of a determinate class.

Second, the reader will find Tronti’s forecast, which is that capital will soon move its attention, energy, and initiative to the terrain of political institutions, where “bottlenecks” and inefficiencies in the bureaucracy abound. Tronti predicts that capital will seek to “adapt” or “adjust” these institutions, transforming them to more adequately support the accumulation process. He expects that the underdeveloped state will not update automatically; instead, it requires an input of political initiative, in other words, the capitalist use of the autonomy of the political. Tronti sees this on the horizon with European integration, transatlantic compacts, and the integration of the Soviet sphere into the capitalist world market.<sup>14</sup> He insists that “forecasting capital’s tendential assumption of the political initiative at the international level” illuminates the terrain on which working-class strategy must now move.<sup>15</sup>

Thirdly, there is Tronti’s proposed action for working-class struggle, which proved most controversial for militants weaned on his *Workers and Capital*, the bible of the extra-parliamentary Italian New Left. Here, Tronti suggests, given his forecast of forthcoming capitalist initiatives to modernize the state, and insisting on the possibility of the autonomy of the political as an opportunity also for the working class, that the battle for command of the modernization of the state is where working-class practice should be focused. The real need that capitalists have for a more efficient and entrepreneurial state

produces a concrete political opportunity, making “room for movement that is real, and not utopian” for the working class.<sup>16</sup> This movement is to be carried out by the political-organizational vehicle of the working class, which for Tronti can only be the PCI.

It is this path which can offer opportunities for working-class political rule in the long term. Whereas the working class has only been able to, and only can, achieve short-term, contractual victories in the immediate sphere of the relations of production – in the factory – in the political sphere, through its party, it can accomplish the task of exacerbating the fundamental class division in society. If the party can succeed in separating capital from its state, making the state the preserve of the working class, it can contribute to “a strategic recomposition of our entire movement.”<sup>17</sup> If, however, the working-class party delays in shifting onto this terrain, and if the party lacks the autonomy required to move nimbly in its political decision-making, then the task of the modernization of the state will be left to capital, the state will be modernized only in the service of capitalist political domination of workers, and the window for a strategic and long-term working-class victory will close.

We maintain that it is essential for today’s reader to distinguish between these moments of Tronti’s theory. What we have called his appraisal, forecast, and proposal for action must be kept analytically distinct in our own reading if there is any hope of understanding not only why this text aroused so much controversy, but of seeing how it might spur new initiatives in Marxist theory, and what it might have to do with revolutionary practice.

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The emergence of the political as a distinct, if not yet “autonomous” terrain, can be traced back what we might call the founding document of *Trontismo*: namely, “Lenin in England.” This text, published in January 1964, not long after the break within *Quaderni Rossi*, inaugurated the newspaper *Classe Operaia*. In this seminal editorial, Tronti argued:

At the level of socially developed capital, capitalist development is subordinate to working-class struggles, not only does it come after them, but it must make the political mechanism of capitalist production respond to them.<sup>18</sup>

Undoubtedly it is the Copernican Revolution that remains the foundational moment of operaismo, and for which it remains famed. Yet what we want to do is open another path through the “*selva oscura*” of the origins of operaismo by situating the terrain of the political – or at least a sensitivity to its distinctiveness – at the very origins of this laboratory of thought.<sup>19</sup> Before doing so, we should say a bit more about this Copernican Revolution by way of a consideration of a meeting transcript that predates the split, which took place in Milan on May 27, 1963.<sup>20</sup>

Here Tronti sketches the main line of development for the new project that he, Negri, and others would soon found:

Marx's thesis, that capital explains everything behind it, is probably no longer true, because clearly there is something today that explains capital, and which alone can explain capital, and that is the working class itself.<sup>21</sup>

This formulation, argues Tronti, more clearly emphasizes the implications of focusing Marxist analysis on the working class, an approach which had emerged through the inquiries conducted by members of *Quaderni Rossi*. In addition, Tronti went on to argue at the May '63 meeting, it also allows one to more precisely define the "concept of revolution itself."

