ON DESTITUENT POWER

A CONVERSATION WITH MARIO TRONTI
INTRODUCED BY IDRIS ROBINSON

ILL WILL

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MARIO TRONTI

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Introduction

It is with great satisfaction that I introduce to you the long-awaited English translation of Mario Tronti's 2008 interview on destituent power. In my various musings on the subject, I have quite bombastically referred to Tronti as "the cornerstone of *operaismo*," "the paragon of Italian Marxism," and even "the last living embodiment of communism itself."[1] Notwithstanding my own penchant for hyperbole, such exaggerated terms of endearment are intended to allude to the way Tronti tends, at least in some measure, to actually see himself; that is, as a man from another era, trapped in an alien and hostile age.[2]

Among the many merits of his more recent interventions, there is an underappreciated value in his willingness to acknowledge the prevailing defeat and failure that has accompanied the past five decades of neoliberal capitalism's triumph. Thus, in contrast to the empty anti-globalization slogan, Tronti ought to be credited for having had the audacity to say, "We are *not* winning," and for mustering the courage to recognize loss for what it really is. Sometimes the most radical gesture involves the simple refusal to seek a silver lining in circumstances that can breed nothing other than misery and anguish. As another Italian comrade once put it, "Marxism is not a doctrine for the understanding of revolutions, but of counterrevolutions: everyone knows how to orient themselves at the moment of victory, but few are those who know what to do when defeat arrives, becomes complicated, and persists."[3] In a similar spirit, the poet Sean Bonney convincingly argued that, however paradoxically, revolt does not necessarily coincide with that which is truly revolutionary.

Whether in Italy following the Years of Lead, or in the USA after our hot pandemic summer, Bonney urges us to reject a false sense of comfort and instead furnish "powerful accounts of the painful return to capitalist business-as-usual after the intensity of social upheaval," and of the "agony of the collective 'I' gradually and painfully returning to its individuality as the uprising is defeated."[4] In short, although it may sound odd, there is an emancipatory impulse in chronicling the way counterrevolution comes to reconquer our physical and psychical being with its weapons of loneliness and melancholy. This approach was confirmed by Marx himself, when he stated in his notorious 1843 letter to Ruge that, "if I nevertheless do not despair, it is only because the desperate situation of this time fills me with hope."[5] Accordingly, we may regard Tronti's conjectures about the potential for destitution as a draft outline for the mobilization of precisely this kind of despair, a preliminary blueprint of what Walter Benjamin once called "the organization of pessimism."[6]

Among the many valuable insights contained in the interview, I wish to underscore five characteristic features that Tronti ascribes to any possible configuration of a destituent power.

I

An exact and thorough understanding of time leads to a dual conception of humanity, since the collection of attributes ascribed earlier to the gods is attainable by means of a thorough study of oneself, and such a study is nothing other than humanity believing in humanity. (Velemir Khlebnikov)

Destituent power is wholly antithetical to constituent power, as it refuses to seek any political end, goal, or objective. For Tronti, the most emblematic example of a constituent politics is found in the historical workers' movement, with its principal aim of actualizing the socialist ideal. Whereas in an earlier phase of capitalist accumulation there may have been a certain strategic rationale for promoting socialism to the level of a constituent objective, the current conditions of exploitation have rendered such a political program obsolete, thereby providing the nascent justification for seeking a destituent alternative instead.[7]

In his allusions to the "coming sunrise" and a "bright future," Tron-

ti offers a subtle nod to the enigmatic critique of the socialist utopian paradise contained in the fourth thesis of Benjamin's "On the Concept of History": "As flowers turn towards the sun, what has been strives to turn—by dint of a secret heliotropism—toward that sun which is rising in the sky of history. The historical materialism must be aware of all inconspicuous transformations."[8] The passage features two metaphorical images that had a profound significance within the German workers' movement. As announced in the first lines of the old anthem of the German Social Democratic Party, "*Brüder, zu Sonne, zur Freiheit* (Brothers, to sun, to freedom)," the sun symbolizes how a politics grounded in constituent power is essentially future-oriented politics, always looking forward to an impending goal of freedom, while the flower—specifically, the red carnation—represents the Social Democratic party itself as it bends in the direction of a radiant victory. For Tronti and Benjamin, however, such a forward-looking gaze is the mark of the most shameful reformism. For this reason, the "secret heliotropism" mentioned in the fourth thesis insinuates a Hegelian inversion in which the historical party would instead turn its perspective back toward "what has been" in the bygone eras of the past. Moreover, in "On the Concept of History," this backwards glance is said to forge a link with a conception of the present that underlines the centrality of class struggle, such that "there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one."[9] It is precisely and exclusively in the fight, here and now, that Tronti will locate the strength of destituent power: since capitalist realism has stripped us of any capacity to imagine a future without oppression, false promises about tomorrow are less likely to seduce us into postponing the conflict for another day.

II

Let my wretched bones be buried / in a nameless cemetery in Sverdlovsk. / Because there my friends are laying / with their profiles in marble and roses. / On acid blue fields of snow / they fell with lead in their skulls / these frontline soldiers of Perestroika. (Boris Ryzhy)

The emergence of destituent power is concomitant with the demise of the Modern subject. This claim follows from a strange twist enacted within

an all-too-familiar genealogical narrative: Tronti elevates the traditional proletarian worker above its classic role as a political subject, presenting it as the apex of subjectivity as such. Starting from the earliest stages of Modernity, when speculative thought first began reflecting upon individual subjectivity as an abstract philosophical concept, he observes a historical progression that would eventually culminate with the collective, social, and political subject embodied in the class membership of the wage-earning laborer. Yet despite its socialist veneer, the story he recounts tacitly corroborates constituent power's historical connection to the same epoch that gave rise to the bourgeois State.

