



## Not Fear but Hope in the Apocalypse

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Mario Tronti is best known in the Anglophone world – if he is known at all – as the originator of the heretical Italian Marxist tradition of *Operaismo* (Workerism) and, for that very reason, in this time of immaterial, creative labour, somewhat *passé*, of another era. Whatever one's judgment on the Tronti of the 1960s, the author of the hugely influential *Operai e Capitale* (*Workers and Capital*)<sup>1</sup> is one of the most important and incisive political thinkers alive today. His books and essays continue to trace the principal contradictions of contemporary society and its dynamics; always manage to fix upon the central antagonisms that uncover the tendencies of the contemporary work of excision of the political that defines contemporary capitalism and contemporary liberal democracy; and he does so in a beautiful, surgically precise language so alien to the rhetorical character of written Italian. If Nietzsche makes German dance, Tronti makes the florid Italian language into a piece of precision technology for the careful labour of discernment of friend and enemy.

The character of Tronti's thinking cannot be divorced from the complex – and dangerous – operation that has always informed it: taking – following Marx's advice – reactionary thinkers seriously and putting them to work by *fusing* bourgeois thinkers with Marxist thought; making them work within a Marxist framework at the same time as allowing them to inform that framework, for it is largely in the reactionary tradition that the centrality of the political – the pivot around which Tronti's thought turns – is most profoundly thought. Thus in *Operai e Capitale* Marx is supplemented with Nietzsche – the proletarian subject becomes the principal agent of the Will to Power; and in Tronti's writings of the 1970s, Marx and Lenin are supplemented not only with Nietzsche but Weber and, still more problematically, Heidegger and Schmitt as well. In his thinking of this period, the question of 'the Political' comes to the fore, and more specifically that of 'the Political decision', of politics as the *techné* that organises conflict. All these figures, both of revolution and of reaction, surface from these engagements transformed, uneasy in their previous incarnations, in the qualities that had

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1 Tronti's most famous texts, which took the form of articles originally published as editorials for the journals *Quaderni Rossi* and *Classe Operaia*, and then published as part of the seminal *Operai e Capitale* in 1966, remain largely unread outside of Continental Europe and South America – despite the fact that a number of these texts have been available since the 1970s in English, and can easily be found online today with a simple Google search. Incidentally, these editorials will be published by mayflybooks ([www.mayflybooks.org](http://www.mayflybooks.org)) in 2008, translated by Peter Thomas.

characterised the various orthodoxies – as do the categories of politics that have dominated modernity.

In Tronti's most recent series of articles on the 'critique of democracy', these figures have been joined by that of Alexis Tocqueville, the author of *Democracy in America*.<sup>2</sup> In these texts, which develop some of the darkly pessimistic themes of his *La Politica al Tramonto* (1998), he traces the coming together of *homo oeconomicus* with the *homo democraticus*. With the end of the working class subject, which Tronti argues is the ultimate terminus of the struggles that followed the events of May 1968, we have the collapse of all political thought, of all politics. Politics requires qualitative difference, marking out friend from enemy; democracy, on the other hand, ignores quality in favour of quantity – and, as Tronti points out in his presentation at *La sapienza* in Rome, the "cipher of capitalism is quantity", adding for good measure: "to adopt democratic practice is to declare the revolutionary process closed ... the majority is the enemy". This does not mean that we should develop *anti*-democratic solutions. He is well aware of the possible totalitarian results that can issue from such solutions. He calls instead for an 'a-democratic' practice, what he calls a 'great theory of the minority', a 'non marginal' 'minoritarian agency' – asking us to draw our lessons from the great tradition of the partisan working class, which was never quantitatively a majority, but was so qualitatively. Today, his most recent reflections work towards the separation of the notion of freedom from that of democracy – to understand freedom a-democratically – and to grasp the unfreedom that marks our democracy, in which politics has become the mere 'management of consensus'.<sup>3</sup>

The following short series of reflections<sup>4</sup> is not an introduction or summary of Tronti's thought from its beginnings to the present, or even an account of his most recent deliberations.<sup>5</sup> Instead, it focuses specifically on some of the themes and texts of his *Lectio magistralis*, '*Politica e destino*', held at the University of Sienna in December 2001 – which marked the end of his teaching career (2006).

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2 See, for example '*Per la Critica della Democrazia*' (2001), '*Per la Critica della Democrazia Politica*' (2005), and the talk with the same title, '*Per la Critica della Democrazia Politica*' at the department of political science at the university *La Sapienza* in Rome, 12<sup>th</sup> December 2007 (unpublished).

3 It is interesting to see how Tronti's critique of democracy, democracy as the locus of the end of revolutionary politics, as the ultimate enemy of a left politics, is also developed by Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek. But Tronti's claim here is perhaps more categorical than either of these thinkers, in that for him democracy signals the death of politics *tout court*; for politics is only the direct confrontation between subjects in struggle that refuse the quantitative reduction effected by democratic practice. The quotations in the final part of this paragraph are drawn from the article and the presentation entitled '*Per la Critica della Democrazia Politica*' cited in the note above.

