

Vocations of the political

Mario Tronti & Max Weber

edited by

HOWARD CAYGILL

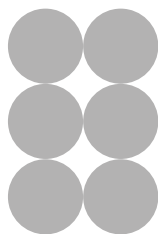
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Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	VI
INTRODUCTION	
Power, enmity and ethics in the work of Mario Tronti HOWARD CAYGILL	3
MARIO TRONTI	
1 Weber and workers (2019) MARIO TRONTI	15
2 The god and the warrior (2015) MARIO TRONTI	31
3 Political Hegel (1976) MARIO TRONTI	40
4 Remarks on terror and the political (1980) MARIO TRONTI	51

VOCATIONS OF THE POLITICAL

5	The autonomy of means and politics as a partisan vocation	
	ELETTRA STIMILLI	63
6	<i>Ira et studium</i>, or, tragedy as vocation	
	ALBERTO TOSCANO	80
7	Warring gods: Tronti's political-theological turn	
	ALEX MARTIN	97
8	Tronti, Weber and the demonology of the political	
	HOWARD CAYGILL	111
	IMAGE CREDITS	128
	CONTRIBUTORS	129
	INDEX	131

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INTRODUCTION

Power, enmity and ethics in the work of Mario Tronti

HOWARD CAYGILL

The honesty of a scholar today, and especially of a philosopher, may be gauged by how he situates himself in relation to Marx and Nietzsche. Anyone who does not admit that he could not have produced the most important parts of his work without the prior work of these two is deceiving both himself and others. The world in which we live intellectually is largely one that bears the stamp of Marx and Nietzsche.

Max Weber

Following a recent and characteristically incisive intervention against the latest episode in the moral and political subsidence of the Italian left,¹ Mario Tronti found himself being praised by an adversary as ‘the youngest, the most lucid, fresh and forward looking’ mind of the Italian left. Yet the terms of praise would be unfamiliar to most English-speaking readers of Tronti’s work: ‘a communist, but also Nietzschean ... a utopian but also an operaista’.² With the publication of a translation of the 1966 classic of twentieth-century political theory, *Workers and Capital*, in 2019, and *The Weapon of Organisation* in 2020, English-speaking readers are finally in a position to assess Tronti’s

1. ‘Sinistro Mia, quando ti liberai dall’attrazione per i grillini?’, *Il riformista*, 18 February 2021, pp. 6–7.

2. Marcello Veneziani, ‘Elogio di Tronti’, *La Verita*, 3 March 2021, pp. 1–2.

thought of the 1960s, but not thereafter.³ Tronti's remarkable adventure of thought over the past half-century, with its utopian and Nietzschean inflections, remains largely a closed book to English-language readers. It was to address this situation that the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy at Kingston University decided to mark the conjunction of the publication of *Workers and Capital* and the centenary of Max Weber's *Politics as a Vocation* (1919) with a conference on the theme of Tronti, Weber and their vocations of the political.

In the 'Philosophical Autobiography' of 2011, characteristically written in the impersonal third person, Tronti carefully situates his work on Marx and Marxism from the 1950s and 1960s within a wider intellectual context. He notes there:

In the early 1960s another important influence emerged from within the exhaustion of the national-popular offering of Italian Marxism and the European tradition of orthodox Marxism. This was the rediscovery of the season of the destruction of all the forms around the turn of the twentieth century, one that produced the culture of crisis, negative thinking, the artistic avant-garde, the revolutions in scientific method and that irrationalist thread that historical and dialectical materialism opposed or forgot.⁴

Tronti had not forgotten, and while maintaining opposition,

had without doubt an anti-rationalist inspiration, anti-enlightenment and fairly romantic, recognizing above all a link with the tradition of European pessimism whose tone was set by Schopenhauer. His insubordinate thinking felt a proximity to every heretical position, disruptive and critico-disruptive of the dominant intellectual common sense.⁵

3. Mario Tronti, *Workers and Capital*, trans. David Broder, London: Verso 2019; Mario Tronti, *The Weapon of Organisation*, ed. and trans. Andrew Anastasi, New York: Common Notions, 2020. The latter is a selection of texts from the invaluable resource *L'operaismo degli anni sessanta: da 'Quaderni rossi' a 'Classe operaia'*, Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2008.