The problem is not simply that constituent power has remained irrevocably tied to the Third Estate since the time of the abbé Sieyès, but also that, even in its socialist guise, that it has been emptied of its prior relevance, having proven itself to be increasingly deficient in setting forth aspirations capable of galvanizing the exploited masses. It is not by chance that the antiquated socialist ideal vanished from the popular imaginary at the very moment when the conventional worker-subject, which had been striving for its concrete materialization, also disappeared.

Given their stormy past, it is worth noting that, in his criticisms of constituent power, Tronti is certainly targeting Antonio Negri's more sophisticated and updated use of the term in his 1992 *Il potere constituente*.[10] For Negri, the eclipse of the historical workers' movement inaugurates a phase of development that is only today revealing the true stature of working class subjectivity and the strength of its constituent power. By contrast, for Tronti, the current stage of capitalist accumulation marks the terminus of a subject capable of actualizing such a positive constituent project. Put differently, the two thinkers drastically differ in the way they read the terrain inaugurated by the so-called "the third industrial revolution."[11] The former views the deindustrialization of the labor process favorably as the recomposition of the working-class into a more formidable subject, endowed with the knowledge and sociality characteristic of immaterial production. The latter regards this predicament as the extreme fragmentation and casualization of labor, which casts the wage earner into a tenuous state of precarity. What's more, if subjectivity is to be judged in terms of political agency, then by any quantitative or qualitative measure of the class struggle, the traditional working-class has departed from the

historical stage.[12] In its place, what remains is nothing other than the left-over casualties of "perestroika," or, in the terms of the area of autonomy, "reconstruction."

Amidst such bleak circumstances, Tronti nevertheless succeeds in finding a red thread: to sublate the outmoded working-class also "means to conserve the essence of its method, the movement of its politics."[13] In the disappearance of the figure of the worker he locates an implicit dialectical inversion, one worthy of the well-known Sun Tzu aphorism: "However critical the situation and circumstances in which you find yourself, despair of nothing; it is on the occasions in which everything is to be feared that it is necessary to fear nothing." Once they are deprived of their prior subjective and constituent dimensions, the exploited and the excluded can now unleash their true and unmitigated destituent power on the current order of things. In this way, proletarians can finally gain the capacity to focus their struggle directly against the conditions of their exploitation without being misled by utopian ideological illusions.

III

Comrades! / To the barricades! – / the barricades of hearts and souls. / The only true communist / is the one who's burnt every bridge going back... / Wipe everything old from your hearts. / The streets are our brushes, / the squares our palettes... (Mayakovsky)

The theorization of destituent power has always been derived from the experience of concrete revolt. This has been true since its very beginning, when the term was coined by the militant research collective, Colectivo Situaciones, in their analysis of the Argentinian uprising of December 2001. Likewise, Tronti also relates destituent power with concrete rebellion, but he expands its purview to encompass a wider sequence of revolts. For instance, he considers the mass uprising in Argentina in 2001, but in comparison with the counter-coup that erupted from the barrios of Caracas in 2002, the directed militancy of the black bloc in Seattle in 1999 and in Genoa in 2001; lastly, he devotes substantial attention to the riots that shook the Parisian Banlieues in 2005. From this broader perspective, he is then able to deepen the concept by distancing it further from the

institutional trappings of constituent power.

In his evaluation of the rebellion in the suburbs of Paris Tronti detects the prospect of new methods of struggle, but also admits that these outbursts of frustration still display weaknesses that are characteristic of the prevailing climate of defeat and proletarian decomposition. Indeed, in the past few years, we've become quite accustomed to witnessing uprisings wane into sudden bursts of desperation that ultimately exhaust themselves. In the same way that the large-scale socialist parties once channeled the constituent power contained within the historical workers' movement, Tronti maintains that some form of organization is required for a new destituent politics of comparable impact. Consequently, his repeated insistence that organization is the only ambit of power, force, and strength leads to the most crucial dilemma addressed in the interview: the paradoxical inconsistency between the masses and their organization, spontaneity and directed activity. That is, on the one hand, the rebellious nature of destituent power means that it is prone to unexpected eruptions; yet, on the other hand, calculated planning is the only option for harnessing its utmost potential. Since the burning problem of the relation of spontaneity and organization will likely be with us until a worldwide revolution fully succeeds, Tronti abstains from proposing any hasty responses, leaving the solution to await its verification in the laboratory of subversion.

IV

My name is J-A-Z-R-A / Here I'm illegal, in spite of the Left / I was born in the dusk of the West / And this evening is just splendid / For smashing fascists heads. (Jazra Khaleed)

The politics of destituent power are distinguished from the traditional constituent approach by remaining irreconcilably at odds with the pursuit of gradual reform. Once again, the historical workers' movement under the direction of socialist leadership best exhibits the path of piecemeal reforms. While professing long-term utopian ambitions, the socialist approach was, in fact, a mainly pragmatic pursuit of immediate and secondary gains like suffrage rights, wage increases, and improved living

conditions. Yet, in Tronti's diagnosis, the perceived progress of step-by-step reform is nothing more than a slightly more comfortable cage that impedes the working-class from reaching its revolutionary goal. What the weapons of critique expose in reformist ideology is how it operates by securing a comparatively small gain in return for a far greater and more devastating loss.