To cut to the chase: because there is no bourgeoisie without a working class (since the working class explains the former, and not vice versa), there is no such thing as a bourgeois revolution. Indeed, the bourgeois revolution is nothing but the "sanctioning of a process that has already taken place": namely, it is the political confirmation of economic power having passed from the landed aristocracy to the new class in ascent, the bourgeoisie.<sup>22</sup> For this reason, it is not possible to model the revolutionary rupture of the working class on that of the bourgeoisie: the growth of the working class within the capitalist mode of production is not the growing *economic* power of the class; it is not the growing strength and autonomy of labor-power. Rather, it is the growth of the immediately *political* power of the class, presented "immediately as political growth."<sup>23</sup>

Tronti traces the contours of this "political growth" in the growth of "class solidarity" that follows from (while remaining irreducible to) the socialization of production – the production, in short, of a "social mass that lacks internal divisions."<sup>24</sup> In the 1964 text, "Lenin in England," he speaks of how "from its birth, the working class's labour-power was already homogeneous at the international level, and – over a long historical period – it has forced capital to become equally homogeneous." It is what he also calls the "unity of the working class's movement at the global level," which in turn forces capital "rapidly to seek out its own unitary response."<sup>25</sup>

Such a response rests on the homogeneity of capitalists acting *as a class* – which he terms the bourgeoisie – which is to be understood as differentiated from individual capitalists – who are in competition with one another. So, one begins with the individual capitalist without the bourgeoisie, i.e., without political unification, and with the initial relation of "single capitalist – mass of workers."<sup>26</sup> And then, at a certain point of capitalist development – of the socialization of capital (and of the working class as political subject) – capitalists must organize themselves *as a class*, as the bourgeoisie, in order to confront the political unity or homogeneity of the working class, which in contrast to the capitalist class is always already collective.<sup>27</sup> There is no single worker; workers only exist in the plural, as a "social fact," and their political character is nothing other than their "sociality": the "absolute lack of divisions within the class, such that the workers are all born with the same interests."<sup>28</sup> Hence, while individual capitalists lie behind the emergence of a unified working class, it is the unified working class that lies behind the emergence of the bourgeoisie – and this is why there is no such thing as a bourgeois revolution.

Leaving aside for now the purported (or imputed) homogeneity of the class on the international level, let us return to the text of “Lenin in England” and see the consequences of this framing of class relations and specifically of working-class politics. Looking at the concrete politics of the workers’ movement, Tronti argues that, at this point in the mid-1960s, there was a contradiction between working-class strategy and tactics, noting that “the process for the unitary composition of capital at the international level can become the material base for a political recomposition of the working class and, in this sense, a positive strategic moment for the revolution.”<sup>29</sup> He adds that this is only possible on the condition that the process is “accompanied by revolutionary growth not just of the class, but also in class organisation.”<sup>30</sup>

In the absence of this latter moment of revolutionary organization, to assist capitalist reformism to stabilize the system (through, for example, capital’s engagement with the reformist wing of the workers’ movement) would be to leave the process in the hands of capital, which at the time was more organized than the working class.<sup>31</sup> So, although from the standpoint of strategy, the correct course of action was for the working class to use “its political capacity to impose reformism on capital and then to make rough-and-ready use of that reformism for the purposes of the working-class revolution,” its lack of a revolutionary organization meant that it was not in a position to do so. Given this situation, rather than leave reformism in the hands of a highly organized capital able to impose it from above, in the form of a capital-labor compromise that would “clos[e] off the entire revolutionary process over a long period,” tactically the working class needed to keep separate the two reformist wings – that of capital and that of the workers’ movement.<sup>32</sup>

This question of organization – what Tronti in a suggestive set of notes from autumn of 1963 would call the question of how “to organize the organization,” which characterizes his notion of the “primacy of the political” – is *the* crucial element that all too often goes missing from reflections on this founding text.<sup>33</sup> To recognize this is to fundamentally shift the specific Trontian sensitivity to the *specificity* of political organization, of the political, to the text that launched *Classe Operaia*. If that were so, then one might argue that Tronti’s operaismo was always one that forced attention on the political – a realization that would later sit uneasily with many of his comrades as its implications became explicit.