4. Mario Tronti, 'Autobiografia filosofica', in *Dall'estremo possibile*, ed. Pasquale Serra, Rome: Ediesse, 2011, p. 234.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 235–6.

He recalls how in *Workers and Capital* he invited his readers to listen to Mahler and to read Musil, and he emphatically agreed with others who 'have found in his literary style – incisive and remorseless – and in his form of irreverent and innovative thought clear signs of the work of Nietzsche'.⁶ It was Weber, however, who was in many ways the focal point of the 'destruction of forms' and the 'culture of crisis' and whose own critical engagement with historical materialism made him a privileged interlocutor and adversary for Tronti.

The importance of 'Marx Weber' for Tronti, Panzieri and other members of the editorial committee of *Quaderni rossi* has been widely acknowledged,⁷ even though Tronti's own account was a little more nuanced, emphasizing the differences between the Weberian group in Turin and Milan and the Marxists in Rome.⁸ The aspect of Weber's thought of most interest to *operaismo* seems to have been his nuanced approach to the question of social composition, in other words the Weber of class, status and party. Tronti would subsequently focus on Weber as a theorist of power, developing the 'great Trontian heresy' of the 'autonomy of the political' during the 1970s, 1980s and beyond. Once again, in the 'Philosophical Autobiography', Tronti notes that it was

possible to detect hints of this theme in even the preceding writings, but this was a turn that his *operaisti* friends read as a kind of betrayal of the original inspiration. On the basis of an experience that saw the workers' struggle as incapable of putting into crisis the mechanism of capitalist production the conclusion was drawn that the terrain of the political, entirely in the hands of the adversary, was precisely the one that prevented a breakthrough of the line.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 235.

7. See Sara Farris, 'Workerism's Inimical Incursions: On Mario Tronti's Weberianism', *Historical Materialism*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2011), pp. 229–62.

8. *L'operaismo degli anni sessanta*, p. 595.

It was thus necessary to take account of this terrain, to master its functional logic and to occupy part of its territory from within.⁹

The project of ‘the autonomy of the political’ was both an attempt to sharpen the Leninist theses of *operaismo* and the announcement of an ambitious project to occupy and master the tradition of political philosophy for the left.

The conjunction of Lenin and Weber is most clearly described in the 1971 ‘Postscript of Problems’ to the second edition of *Workers and Capital*. There Tronti proposes the controversial thesis that

The new theory of a new politics suddenly arose both in great bourgeois thought and in subversive working class practice. Lenin was closer to Max Weber’s *Politik als Beruf* than to the German working-class struggles, upon which classical social democracy was based like some giant with feet of clay.¹⁰

Linking Weber’s celebrated lecture *Politics as a Vocation* to his participation in the Heidelberg revolutionary Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council of 1918 allowed Tronti to see Weber alongside Lenin as a critic of social-democratic politics and a thinker of revolutionary power. For him, both Lenin and Weber subordinate the ethical view of politics as the realization of the good to the stark question of the struggle for power and domination between classes. Tronti shares with Lenin and Weber a strong sense of social struggle as war – complete with an understanding of theory as above all strategic and tactical reflection on a field of struggle – along with a Nietzschean appreciation of the power of enmity.