Somewhat ironically, Tronti turns the pages back to Marx's reflections on the revolutionary wave of 1848, not only to help develop the above critique of reformism, but also to give a few brief hints about the putative character of a patently new organizational form. Above all, the immediate lesson to be gleaned from his interpretation of *Class War in France* is that a destituent power matures and further consolidates its own strength by more clearly discerning its target in its attack on the existing order. Yet, whereas counterrevolution is typically understood as an external opponent, he instead counter-intuitively asserts that it is actually engendered by the revolutionary progress of the insurrectionary party. The idea can be traced back to the depiction of class conflict in his 1966 classic, *Operai e capitale*: whereas the bosses will attempt to envelop the exploited within the alleged objectivity of the economic sphere, the working-class struggles to achieve a subjective autonomy that divides capital and labor into two antagonistic camps. Similarly, a movement today can mature into an organized destituent power only by instigating a similar fracture that brings about a distinct class enemy, and with this, a new form of counterrevolution.

V

The orange sun is rolling across the sky like a severed head, gentle light glimmers in the ravines among the clouds, the banners of the sunset are fluttering above our heads. The stench of yesterday's blood and slaughtered horses drips into the evening chill. (Isaac Babel)

The force of destituent power precipitates a rift in the order of things that results in states of exception, civil war, and ungovernability. As the hostilities between the party of insurrection and the party of order, the revolution and counterrevolution, develop and mature, Tronti envisions

a transition from full-fledged civil war into a condition of absolute disorder. Implicitly objecting to Giorgio Agamben's formulations of global civil war and states of exception, Tronti argues that the recent neoliberal era has instead been typified by the stifling reign of normality. In a 2009 article, he insists that the world order is more accurately characterized by an imperial democratic stability, a *Pax Americana*: "Contrary to what one often hears, especially from progressive quarters, I deny that in the current phase we are experiencing the centrality of war. It seems to me that this present emphasis on peace-war is entirely disproportionate. All the wars are taking place at the borders of the empire—on its critical fault-lines, we could say—but the empire is internally living through its new peace, though I do not know if it too will last one hundred years. It is in this condition of internal peace and external war that democracy does not merely prevail, but experiences a resounding triumph."[14] The only possible means of inverting the routine functioning of global imperium is to organize a destituent power capable of producing a diametrically opposed enemy, and thereby provoking a clash so furious that it gives way to a completely unmanageable, uncontrollable, and ungovernable situation. On this account, it is by no means a coincidence, but rather confirmation, that after three years of widespread unrest and recurrent uprisings, war is once again crashing at the gates of Europe. Nevertheless, the directive remains the same as it was when war had previously threatened to engulf the Continent: let us transform the imperialist war into a civil war!

—Idris Robinson

A Conversation with Mario Tronti

Adriano Vinale: The first thing that I want to consider together is political subjectivity, or rather: how and if political subjectivity is created today. More generally, I wonder whether the subjectivization process is still a mechanism through which we can analyze action and political militancy? Since the processes of subjectivization have clearly shown their limits, shouldn't we draw lessons from the histories of feminism given how it short circuits subjectivization or contests the "subject" as the preeminent space for the formation of political action. It is necessary, perhaps, to start thinking about the *political* and *politics*[15] from this impossibility or reasoning in the classical terms of political subjectivity.

Mario Tronti: In all honesty, for some time now I haven't thought in terms of subjectivity primarily for one reason: when one says "subjectivity," there has to be someone in front of you, either here at your feet or out in the field. On the other hand, when there is no one there, speaking of subjectivity seems to speak about something else entirely. Taking a step back, there might be an even more fundamental question: the crisis of the modern subject, which is one and the same as the exhaustion of modernity as a project that is founded precisely on the subject. We have been stuck inside this project-subject dialectic for a long time now. I think that Marx set himself on this path, and that this has been going on for quite some time—not decades, but centuries, from the beginning of modernity until halfway through the twentieth century. This idea of subjectivity, and also the idea of the subject have had different evolutions. There was a storied

philosophical reflection. With Marxism, and with the workers' movement, this notion of subjectivity became a collective subjectivity, a social subjectivity, a political one. So, I think that the arc of modernity from the singular subject of the subject-individual to the social subject closes the history of the subject as such. This form of presence in history has entered into crisis. My feeling is that it has opened a different history, the possible developments of which are not yet clear. I have the impression that with the emergence of the working-class, of the proletarian subject, of proletarian subjectivity, the history of modernity and the modern subject, or if we want, of subjectivity, was brought to a close. At this point, as far as I'm concerned, the eruption of the working class seems to be more of an endpoint rather than a starting point for modernity. Of course, this does not diminish the importance of the working class. To the contrary, I think that this exalts the working class: it was the force capable of bringing the long and complex development of modern history to its conclusion. Its defeat brings the idea of the subject into crisis without ushering in another form of subjectivity, but seems rather to point toward the end of subjectivity itself.

AV: Your *La politica al tramonto* (1998) surprised me because on more than one occasion, and with considerable emphasis, you underline and defend the idea of an "ethical revolt," something that's classically antithetical to the idea of revolution. It seems to be a new space opened by the decay of political subjectivity during the late 1960s. Clearly that dichotomy isn't the classical one anymore (that of Camus, for instance). What do you mean by "ethical revolt"?