This is not to claim that some of its subsequent incarnations (whose perhaps most extreme form is revealed in the text translated below) were somehow inscribed within the Copernican Revolution as an essence that needed simply to find its correct form of expression: autonomy of the political, entryism, etc. But it is to suggest that, from very early on, Tronti understood the attempt to yoke political practice to the factory as missing a certain specificity possessed by the political, which denied the seamless interweaving of political and economic terrains favored by some of his comrades as much as it sought to problematize the bourgeois conception of a state that floats above society as a neutral arbiter of contending forces. Rather, the space of the political becomes, for Tronti, something that operates *between* Marxian social relations of

production and that of the state-form itself, a space that comprises the dynamics, temporalities, and historicities of social relations of production, state-forms, and political practices. These differentiations are not strictly *autonomous* – see Tronti’s reframing of the problem in his conclusion to the seminar – but they have a specificity that precludes any attempt to derive, read off, or determine them as expressions of a shared, underlying substance – which conversely would see Tronti affirming “the true not just as *substance* but just as much as *subject*,” thus rendering the accusations of Hegelianism as all too plausible.<sup>34</sup>

The heart of “Lenin in England” considers how workers’ struggles ought to relate to the twin reformisms of capital and of the workers’ movement, instantiated by the historical institutions of party and union. It is around this question – the relationship to organization and to reformism – that the entire later development of what we might term the “other operaismo,” is inscribed – a political and intellectual current which is almost completely obscured in the Anglophone (and much of the Italian) literature that circles around a post-operaismo of mostly Negrian origin.

We might consider the crucial programmatic statement of this alternative operaismo to be the following:

Right away, it is worth saying that the objective to be achieved is the solid recomposition of a politically appropriate relationship between the two moments. No division should be theoretically contemplated, and no opposition, at no point, not even provisionally, should be put into practice.<sup>35</sup>

Which moments are these, whose relationship requires recomposition? The historical institutions of the working class: the PCI and the trade unions.

The relationships to be established between class, unions, party, and state are of course classical political and theoretical problems in the Marxist tradition, which often come into contact with those of reform and revolution. We would contend that this question is at the heart of *operaismo politico*, as Tronti likes to refer to the orientation pioneered in *Classe Operaia*: how to exacerbate the antagonistic relation between, on the one hand, working-class struggle and organization (which may traverse and make use of the parties and unions, but which cannot be reduced to them), and, on the other, the twin reformist perspectives of *both* “enlightened” capital *and* the trade-unions and parties that process and package working-class demands, shipping them off postmarked as “progress.” This question would later appear more explicitly in the pages of the newspaper with Tronti’s “Class and Party,” but it was already present as *the* critical issue from the time of the break from *Quaderni Rossi*.<sup>36</sup>

For Tronti, the “move to organisation” of the struggle is not linear, nor can it bypass the relation to capitalist restructuring, the institutional terrain of state reorganization, or the organizations of the workers’ movement.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, although struggle in the immediate process of production is the material basis for political organization, left alone it remains constrained and isolated. It needs to be “mediated by a political level which



can generalise it.”<sup>38</sup> Our claim is that the emergence of what would later come to be called the terrain of the “political” is already inscribed in this founding document of “political workerism,” and it is so precisely as that moment which organizes organization *between* class, union, capital, and state. The political is to be found at once in the attentiveness to movements of the class itself (i.e., of the class in the varieties of its struggles), and in the creativity of the “interregnum period,” that period during which the working class has already moved beyond the historical institutional forms of the workers’ movement without yet having forged an organization suited to its new forms of struggle (that moment celebrated by others as the ontological creativity and immanence of the mass worker, social worker, or multitude). Tronti reveals an unrelenting focus on the *organizational form* able to generalize those local struggles to the social relations of production, considered both nationally and internationally.