4 This article was originally presented in July 2007 at SCOS in Ljubljana, Slovenia. It has been partly revised for publication here.

5 An account of Tronti's thought is sorely missing, and it is hoped that this thinker, unaccountably ignored in the Anglophone world, will receive a proper critical appraisal – although it is even more important that the imminent publication of the first part of his *Workers and Capital* instigates the publication of some of his most important recent works, especially his *La Politica al Tramonto*.

The question with which Tronti is concerned in this text – whose parameters he sketches out – and upon which I want to focus, is that of the relation between politics and fate.

In the history of political thought, the connection between these two terms is not at all obscure and – yet – what was obvious to the political thinkers of modernity, has become progressively less so. In saying ‘obvious’ I mean that it was precisely in respect to the unfolding of fate that politics, as we have come to know it, was formulated.

Italy likes to think of itself as *the* country of politics – where politics was, if not invented, at least first most rigorously theorised. If René Descartes is the ‘father of modern philosophy’, then the self-styled *cittadino e Segretario fiorentino* is the father of modern political philosophy. The incisiveness of his political thought is nowhere more evident than in his opposition of *fortuna* and *virtù* – on which Niccolò Machiavelli reflected so profoundly in *The Prince*, *The Discourses*, *The Art of War* and in practically all his political and historical texts. For Machiavelli *virtù* marks the specificity of the political: it is with *virtù* that one confronts *fortuna* and bends it to one’s will.

To contrast this paradigmatic instance of modern political thought with today, in which what is obvious is – rather – that fate or destiny is the immediate, the objective, which calls instead upon a practice of administration or management, is to highlight the distance travelled from this modern notion of politics.

Heideggerians will notice a somewhat easy slippage between ‘fate’ and ‘destiny’ in what I have said so far – for which Heidegger uses distinct terms with clearly distinguished meanings. *Schicksal* is usually translated as ‘fate’ whereas *Geschick* by the neologism ‘destining’. In the later philosophy, it is *Geschick* that becomes predominant, displacing what Heidegger sometimes suggests is the more or less implicit remnants of ‘humanism’ – that is, metaphysics, in the earlier work. Although I will be unable to engage Heidegger here – this question of fate and destiny, *Schicksal* and *Geschick* is crucial for a proper treatment of the question of the relation between politics and fate.

So, instead of to Heidegger, we shall turn to another German philosopher. In the early essay, *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate* [*Schicksal*] to which Tronti draws our attention, Hegel articulates politics and fate in a remarkably concise form:

Thus the earthly life of Jesus was separation from the world and flight into heaven; restoration, in the ideal world, of the life which was becoming dissipated into the void ... yet at times [his earthly life was a] practical proof of the divine and therefore a fight [*Kampf*] against fate, partly in the course of spreading the Kingdom of God, with the revelation of which the entire kingdom of the world collapsed and vanished, partly in the course of immediate reaction against single elements in the fate as he came up against them. (1971: 271)

Before turning to another unavoidable and disturbing presence within the modern thinking of the political, I want to spell out some – perhaps obvious – ideas in this passage.

What we find in it is a dichotomy within immanence: the earthly life of Jesus involved both an ideal transcendence and a practical, an engaged practice, within and with the world. It is worth noting that the movement of transcendence is defined as a 'flight' [*Flucht*] – a fleeing from – that separates Jesus from the world and it is as such so as to refuse being 'dissipated' in the 'void' – the void, I take Hegel to mean, of the world. Thus, part of Jesus' earthly life was to flee the world – understood in some sense as void, that is, as corruption. And yet, his earthly life was sometimes the 'practical proof', the activity of the divine itself within the world and, therefore, the transcendent or divine as an earthly struggle [*Kampf*] against the objectivity of fate or the immediacy of the void that the world as fate is.

I shall say no more about this passage, other than to make two remarks. Firstly, although I have no desire to call upon Jesus to represent modern politics – messianism with a messiah, to reverse Derrida's well-worn phrase – it seems to me that we are presented here, in concentrated form, with the possibilities and difficulties for all attempts to think politics and fate together. Some questions that arise in this respect are: What is the relation between transcendence, the ideal and concrete struggle? What might one mean by linking world, void and fate and – at the same time – to remain within the 'earthly life'? How does one flee fate and – at the same time – bring the kingdom of the world to collapse? Secondly, I wish merely to point out that we discover here – in Tronti's words – the 'Hegel of political theology' (2006: 13), to use a term from the third great – and also somewhat problematic – German thinker I shall discuss: Carl Schmitt.

There are two phrases that spring to mind when thinking of Schmitt: "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception" (Schmitt, 2005: 5) and "The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy" (Schmitt, 1996: 26). Schmitt's definition of the "specific political distinction" provides us with one way by which some of the problems emerging from the conjunction of politics and fate – as condensed in the Hegel passage – can be thought.

I shall briefly summarise some of the most relevant aspects of Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political*:

- 1) The friend-enemy antithesis is that which distinguishes the properly political element from other antitheses and provides it with its autonomy.
- 2) "The friend, enemy, and combat concepts receive their real meaning precisely because they refer to the real possibility of physical killing. War follows from enmity. War is the existential negation of the enemy" (Schmitt, 1996: 33).
- 3) Schmitt argues that who the enemy is "can neither be decided by a previously determined general norm nor by the judgement of a disinterested and therefore neutral third party" (*ibid.*: 27).