MT: It's true this expression is a bit foreign to my usual mental habits. I have always maintained an anti-ethical perspective, preferring an emphasis on politics that doesn't leave any space for ethics. Clearly, the crisis of political revolution that has taken place, even with the events that we discussed earlier, opens up new possibilities. Most of all, this is because the political sphere is limited with respect to the types of responses it allows. The type of world that exists, the dominant social model, has assumed a totalizing form. It has come to occupy all spaces, including all those belonging to the human being, such that purely political responses have

become inadequate, as they do not respond to the scope of the problem, which is one of totality. This goes hand in hand with another topic: the rediscovery of the anthropological dimension of politics. Here we see the necessity of reckoning with the substance of the human being, which is perhaps more complicated than revolutionary Marxism or the workers' movement had thought. Much of this theory reduced man to his status as a worker, or to a man wielding the tools of his trade. Therefore, expanding the anthropological dimensions allows for an expansion of possible responses. It opens new spaces of possibility because this type of world and social form, which has assumed this totality, becomes all the more lamentable and thus refutable. Ethical revolt tells you that you must be against the world in as total a way as the reality in front, above, below, or behind you is... There were strong examples of the internalization of this totality into a single individual, and not only individuals but social subjectivities as well. This process of internalization of the animal spirit of the bourgeoisie, the bourgeoisification of the individual form, also subsumes what little remains of social subjectivity—or at least what can be construed, even if in a false or decadent way, to belong to social subjectivity. In the same social subjectivity there is an interiorization of a hostile world, which explains why even collective organizations (made up of individuals) offer the same answers as do individuals. Just as today's individual surrenders to being just what they are asked to be, i.e., to be bourgeois—if you want to live, and live well, and everyone wants to live well, then you must be bourgeois—collective organizations (the union, the party) also surrender to this imperative. If you want to perform well in this world, then you need to internalize this characteristic of being as you are asked to be. This is what provokes ethical revolt, because there is a process of internalizing what was earlier an external enemy that has now become a more complicated, more dangerous, and more difficult foe.

AV: Speaking about unions, you argue in *Workers and Capital* (1966) that in the past the party had resigned itself to a purely revolutionary function while the union assigned itself the function of mediating social needs, integrating the working class into the capitalist system. Until recently, I would have said that the relationship between the union and the party, at least in Europe, had flipped, and that political militancy needed to be

carried out through the union. Recent discussions about welfare in Italy, however, seem to flip the roles and the question back once more, implying that the union is still thought of as a funnel carrying the working class into the machinations of capital. What do you think?

MT: The destinies of the two forms of organization have been more or less parallel, or let's say that they converge in the course of their development; they are both forms that have little space for escaping dominant mechanisms and thus function inside [the system] with diverse characteristics. I have always thought that empirically the union represents social conditions and was thus less integrated than the political party. Because of the union's greater proximity to the needs of the subject-worker, it always felt the pull of reality a bit more and was thus more representative. The party, however, with its preoccupation with mediating politics as opposed to social conditions, drifted away from the subject-worker and inserted itself completely into the logic of the system. To be honest, today this distinction seems much less interesting than it was in the past.

AV: In an interview with Ida Dominijanni in *il Manifesto* on the fortieth anniversary of *Workers and Capital*, you concluded by commenting on the need for a new Lenin to organize forms of un-unionizable labor.[16] Putting aside for a moment the classical union, the last heir of twentieth-century politics, it seems that today efforts to unionize immaterial and precarious labor are perhaps the biggest challenges for political organizing, and thus also for militant politics.

MT: This self-activity of immaterial/precarious workers is an untapped field for both unionist and political forces. I often wonder why it is that this sector isn't the main focus and why new forms of subjectivity aren't found there, even if they are perhaps weaker than those of the past. I understand the difficulties, as we have always worked upon the social forms of appearance that are objectively and structurally concentrated in a given field of work, in a certain region, a certain city. This type of objective concentration allowed for a form of direct organization. Unsurprisingly, today you are more likely to hear of *jobs* rather than *work*. This is a mistake, because even this change of terminology is indicative of the fragmen-

tation of work. In my opinion, it is necessary to reestablish the category of *work* in its singular form, precisely because the job of organizations is to reunify what is otherwise fragmented: not to organize the fragments, but to unify the fragments under one definition of work that includes knowledge work, flexible work, precarious work, and so on; to unify as much as possible, notwithstanding the difficulties that are hard to overcome, precisely because today's forms of work escape any attempt at objective unity. I think that this is more true today than it might have been in the past. Not long ago one could still speak of 'bringing consciousness to the workers from outside,' whereas today it is about bringing a unity to the condition of work itself from outside of it.

AV: And non-work? According to some, the recent European revolts, particularly those in the French banlieues, could be considered non-work rebellions. Not a refusal of work, but rather a quasi-heretical revolt against non-exploitation...

MT: ...A demand *for* exploitation, yes. Non-work is even harder to organize. Furthermore, non-work comes in two forms. Firstly, there is obligatory non-work: the lack of work, around which people could attempt forms of organizing like demanding a guaranteed income. Then, there's what we might call desired non-work, by which I refer to the main issue that *Operaismo* brought into focus in its most propitious season: non-work understood as the refusal of work, opening up a very difficult, very delicate field of discourse, which is still extremely present. I don't think that this is something we can bring back again today, since the refusal of work came about during a period of full employment that is no longer with us.

AV: Many contemporary thinkers consider our epoch as one governed by the state of exception. Instead, you have frequently insisted on the fact that, although classical political subjectivity, as well as the historical dialectic between workers and capital, was tied to a horizon of the state of exception, today this connection no longer remains, nor does the classical dialectic between antagonistic political subjectivities. You argue that the era of the state of exception (as well as that of class war) ended in the

1960s. On the other hand, if only from a politico-militaristic point of view, isn't our era the preeminent example of rule through the state of exception?