Tronti’s first public presentation of the ‘autonomy of the political’ thesis in 1972 pointed to weaknesses in the Marxist theory of power and the state and implicitly turned to Weber to address this deficiency. Proposing two parallel histories of capital and

9. Tronti, ‘Autobiografia filosofica’, p. 236.

10. Tronti, *Workers and Capital*, p. 290.

the state, Tronti called for an inquiry into the laws of motion of the modern state parallel but not subordinate to Marx's inquiry into the history of capital. Apart from his strategic reflections, such as the intervention on political terror translated below, this inquiry into the laws of motion of the political took the form of a sustained struggle with the history of political thought, a struggle that informed over three decades of teaching as professor of moral, and subsequently political, philosophy at the University of Siena, from 1970 until 2001. His research began with the origins of the modern categories of state and power in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – with Machiavelli and Bodin – moving to Hobbes and the political theory of the English Revolution, Spinoza, Locke, Rousseau and the American and French revolutions, with due attention to political theorists of the counter-revolution. In 1975 he published his reckoning with Hegel – *Hegel politico*, a defence of which is reprinted below – followed in 1977 by a joint work with two of his students, *Stato e rivoluzione in Inghilterra: teoria e pratica della prima rivoluzione Inglese* – comprising studies of Hobbes, the Levellers and Cromwell. In his own words, 'It is symbolic for understanding the developmental curve of his singular thought that his first two courses at Siena were dedicated to Machiavelli, the last two to Nietzsche.'¹¹

This sustained effort to wrest the thinking of the political away from conservative thought and to complete the critique of *political* economy, inaugurated but only partially achieved by Marx, has to date had little resonance among English-speaking philosophers and activists. The important texts of this season of his thought – above all, *Political Hegel* (1975), *Twilight of the Political* (1998), *For a Critique of the Present* (2013) and *Of the Free Spirit: Fragments of Life and Thought* (2015) – remain untranslated.

11. Tronti, 'Autobiografia filosofica', p. 237.

Weber remained a significant presence in Tronti's critique of political reason, directly but also indirectly through writers touched by Weber, including Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin. The development of the intimations of a political theology in Weber's *Religionssoziologie* by Benjamin and Schmitt, and subsequently Jacob Taubes, proved of lasting fascination to Tronti and one that has intensified in his work of the past two decades. This turn to political theology coincided with the strategic assessment following 1989 that the workers' movement 'had not lost a battle but had lost the war, the war of class struggle' and that 'capitalist world and democratic society, functional for each other, reimposed an absolute dominion. The workers' movement and modern politics collapsed at the same time.'¹² The sense of defeat if anything intensified the urgency of Tronti's critique of the political and his turn to political theology as a source for the power with which to contest political-economic domination in late modernity.

Tronti's reading of Benjamin's appeal to the messianic in the 'Theologico-Political Fragment' exemplifies this gesture. Tronti offers one of the most illuminating interpretations of this cryptic text:

The Messiah is the one who in the eschatological war defeats the Antichrist. The revolutionary use of the historic past is the decisive weapon of this struggle. Messianism accomplishes the historical event, introducing into the victorious history of the dominant classes the spark of hope, the heritage of oppressed classes. The messianic is struggle. It is essential that the reign of God is from a historical point of view not the goal, but the end. It is not *kratos* but *logos* that comes after *theos*: theology and not theocracy.¹³

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 239–40.

13. Mario Tronti, 'Walter Benjamin. Frammento teologico-politico', in *Il demone della politica*, ed. Matteo Cavalleri, Michele Filippini and Jamila M.H. Mascari, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2017, p. 642.

Political theology allows Tronti to extend the class struggle from the defeated present to a still-to-be-avenged past and redemptive future, so keeping alive the workers' hopes of victory. He turns to Aby Warburg to develop the idea of a Workers' Atlas of Memory with which to maintain the intensity of a struggle with and for the past, a struggle evoked in Benjamin's twelfth thesis on the philosophy of history, one that Tronti recommends we commit to memory.