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With this snapshot from Tronti’s “classical” period in hand, let us now return to the premises we set out above concerning the appraisal, the forecast, and the proposal for action put forward by Tronti in 1972. At this point, Tronti claims that the task is to separate capital from its state. This is possible in part because, in his judgment, capital and its state possess “*two parallel histories* that do not always coincide and which sometimes even contradict each other.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Tronti is in the process here of subjecting to scrutiny the ossification of his own former thesis of the working class as the unique explainer of the history of capitalist society – Tronti against *Trontismo*:

When we theorized certain things – the strategic overturning, labor driving everything – what did we do? It is not that we invented things. We only saw the reflection of a determinate reality that was nothing but an empirical and material reality, whose validity increased the more it expressed a determinate moment of the class struggle specifically in Italy. This was the strength of those theoretical discoveries. However it was simultaneously their limit, in that they were abstractions that we derived perhaps too immediately from the particular reality we had before our eyes. The mediation, in other words, was too weak in that case; the chain of mediations was too short.<sup>40</sup>

Here in this discussion, Tronti, self-critical of the immediate reflection too quickly generalized into abstraction, acknowledges that if FIAT was the privileged site of class struggle in the early 1960s, and if the working class’s movements then best explained capitalist development, such a framework must not congeal into a permanent factoryist perspective. This development in his own theoretical practice was also no doubt conditioned by reflection on the recent history of workers’ struggles in Italy, which had rekindled in spectacular form during 1969’s Hot Autumn, but which, in his estimation, encountered limits.<sup>41</sup> The new conjuncture called for fresh experimentation on a different terrain of struggle.

As we began to explore above, Tronti now deemed his previous abstraction oversimplified, finding it incapable of accounting theoretically for the historical instances of the autonomy of the political, whether on the side of the working class (Lenin), or on that of capital (Roosevelt). Beyond this appraisal of historical fact, as Martín Cortés emphasizes in the astute introduction to his recent Spanish translation of *The Autonomy of the Political*, Tronti viewed it as imperative “to anticipate the movement of capital towards the political terrain.”<sup>42</sup> This anticipation is not so much a prediction as an induction, based on Tronti’s reading of a prior sequence of class struggles that reached an analogous high-water mark in relation to the political – the United States in the 1930s.<sup>43</sup> Tronti’s concern here is to forecast the moves that capital in Italy may soon take in order to secure the conditions for reproduction (on an extended scale) of global capital in the long term – namely, the modernization of the state machinery, catching it up to the level of capitalist development.

It is on the basis of this appraisal and this forecast that Tronti proposes that the working class, with its organization, the PCI, must itself take on this task of updating the state, to ensure that the coming “adaptation” or “adjustment” of the state machinery required by capital does not serve capital alone. Capital’s recuperation proceeds by appropriating the fruits of workers’ struggles that fail to assume their own political form and making them the motor of its own development. It is for the working class to develop a political organization operating in the interest of the class, one that promotes open, political class struggle. Tronti’s wager is nothing less than to create an “effective duality of power” between capital and a state separated from capital, a state now in the hands of the working class.<sup>44</sup>

This is perhaps a more fruitful way to understand how Tronti’s analysis differed from that of Negri and others concerning 1969–70. While often seen as a different evaluation of working-class revolt, it might be more correctly framed as a different evaluation of the organizational moment. Whereas for Negri the “Hot Autumn” marked the effectiveness of groups such as Potere Operaio, for Tronti it was a signal that the level of organization needed to rise in scale. And only the historical organs of the workers’ movement had demonstrated their ability to meet this task: they endured over time, they maintained sufficient authority among grassroots political militants of the working class, and they possessed the requisite organizational capacity at the national level – hence Tronti’s increasing focus to establish working-class cadres in positions of authority within the bureaucracy.<sup>45</sup> In earlier years he had fought for the party to embed itself within the factory; he now demanded that the factory embed itself within the state.