MT: In all honesty, looking around I don't see a state of exception. It is always strange when one claims there is normalcy. A "normal" country, a "normal" left... I would be hard pressed to imagine something more normal than what's around us. The state of exception is a state of objective ungovernability. Not in the sense of the government's control, but in terms of having control of any given situation in general. The state of exception occurs when this possibility of control and management escapes those who hold the reins of true power—i.e., the ruling class. Instead, I believe that a decisive process of normalization took place, of which the 1980s were emblematic. I mean, the reversal of a condition based in occasionally irreconcilable contradictions, into a time of immense social and political control. From the Trilateral Commission [1973] onward there was a rerouting by capital, which has since taken complete hold of power over the world. In my opinion, this shift was akin to a new *Pace dei Cent'Anni*.[17]

AV: Yes, but this is because you understand the state of exception and normality/normalization differently than the thinkers I was referencing. It's clear that the major reference point today is democracy—absolute, real, total, however we want to call it. In this context, it seems to me that democracy has normalized its tendency to function through emergency measures, through crises—whether these be of production, or else political, social, or military crises, and so on. Of course, there is another type of "exception," as you describe. But if we look back at the last ten or twenty years, hasn't crisis become the primary geopolitical mechanism for the control of economic and human resources? Societies are managed through crises on internal and external fronts. In some ways, doesn't this point toward the implementation and normalization of the state of exception?

MT: In that sense, sure, we could talk about it in those terms. However, what strikes me isn't the state of crisis, but rather how contemporary crises don't ever explode beyond control these days. The first example that

comes to mind is a banal and empirical one: the periodic crisis of the stock exchange. Every now and then another "Black Friday" arrives when it seems as if everything will collapse, and everyone gets super alarmed. It lasts a couple of days, a week, but then everything goes back to normal, because today there is the National Bank, investment banks, and other forms of control at the institutional level that did not exist previously. This is globalization; it's a superior capacity of control of the economic cycle, which was escapable as long as it operated on a national level. Europe is integrated, the global market is integrated, and the more something is integrated, the more control there is over the system. Nothing is escapable anymore, nothing explodes. I don't think this will be the permanent state of things in the future, which is a mode of perception I learned from Marx. As Jenny Marx wrote: "Today, Marx is happy because there was a production crisis in London, he is very cheerful." Something's got to give eventually because one of capital's characteristics is its ungovernability. There is an anarchist character of the capitalist mode of production at its foundation. Today this is less obvious because there are many institutional mechanisms that regulate and control it, but this will not last forever, even if we won't know when or how things will come apart. Today when I think about the state of exception I think of civil war, which is the point at which there is no longer anyone with the capacity to keep a grip on equilibrium. This is why I find so-called pacifist movements to be a bit pathetic. Because the more there is peace, the more there is order, and thus the more there is the capacity for control by those in charge. The only thing that can unhinge this order and this possibility of control is precisely a form of conflict that is so fierce and uncompromising that no one can control it. It's true that today there is also a use of conflict to instill control; it's not a coincidence that wars are occurring in the peripheries. We have to think a bit more about the forms of these wars. The form that politics takes at a given moment dictates the corresponding form that war will take. We have to understand this correspondence. This is interesting, because the war is at the margins of global order and at the same time assures that there is order in the center. I don't know if this has been strategically planned in this way, but it's a fact that war doesn't explode in the center of the system anymore.

AV: Thinking about a series of recent conflicts, maybe we can talk about them in pairs: Caracas and Buenos Aires, Seattle and Genoa, Los Angeles and Paris. However, the example of Paris is not like the others, because the catalyst there was not an economic crisis, nor the middle or working classes rebelling, as it was in Latin America; nor was it antagonistic militancy like in Seattle or Genoa. Their differences aside, we have to learn from these movements and understand them. How are you reading the cyclical explosions of French violence?

MT: I'm very interested in what's happening in Paris. Of course, when I see the explosions of the *banlieues* I feel happy, because every instance of disruption and disorder is a positive thing. But for me, I always return to one central thing: for today's youth, for the new generations, the twentieth century is missing. Having lived through that century myself—and I only regret having arrived so late—when I think of economic crisis, 1929 comes to mind; when I think of war, my mind goes to the World Wars... So, when I have to contend with the Balkan wars or an economic crisis, I remain somewhat disappointed, because my reference points are different. Someone recently brought up how it is ironic that I often use the adjective "large" [*grande*]. But, for me the difference between large and small is very important as a quantitative dimension. Today when even one soldier dies at war, there are ceremonies, flags, flowers... At Dresden, 80,000 people were killed! So when thinking about contemporary crises, my mind spontaneously makes such comparisons with the past. This is not to diminish what is happening today; rather, it is simply a way of saying that with these historical points of reference it's hard to go somewhere else. There are many people that aren't fans of movements because they see only a practice of excessive violence. I instead see them as weak practices: movements don't have power. And perhaps it's for this reason that they resort to violence, to gratuitous violence, since violence is always gratuitous. Power is a serious thing, it impacts the great contradictions, it makes itself felt. Power is always organized, thought through, quasi-planned. It's not a coincidence that movements and also the *banlieues* are...

AV: ...structurally anti-Leninist.

MT: In fact, I do have a Leninist matrix, which I maintain beyond the period of Leninism. But, struggle only makes an impact when it is organized. Movements need to find their strength. Not a strength based in external politics, but precisely *their* strength. Movements should become the primary powers of the moment, seeing that political powers have become powerless. Movements should be self-organizing so as to become powerful [*potenza*], not just strong [*forza*], but powerful. But at the same time, they also need to develop the capacities for longevity and management; I know that this contradicts the very idea of movements, given that once you begin to manage something you also create a form of organization that is no longer a movement. This is an *impasse* that I myself have not figured out how to resolve. That being said, I naturally have sympathy for all these movements because every Genoa and every *banlieue* is an important moment as far as I'm concerned.