One of the most striking essays in the collection *Twilight of the Political* urges the encounter of 'Karl and Carl', regarding Marx and Schmitt as extreme adversaries who nevertheless share a common enemy:

They pose two forms of agonistic thought, 'polemical' in seeing not only action but also theoretical research as a means of war. Two points of view from opposed positions pursuing different ends but by means of the same method directed against the same problem: capitalist modernity, its history and the politics that opposed it. The one Prometheus, the other Epimetheus. Then there is the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: behind Marx, Hegel and behind Schmitt there is Weber. Marx is as much the Weber of the proletariat as Weber is the Marx of the bourgeoisie. And Weber, says Taubes, is the synthesis of Marx and Nietzsche, and it is from this synthesis that we need to set off once again.¹⁴

With the defeat of the workers' movement and with it of the political, Tronti sees the possibility of erecting a barricade against the nefarious tendencies of the twenty-first century, one made up of the 'divergent accord' of 'Marx–Nietzsche–Weber–Schmitt'.

The themes of war, political theology and ethical action intersect in a conversation with Weber in the essay 'God and the Warrior' (p. 31 below) from Tronti's most explicitly Nietzschean collection *Of the Free Spirit: Fragments of Life and Thought* (2015). Tronti returns to the Bhagavadgita, a text of extreme importance

14. Mario Tronti, 'Karl und Carl', in *Il demone della politica*, pp. 550–51.

to Weber, but draws diametrically opposed conclusions from its lesson. For Weber, the Gita proposes a solution to the ‘polytheism of values’ and shows ‘war integrated into the totality of life-spheres in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, in the conversation between Krishna and Arjuna.’¹⁵ For Tronti, however, there is no integration but an irresolvable dilemma that can only be addressed by action, in this case by entering into the war. In words that sum up his view of the primacy of political struggle, Tronti concludes:

I have been convinced by thought and by experience that a moderate politics, gradual and reformist, must follow and not precede the revolutionary act of taking power, when the latter is indispensable under given conditions. It is after the ‘I will fight’, not before, that there comes the ‘thou shalt not kill’.¹⁶

Yet Tronti will also accept that sometimes the ‘given conditions’ do not point to revolution or to Arjuna initiating the war.

In much of his most recent work the theme of the defeat of the workers’ movement has become increasingly prominent, but not always in the melancholy key evoked in ‘I am Defeated’. In ‘Politica e profezia’ he turns to Weber’s earlier lecture in the vocations diptych – *Science as a Vocation* (1917) – in order to evoke the prophetic voice calling for justice. It is the same voice he heard in the tradition of political theory stretching from Machiavelli to Weber and that now sounds in the cry of the Edomite watchman from the book of Isaiah evoked by Weber at the end of his 1917 lecture: “‘Watchman, what of the night?’ The watchman said, “The morning cometh, and also the night: if ye will enquire, enquire ye: return, come.””¹⁷ In 1917 Weber heard in the watchman’s reply a call to action – ‘if not now, when?’ – in the lecture of 1919, though, the then promised morning seemed

15. Max Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, Abingdon: Routledge 2009, p. 123.

16. Mario Tronti, ‘Il dio e il guerriero’, in *Dello spirito libero: frammenti di vita e di pensiero*, Milan: Il Saggiatore, p. 240.

17. Max Weber, *Science as a Vocation*, in *From Max Weber*, p. 156.

remote, with the German Revolution freezing into an ice age of reaction: 'a polar night of icy darkness and hardness'.¹⁸ Almost a century later, while reading *Science as a Vocation*, Tronti cannot but remember Weber's prophesy of a coming reaction in *Politics as a Vocation* and reflects:

The prophetic voice today does not take flight at dusk, but in the middle of the night, after the day of grand narratives has definitively past. We can only call to the watchman, 'At what point is the night?' And we can only hear the answer not to ask because it is still deep night.¹⁹

Thinking, then, is at a point of arrest – it cannot look back like the owl of Minerva to a form of life that is past and complete but must content itself with the thought that the new day will come, even though the end of the night is still afar.