Two main points should emerge from this very schematic summary. The friend-enemy distinction is both existential and formal. It is existential, in that it is determined concretely, such that only the participants in the struggle are able to judge whether "the adversary intends to negate the opponent's way of life" (*ibid.*: 27); and the participants are 'public enemies', i.e. 'fighting collectiv[ies]' organised as nation states (*ibid.*: 28). The distinction is formal, in that – as Karl Löwith writes in his trenchant critique – "for Schmitt it is simply a matter of securing the nonnormal right of decision purely as such, quite apart from what is decided upon" (Löwith, 1995: 142). The 'right' of decision

exists only on the basis of authority as such. Right is not the condition of authority but follows from the existence of authority, i.e. of the state. Through this curious, formal articulation, decisionism and existentiality are knotted together.

It is obvious that this is a very different formalism from Hans Kelsen's. Instead of the decision following from a formal system of law, the law follows from a decision over the exception: "In the exception the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition" (Kelsen, 2005: 15). The form of law follows from the decision over the norm and the exception, but the peculiar formalism at work here stems from the fact that the decision is a "pure decision not based on reason and discussion and not justifying itself, that is, [it is] an absolute decision created out of nothingness" (*ibid.*: 66).

But what has all this to do with politics and fate – the subject of our discussion? We might want to point to the importance of the (political) decision – over the exception, over friend and enemy – that 'breaks through the crust of mechanism that has become torpid by repetition', i.e. that breaks with what Hegel names the 'void of the world', Machiavelli calls *fortuna* and we might simply call fate. It also breaks with the fixity of the (external, objective) system of norms, reasons and any understanding of natural teleology precisely by being founded on nothing – and so the kingdom of the world, the void, is destroyed through a flight to the transcendent nothing which founds decision.

But is this not too easy? Does all this not depend upon the possibility of a Nothing from which the decision precedes? What is the status of this Nothing? And furthermore, what furnishes the conditions for a decision – according to Schmitt these conditions cannot be normative nor carry content in any way, since any such conditions would degrade the autonomy of the political by suturing the decision to something other than Nothing.

Let us try and answer some of these questions by considering Schmitt's "high points of politics [that] are simultaneously the moments in which enmity is, in concrete clarity, recognized as the enemy" (Schmitt, 1996: 67). His favoured example is Cromwell's enmity towards the Spanish. Schmitt presents us then with an example of what for him is the highest recognition of enmity. But it is hard to un-problematically situate this example within Schmitt's analysis of decision. As Löwith persuasively argues, Schmitt is forced to "seize upon a substantiality which no longer befits his own historical situation and from which enmity derives substantive content" (Löwith, 1995: 151). That is, can this enmity towards the Spanish be understood outside of a specific position taken on Catholicism by Puritan England? Is not the work of fate working at the heart of the political decision on enmity? In that sense, the flight to the empty place of transcendence, to the 'nihilistic ground', the flight to the Nothing which is the formal condition of the autonomy of decision, is filled in the concrete instance in which enmity is decided upon. In that sense, Löwith is entirely correct to point to this unresolved 'ambiguity' at the heart of Schmitt's definition of the political: enmity cannot pre-exist the decision on the enemy and yet any decision on the enemy can only be understood on the basis of a pre-existing antagonism.

In ‘Politica e destino’, Tronti concludes his talk with Mao’s famous phrase, ‘It is right to rebel’. To conclude this note, I would like to reflect on this path and hopefully shed some light on the path Tronti gestures towards.

How are we to understand the ‘it is right’? It seems clear that ‘right’ here is meant both as ‘it is justified’ and ‘it is correct’. More philosophically, perhaps, we could say: rebellion is true. In Alain Badiou’s gloss on this phrase from his 1975 text, *Théorie de la Contradiction*, he writes:

Every truth is ... essentially destruction. Everything that simply conserves is simply false. The field of Marxist knowledge is always a field of ruins. (2005: 676)

As for rebellion, it is taking sides but, as Tronti points out, it is a side to which we are destined, which a certain history has transmitted to us. Rebellion then is the decision on this destiny that affirms that part – that *partisanship* – as truth.

And yet, Tronti argues, such a choice of a part is only for those who have the “Machiavellian [good] ‘fortuna’ to act within the state of exception” (Tronti, 1998: 17). Only [alternatively: in such circumstances] can politics exist at all; only there [alternatively: under such circumstances] is rebellion true. Outside of the state of exception, there is no politics, and we are left – instead – with the fate ordained by technical-economic rationality. In such a condition, Tronti argues, we should be driven not by “fear but hope in the Apocalypse” (*ibid.*: 27). For until nothingness – from transcendent – reappears within the “objectivity of destiny” (*ibid.*: 13) as the part which refutes it, it will remain abstract, ineffectual, irrational and unable to “lacerate the fabric of the being-towards-death of history” (*ibid.*: 21).

## references

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