AV: Don't you think that democracies that govern through crisis, and the realities of spontaneous movements typical of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first centuries, together constitute an inseparable antimony? Especially since democracy has learned how to manage through crisis and the threat of producing more crises that are perhaps smaller in size but thus all the easier to control. In this way, movements become *destituent* that rebel against the structures imposed on it, or those that power tries to impose on it, without becoming *constituent*, thus relegating itself to an absolutely unorganizable temporality, especially given the current conditions of work.

MT: I really like the idea of destituent power. I think it is a really nice idea. But we have to reason, elaborate, and articulate the discourse a bit, because I think destituent power emerges from the crisis of subjectivity. Subjectivity—especially when it became social subjectivity, whose organization was indeed a possibility and a reality and a practice—was naturally constituent, and a bearer of a positive project. In fact, it linked struggle more to solutions rather than to the reasons for struggle itself. In some sense, this was the logic in which the worker's movement was trapped, since it often became more about preaching socialism than critiquing capitalism. Put another way, the idea of socialism became more central than the cri-

tique of capitalism. And it's no mystery why. They had no idea what to do with subaltern classes because you can't offer a pure and simple reason for subaltern classes that doesn't already point towards a messianic exit towards another world. If you really think about it, the socialist movement, more so than the communist movement, was always positioned as the coming sunrise. Today, the value of symbolism is being reconsidered. In the past, symbolic elements were much stronger: anthems, songs, flags, the party's coat of arms, indicating a bright future to its members... This was a complete failure, and is one of the few positive traits that I see in the present as compared with the past. If the idea of socialism seem less important to me today, this is because it is possible to make a pure and simple critique of really existing conditions that is strong enough to muster the same capacity for development and mobilization as historical socialism once did. Also because it is not necessary to discern what to do about subaltern classes. The same type of work that we were talking about earlier—fragmented, dispersed, one that is at a completely different level of awareness as compared with traditional work, since we are talking about knowledge work—allows for a more realistic and less ideological discussion. The critique of really existing conditions becomes less messianic and closer to the practice of effective struggle against working conditions rather than about fighting the manager. It is here that the idea of destituent power takes shape. The primacy lies not in building something, but rather in destituting what is already there, to place the existent into crisis. This is an idea that I would insist on. I take it that we understand destituent power as an alternative to the constituent power that the ideologues of the multitude continue to invoke.

AV: I certainly share your feelings in the sense that the theorists of the so-called "multitude," with their re-assertion of constituent power, tacitly presuppose an operative notion of subjectivity. On this there can be no doubt. So much so that they place work—albeit "dematerialized"—at the very foundation of the process of immaterial subjectification. For this reason they don't understand that the mechanisms for social cooperation, for physical being-together, can constitute forms of organization and struggle. On the flip side, reflecting on destituent power can be interesting precisely for thinking beyond a revolutionary force understood as classical

subjectivity. The question of imagination remains, especially because even if we do not want to accept the idea of immaterial labor and affective-cognitive labor as the only forms of work, the fact remains that imagination plays a central role. You very clearly emphasize the proximity between the idea of *homo democraticus* and *homo economicus*. To this, I would also add *homo affectivus*. Democracy is a form of social control operating through a system of capitalist production precisely because it moves, at least partly, through the ganglia of the imagination, or rather through the control of the dynamic between desire and need. It's enough to look at the beginning of *Capital*, where Marx clearly states that that which is a need, even if immaterial, always remains a need. This is always what democracy was. So, has democracy simply showed its darker soul, or has something shifted along the fronts of the imaginary and imagination?

MT: I'm not sure that democracy is a reproduction organ that is enlarged by the imagination. I see it as a means of reducing the capabilities for human beings' imagination insofar as the available modes of escaping democracy are relatively few in number, trapping people inside a perpetually unattainable horizon. Then, imagination has other ways of expressing itself, because the world of the market, of consumption, of free time, are all inscribed inside democratic time. Instead, I think that we need to consider the force of imagination in a positive sense, and find a way to recharge—not in the sense of the old idea of ideology, but rather through the deconstruction of ideology—and enlarge life's horizon of possibilities.

AV: You use the figure of mythology in a similar way...

MT: ...It has been many years now that I have been attempting to reacquaint myself with these territories that had been taken from us by an excess of rationalism (which Marxism also has at its base), in order to reconsider human complexity as something much more difficult to enclose within materialist frameworks. There are various human resources that can be used, and that have been destroyed by, the form of organization proper to modern capitalist society. It is the same type of thought that I've been practicing for the last few years, which is an imaginative style of thinking and writing, which is more transversal, allusive, and always seeks

to make people think in new ways: not in the style of political economy, whose method replicates the cold calculus of the capitalist market, but in a manner that emphasizes that which is profound in human being. This should be a refrain for social movements: to accuse the world of having reduced the human being to much less than it could be. But I don't want to talk about a new humanism…

AV: I was thinking that the internalization of democracy that you were referring to was brought about precisely through the conceptual and practical functions of the imagination. The broad mapping of the affective passions undertaken by Spinoza, which for us serves as the disruptive entry into revolutionary modernity, also set up a categorical apparatus of affective manipulability.