The four contributors to this collection, besides Tronti himself, engage in a debate on the question of Tronti's and Weber's vocations of the political, focusing on a number of discrete themes. Elettra Stimilli explores the role of means in Weber's and Tronti's thinking of the political and asks what lessons can be drawn from them for resisting the subjectifications of neoliberalism. Alberto Toscano addresses the theme of the tragic in both Weber's and Tronti's understandings of the political and locates it with respect to the early-twentieth-century collapse of forms evoked by Tronti. Alex Martin explores Tronti's turn to political theology in his later work, showing how the turn to the warring gods of politics and theology serves to intensify Tronti's vocation for the political. Howard Caygill explores the ways in which Weber's and Tronti's vocations of the political are beset but also inspired by the threat of the demonic.

^{18.} *Politics as a Vocation*, p. 128.

^{19.} Mario Tronti, 'Politica e profezia', in *Dello spirito libero*, p. 210.



WORRE
TOGETHER

A PAIR
TOGETHER
GERARD
INSTANTO
A TRUE
FAMILIA
1919

MARIO TRONTI

1

Weber and workers

MARIO TRONTI

For nothing is worthy of man as man unless he can pursue it with passionate devotion.

Weber, *Science as a Vocation*

1919: decisive years. Years, because year 19 of the twentieth century does not stand alone but in the midst of a turbulent time. The Great War, which had just ended, stretched its claws into the early 1920s. You might say that its direct effects only ceased with the great crisis of 1929, which would introduce its own specific effects.

Let me immediately make a suggestion. Can one, in theoretico-political discourse, resort to suggestion? One can. One can, when the context of public discourse is, as it is today, grey, opaque, undifferentiated and neutralized. Then it becomes important to trip up those who consider themselves thinking people with a change of paradigm, something that breaks, wrong-foots and displaces concepts in their relations with given reality.

Here is the suggestion: in 1919 Keynes wrote and published *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*. We could say that Weber in the same years was writing 'The Political Consequences of the Peace'. Not a single text, but a series of texts – or, better, interventions – from between 1917 and 1920 that could be collected

under this title. At the centre, at the heart, of all of these fragments is precisely *Politics as a Vocation*, whose centenary we are celebrating today. The ensemble of these texts orbits around the German situation at that precise historical turning point. Weber takes us from the end of Wilhelmine Germany to the birth of the Weimar Republic; that is to say, from Germany at war, through Germany in defeat, to the Germany subjected to severe punishment at the hands of the victorious powers – something that will weigh heavily, and how, on the immediate destiny of that country. Weber is a profoundly German thinker, even if, as Angelo Bolaffi reminds us in his introduction to a collection of Weber's political writings, 'in the postwar many tried to "de-germanise" Weber in order to save his oeuvre from the terrible legacy of the German tragedy'.¹ Raymond Aron wrote, 'Certain writers in the Federal Republic and in the United States have had a tendency to present Max Weber as a good Western-style democrat in accordance with the image that can be constructed after World War II.'²

It often happens with uncomfortable thinkers that in order to soften their hardness of thought – and all uncomfortable thinkers have this hardness of thought – efforts are made to interpret them with benevolence and to pardon their occasional excesses. I don't intend to follow this route. On the contrary, I will choose the extreme points of this forceful thought because it helps me to emphasize and denounce the theoretico-political inconsistency of the entire political phase in which we are immersed.

I will make a confession before you all. I thought about and wrote this talk in the midst of the Italian political August [of 2019] distracted by the everyday unfolding events and the efforts, futile as ever, to avoid the governmental solution that duly came

1. Introduction to Max Weber *Scritti politici*, Rome: Donzelli, 1998, p. xix.

2. Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought 2*, trans. Richard Howard and Helen Weaver, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971, p. 253.

to pass. This conditioning may be discerned in the folds of my argument, and I reveal it now myself before it becomes evident to you. In politics, a theoretical inquiry with practical intent inevitably brings with it a certain degree of occasionalism. Better to know it than to suffer it.