How can this proposal be distinguished from the classical social-democratic road to power, and how could a repeat of those historical failures be avoided? Tronti argues that what is required is not simply the occupation of the command posts of the state by working-class representatives, nor merely the passing through the state of reforms in general, but something more peculiar. Specifically, what is needed is “the capitalist reform of the state.” In other words:

making the state a productive machine, eliminating bureaucratic incrustations from within the state, making it an agile machine that the working class can use – just as I have always thought of the party of the working class as small arms, as I once said, that is, a structure able to be maneuvered for political struggle.<sup>46</sup>

Capital is a social relation, a relation of antagonism. That antagonism should be brought into the state, which in turn should be won over for the working class. No doubt this approach would carry major risks, namely what Tronti calls “more organic action between state and capital,” if it were to fail.<sup>47</sup> But for Tronti, neglecting even to try would be an abdication of political responsibility, a failure of courage. The task was to reconsider the “interwoven relations” between the working class, the state, and capital, not under the banner of a “right-wing revisionism” but to “possibly revise the Marxian conceptual apparatus ‘from the left.’”<sup>48</sup>

Tronti’s proposal for action in some ways prefigures that of Nicos Poulantzas a half-decade later. He too suggested that the historical alternative between communism and social democracy “has not produced very much, ultimately,” and he rejects the traditional imperative put forward by the Lenin of *State and Revolution*, “to smash the state machine.”<sup>49</sup> Leaving aside the complex debates about what precisely “to smash the state” would mean in a contemporary capitalist society (a problem also rather hastily abandoned by the late Poulantzas), here Tronti follows the Lenin of the New Economic Policy (NEP), calling for the working class (via its political mediations) to *use* existing institutions bequeathed to it by capital. This too finds precedent in Tronti’s earlier thought, whether in 1962, when he wrote in *Quaderni Rossi* that “it is not enough to oppose the plan of capital at the ideal level: it is necessary to know how to use it materially,”<sup>50</sup> or in the later experience of *Classe Operaia*, when he would valorize “the working-class use of the trade union.”<sup>51</sup> In 1972 we witness an update and reformulation of this orientation: the goal is that “the working class recovers a certain type of relation that is not so much critical or polemical, but one of use, of using the organizations for what they actually are.”<sup>52</sup>

But the question of what, actually, these organizations are, and how they might be transformed, is not explored in the talk below. What falls away, as one of his critical interlocutors recognizes, is a concern for the concrete mechanisms needed for “the working class to transform its own organization.” Without this practical question on the table, the unnamed comrade argues, Tronti’s theory of the working-class use of the state by means of the party simply “does not work.”<sup>53</sup> We find here a distillation of the perplexed response which would meet Tronti’s discourse once it circulated beyond the four walls of the seminar room. The chief theorist of the working-class *strategy* of refusal, and of the confinement of the party to questions of *tactics*, now appeared to have lost his way.<sup>54</sup>

Yet for those who had tracked Tronti’s trajectory following the closure of the newspaper *Classe Operaia* in 1967 – and indeed, for the critical reader of his earlier output, as we have attempted to argue above – the provisional hypotheses of 1972 appear to be less a

ruptural betrayal than an experimental development (however controversial and contingent) in Tronti's uniquely *political* theorizing of relations between workers' struggle and capitalist development.<sup>55</sup> At the same time, such developments were by no means inevitable, implanted as a rotten kernel in Tronti's earliest written works.<sup>56</sup>

In fact, Tronti may have wanted to reclaim Lenin's efforts during the NEP in precisely this direction. In 1920, Lenin, in a speech criticizing Trotsky and the notion of unflinching "principles," had prioritized the conjunctural need of the working class to maintain independent trade unions, in order to defend itself from the new workers' state in Russia. Lenin argued hence that, as long as the state remained necessary for ramping up large-scale capitalist development (crushing small-scale, petit-bourgeois production while building up state-run industry), class and party could not be identified with one another.<sup>57</sup> The working class would need to be able to defend itself with "its own" institutions, while the party-state would need to have the tactical flexibility to work on a variety of fronts. A parallel observation was put forward by Tronti, in typically provocative fashion, with these infamous lines:

Do we want to say that the party needs to attain *autonomy from the class*, that the class must concede to its party the autonomy it needs to carry out this supportive work for big capital, at this particular moment? Let's say – scandalizing everybody – *even this*.<sup>58</sup>

This passage, widely cited as the betrayal of the heterodox political-theoretical laboratory Tronti helped to found, indeed emphasizes the tactical importance of the PCI's *ceto politico* acting without consultation or deference to its working-class base.