MT: Affective manipulation is very important. Imagination is something that should be handled with a lot of care and ability, with a great capacity for control, because it can be dangerous. I was recently thinking about the young Marx—even though I was one of those who tried to free myself from him as quickly as possible, when in the 1960s everyone passed through *Capital*, to say nothing of all the chatter about *The Manuscripts*. Today we need to return to the young Marx and re-read those texts in a new way. It's the only moment when Marx acquires a bit of an anthropological discourse, which he later abandons to focus on different problems, including very important ones. But it's there in the early writings that we first see the connection to what I call a "critique of civilization." It's a discourse that is very imaginative, with a lot of imaginative force, where Marx begins his discussion of the overcoming of alienation, of man as a generic entity, something that has been banalized today by ecological Marxism. Instead, we should return to that earlier matrix. Perhaps, if we overcoming a certain distrust, those writings still have things to say to us.

AV: In a recent interview, you responded to a question about biopolitics saying that for you the only horizon is geopolitics. I'd be interested to hear more on this to better understand your position. Especially with regards to what you just described with reference to Marx and the idea of man as

a generic being, which I take to be the root of biopolitics, understood as the power's grip on the human as a species.

MT: If we understand biopolitics in the terms you just described, and if we can read the writings of the young Marx on species-being in biopolitical terms, then I think that connection fits well. I have the impression, however, that in this discourse there is also another meaning. I have the impression that social politics have accumulated a series of failures, and has now reached a point where it is impossible to advance any further. So, I think returning to *bios* seems more like a step backwards than an advance forward that might overcome the impasse. I fear that we are unconsciously subjected to a hegemony of adversarial thought, a thought of exasperated individualism, and a return to the central figure of our singularity. This is why I think the *bios* can be read as an attempt to adhere to this horizon, changing the terms of the problem and summarizing it on its own terms, but still implicating itself within it rather than subjecting it to criticism. Geopolitics is the thing I am most convinced of, but it's tied to my style of thinking which always sees politics as a terrain of forces that confront one another. When I seek out this terrain today, it's not only between countries considered individually, but at the level if the globe itself, over large and contrasting spaces. Here, I return to the idea of large spaces. It seems to me that this is the most interesting thing because it is the only one I can see today that continues to give me hope of a real crisis, of a radical crisis of the existing equilibrium. The only crises that are difficult to reconcile and govern are those between the big world-spaces [*grandi spazi-mondo*]. When I consider the large powers growing in Asia, that claim their political space on the world stage, I see nodes of contradiction emerging that, if they were to explode, could call everything into question. I don't exclude that these conflicts could engender new and unheard of subjectivities, which will then strategically oppose one another along the way. However, I see them emerging in accordance with these contradictory fault lines. I don't know if it will happen exactly like that, because it is also possible that these conflicts will fit together to produce new equilibriums. But I would advise we take note of these spaces, because I think politics today has more to do with a billion and a half Chinese people than with the single individual who might possibly enter into crisis.

AV: One last question. Recently you have argued, a bit rhapsodically, that the critique of political economy is insufficient because it isn't able to get around the general horizon of political economy as such. Hence, your suggestion that we need to take a further step beyond political economy itself. I would like to understand what you mean.

MT: For me, this is absolutely crucial. This is one of my most recent arguments. Maybe Marx took us down a bad road because he allowed himself to be trapped inside the critique of political economics. Not only could he not see what lies outside it, but he didn't succeed in freeing himself from political economy in general. Even throughout his criticism, even though it was still very strong and decisive, he didn't succeed in freeing himself. Because once you position yourself inside political economy, there is no space for emancipation. It's a total science, a total knowledge, it doesn't leave anything out, it draws everything into it. This is why you rarely find an anti-capitalist economist, or a revolutionary economist. There are a few, but they are rare creatures. And most of them are not simply economists, usually they are something else also. I always say that that there is too much talk of economics these days, you rarely hear about anything else. All political governments do today is manage the economy. But can the government of a society only have this role? Can it just be the manager of an economic enterprise? Look around. Day in and day out all you hear about is economics. There are electoral campaigns and all they talk about is money. Everything is reduced to this point. Because capitalism grows. Capitalism is economics and political economics is capitalism. If you critique capitalism only from the perspective of political economy you will never be able to escape capitalism. The proof of this is in the construction of socialist societies, which followed a Marxian framework and also fell for the same trap. They built socialism on the basis of Marxian economic schemas. For decades the Soviet Union built socialism following the schemas of Volume II of *Capital*: production, circulation, distribution, consumption… That's how it worked, that how it *should* have worked. They failed to create a society that was truly different from capitalist society. Socialism fell because of this. Eventually they had to recognize that they might as well remake capitalism, which works a lot better than a socialist society that runs on capitalist planning. I don't believe the critique of po-

litical economy will ever completely free itself of political economy. When you take up a position inside *Capital*, even if you explicitly acknowledge that you are inside its world, you are still sucked in. The only serious attempt to get out of this situation was to break the cage itself, the cage of Marx's *Capital*. So when Gramsci defined the October Revolution as a revolution *against* Marx's *Capital*, I found this to be a brilliant insight, because the October Revolution was not extractable from *Capital*. It was Lenin's invention, an entirely political invention. However, after the political invention, being Marxists, the Russian revolutionaries climbed right back into the cage. They left for just a brief moment, and then promptly went right back in. In my view, the failure of the construction of socialism resulted from their decision to not continue along the path of fracture, with the result that, in the construction of socialism, they fell back into the framework of political economy, which is capitalist economics.

AV: I wanted to discuss a brief passage from Marx's *The Class Struggles in France*: "The revolution made progress, not by its immediate tragicomic achievements but by the creation of a powerful, united counter-revolution, an opponent in combat with whom the party of overthrow ripened into a really revolutionary party."

MT: It's so terrific. "The revolution made progress, not by its immediate tragicomic achievements." I think this is wonderful. To define its immediate achievements as "tragicomic" is the greatest possible critique of reformism. Because everything is reformist: pragmatism, the workers' movement, and even the Italian communist movement chased after immediate achievements. Defining them as "tragicomic" is extraordinary because that's exactly what they are. Immediate achievements are ridiculous. The more they are immediate conquests, the more they are tied to the present condition. Immediate conquests will improve the present conditions of work, of life, but they won't allow you to pass on to other alternative conditions. Rather they lock you inside what you have already achieved. This is the tragedy at the heart of comedy. But Marx continues: "...but by the creation of a powerful, united counter-revolution, an opponent in combat with whom the party of overthrow ripened into a really revolutionary party." So, the revolutionary process (or what we could

call destituent power) thus consists in creating an adversary, in creating a "united counter-revolution." It's not about fighting for the revolution, but rather doing it in such a way as to produce a powerful counter-revolution, that, as you struggle against it, it allows you to go beyond the immediate situation. I find this illuminating. The insurrectionary party will only mature when it has a powerful enemy to combat. That's why I am enthusiastic when the enemy grows stronger. When I saw the neocons emerge, all of them exactly the same, I thought that they might just be what was missing. Because that is the strong counter-revolution. But then they lost, because the mechanisms of democracy are such that they recuperate everything. But that's what was needed: a powerful, strong, visible, explicit adversary against which one could unleash a movement and let it mature. The movements needed this; instead of a power that immediately represses them, then tolerates them, then learns to control them, they needed to find a great adversary that would have allowed them to grow.

AV: It's as if one were a function of the other, as if in this polarized dialectic, the forces of social movements and counter-revolutionary forces are complementary. It's as if the mechanisms of democracy use the expression of a counter-revolution to provoke an uprising which then brings the mechanisms of democracy back to re-govern the crisis. It's as if the Bush-Clinton dialectic wasn't an absolute contradiction, but rather a complementary relation, exposing the theo-conservatives that would bring back democracy.

MT: That's what's happening. In fact, now there is a very strong capacity for recuperation. I read Samuel P. Huntington's book, *Clash of Civilizations*, with much admiration. Unlike what most people say, I think it's a great book by a great political realist. Everyone had a problem with the title, and everyone received it in their own way, but Huntington was able to understand what was just beginning. The neconservative strategy was dictated by a fear of China and of the new Russia. Hence the attempt to bypass them, by going through Iraq, through Iran, through North Korea, through Afghanistan. Getting around the behemoth was a highly militarized global strategy — great politics is always a military strategy. I got excited here, I thought that we had found the right adversary. But when the open conflict recedes, there will be nothing for everyone to do but go

home, and even if it seems like the most advanced solution, we will all fall asleep again and nothing will happen.[18]

Notes

1 See for instance, "There is No Unhappy Revolution," Red May 2021, May 26, 2021, 36:28.

2 Mario Tronti, "Our Operaismo," *New Left Review* 73, (2012); Mario Tronti, "I Am Defeated: Interview with Antonio Gnoli," 2015.

3 Amadeo Bordiga, "Detailed Report from the Naples Meeting of the International Communist Party – September 1, 1951," *Lessons of the Counterrevolution*.

4 Sean Bonney, "Rimbaud and the Paris Commune," *the commune*, May 19, 2010.

5 Karl Marx to Arnold Ruge, May 1843, *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*.

6 Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism," trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Reflections*, Schocken Books, 1978, 190.

7 For more on the decline of socialist reformism within the context of the past decades neo-liberal offensive, see Gilles Dauvé & Karl Nesic, "Whither the World."

8 Michael, Lowy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History,"* Verso, 2005, 37.

9 Lowy, *Fire Alarm*, 30.

10 This is but one of many disagreements between the two dating back to the dissolution of the *Classe Operaia* journal in 1967, which signaled an end to their collective partnership in theoretical pursuits. See Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Marxism*, Pluto Press, 2002, 221-225.

11 Antonio Negri, "Interpretation of the Class Situation Today: Methodological Aspects" in *Open Marxism* Vol 2, Pluto Press, 1992, §4-5, 8, 10, 12, & 17.

12 On this point, see Aufheben, "From Operaismo to Autonomist Marxism."

13 Mario Tronti, "We Have Populism Because There is No People."

14 Mario Tronti, "Towards a Critique of Political Democracy," trans. Alberto Toscano, *Cosmos & History* 5, no. 1 (2009). See also Idris Robinson, "The Revolt Eclipses Whatever the World Has to Offer: A Conversation with Gerardo Munoz," *Tillfällighetsskrivande*, May 24, 2021.

15 "...pensare *il* politico e *la* politica."

16 Tronti writes: "I am not proposing to return to Lenin or Luxemburg: no experiences of twentieth-century communism are actionable today. A memory is good if it is an active memory that serves to go beyond the past, not to repeat it." —Trans.

17 A reference to the supposed lack of major conflict on the European continent following the Congress of Vienna in 1815, lasting until the outbreak of World War I—though there were major exceptions like the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871), among others. —Trans.

18 The translator wishes to thank Jose Rosales, Pietro Scammacca, Vincenzo Latronico, Giulia Sbaffi, and Andrea Pozzana.

Once they are deprived of their prior subjective and constituent dimensions, the exploited and the excluded can now unleash their true and unmitigated destituent power on the current order of things. In this way, proletarians can finally gain the capacity to focus their struggle directly against the conditions of their exploitation without being misled by utopian ideological illusions.