Nevertheless, the question of emphasizing the autonomy of the *party* does not preclude the autonomy of the *class* at other levels of activity. The autonomy of the political, in the terms of Tronti's proposal for action, was not put forward as the subordination of workers' self-activity to the designs of leadership. As he remarks in an aside, "even if we wanted to, we could not manipulate and move the classes, for we are here, confined to these roles."<sup>59</sup> Rather, autonomy of the political means acknowledgement of the non-identity between distinct levels of class struggle. That this may not appear explicitly in the text presented below can be attributed to the form of the talk, which, as the speaker noted in his 1977 foreword, "is not really the new way of doing political theory. It is rather the means of searching for it."<sup>60</sup>

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Neither an epistemological break nor the oak born from a rotten acorn, Tronti's specific proposal was made in anticipation of an encounter.<sup>61</sup> This in no way means that the appraisal of the historical existence of the autonomy of the political– Lenin, Roosevelt – must remain indelibly tied to the history of the PCI, however well the glove might fit. One can indeed understand how this instance of bending the theoretical stick to an extreme would be read quite differently after Berlinguer's 1973 articles in *Rinascita* broaching a historic compromise with the Christian Democrats, after the PCI's denunciation of housing occupations and rank-and-file worker activity throughout the 1970s, and after

the storied left-wing municipal government of Bologna welcomed tanks to disperse student protesters in 1977. However, Tronti's theory, despite rhyming with the ideology linked to the historic compromise, never in fact found active purchase among the political leaders whom it sought to address.<sup>62</sup> As he explained in a recent interview,

the autonomy of the political was never well received. This was the destiny it had. The kind of thought which was most radical, that is, revolutionary thought, excluded it immediately... But perhaps the most surprising thing is that it was not accepted even by the other side, the reformist majority, let us say, which practiced the autonomy of the political every day, especially here in Italy, with the Togliattian tradition.... As a consequence, this theory remained somewhat suspended in the air. I do not know what good it did.<sup>63</sup>

Isolated from his former comrades and those whom he hoped would be new interlocutors, Tronti was also, as Cortés notes, ignored in the debates around Marxism and the state that would take place among dissidents in the Italian *Manifesto* group and French thinkers including Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar, and Nicos Poulantzas.<sup>64</sup> Tronti's talk preceded by several years that famous talk in which Althusser, likewise scandalizing his comrades, announced that "there does not *really* exist any 'Marxist theory of the State.'"<sup>65</sup>

Asked recently about the connection between his work on the political and these reflections by Althusser, Tronti acknowledged the affinity between their problematics:

My relationship with Althusser was indirect, but significant: indirect in the sense that we were not acquainted and did not associate. Significant, however, in that we found ourselves thinking the same problem, that of the political, in the same period and with the same orientation in our research.... That politics was and should be, first of all, the management of contingency, command over the conjuncture – this was the research thesis that we found ourselves working on, contemporaneously and independently of each other. When these mysterious correspondences present themselves, it means that a timely need calls for confrontation with the weapons of thought.<sup>66</sup>

We hope that the insightful considerations of the resonances between Althusser and Tronti already put forward by Sara Farris, Andrea Cavazzini and Fabrizio Carlino, and Étienne Balibar may now be complemented with further reflections on how their theories of and approaches to the state intertwine.<sup>67</sup>

Finally, a note about the presentations below. "The Autonomy of the Political" is the transcription of a discussion, which took place on December 5 and 6, 1972, between Tronti, liberal political theorist Norberto Bobbio, and a series of unnamed interlocutors – leftist militants, researchers, and students in the Department of Political Sciences at the University of Turin. A group of these researchers had proposed the subject of Tronti's talk. Shortly after the seminar took place, a mimeograph of the proceedings was produced and distributed. Four years later, in January of 1977, the talk was published in

Feltrinelli's "Opuscoli marxisti" series, with a brief preface by the author and the text of another presentation given several years later in Milan, entitled "Le due transizioni."<sup>68</sup> We are pleased to introduce readers of *Viewpoint* to a complete English translation of the December 1972 seminar materials: Tronti's introductory presentation, two subsequent debate sessions, and Tronti's concluding remarks.