It was during those August days that I happened to reread the brief intervention – which I did not remember – that Weber made at Munich University on 19 January 1920, possibly among his final thoughts. A student assembly had declared itself in favour of clemency for Count Arco, the assassin of Kurt Eisner, the leader of Bavarian revolutionary councils. Before starting his lecture, the professor felt the need to say something about this occurrence: according to him, on the basis of extant law, Arco should not be reprieved but rather executed by firing squad. The tumultuous adverse reaction of the students forced him to interrupt his course. Weber's thought, captured by a stenographer, was this:

I would like to say to you that to bring Germany back to its past magnificence I would, if I was still in politics, ally myself without doubt with every power on the earth and even with the devil himself. But there is only one power with whom I would not deign to make a pact – the power of stupidity. The fact that, as you know, I no longer pursue politics is determined by the impossibility of pursuing an authentic German politics as long as fools – be they of the right or the left – are entitled to move in the field of politics.³

I felt at peace once I had read this. For I too had rediscovered today the selfsame power of stupidity and the selfsame fools of the right and the left. It is true, then, that the same things will always recur in the same way, even if at infinitely lower levels.

If we substitute for the magnificence and authenticity of a national politics the will to tear down the forms of life of the

3. Weber, *Scritti politici*, p. 239.

current state of things, then I too would frankly ally myself with every power in the world and with the Devil in person, but never with political stupidity.

The hard language of Weber is still valid for us. What is it we are living through today if not the systemic contradiction between the power politics which is always present in global politics and the politics of impotence now practised by the administrative class within the confines of individual countries?

I would therefore like to speak here about the dramatic problem posed by the quality of today's political class; that is to say, its professionalism and 'vocationality'. I will attempt to investigate its lost or perhaps never acquired sense of the Weberian vocation (*Beruf*). There is a lot of scope for this in the text we are celebrating today. But, better still, this approach is suggested by the whole personality of Max Weber, his disputed and contemporaneous presence in both the noise of public struggle and the rigour of the social sciences, his restless theoretico-political existence to which, at a human level, I feel very, very close.

But I am more interested here to reflect on Weber the politician than Weber the scientist or political philosopher. And this is the meaning, translated, of the title I have given to this talk (*Weber and Workers*). Workers has meant for me, first in one and now in another way, the same thing: What is to be done?

It seems that Weber said of himself 'I was born for the political tribune and the newspapers' and yet he finished his short life immersed in that enormous open-air archeological dig that is *Economy and Society*, in which – each according to their needs – we immerse ourselves in search of the finds necessary for our intellectual investigations.

Max Weber is one of those thinkers about whom everything has been said, and yet it always seems, every time I confront him, that the essential has not been said. Because the essential, after all, is what you feel must be said at a given moment.

Jaspers gave his book the title *Max Weber: Politiker Forscher Philosoph (Politician Researcher Philosopher)* and said of him: 'His thought was in reality that of a political man in every fibre of his being, it was the thought of a political will that aimed to be effective in the present political moment.' And Mommsen, commenting on this passage, added:

The political writings of Max Weber were born almost without exception from public contributions to newspapers and weeklies ... They cast on the problems of current politics a light that issues from the elevated vantage point of a thinker who knew how to illuminate the structure of social reality and the basic elements of politics, conceived as a specific and irreducible reality with an intensity and a radicality that we find perhaps only in Machiavelli and Hobbes.⁴

At this point I cannot resist the temptation to supplement this passage – I don't know about here, but in my part of the world it certainly wouldn't be appreciated. Weber's thought is marked by an intensity and a radicality concerning the idea of the political which may be encountered in Machiavelli and Hobbes and re-encountered in Schmitt.

On 29–30 April 1964 the XVth Congress of German sociology held in Heidelberg was dedicated to 'Max Weber and Contemporary Sociology' on the centenary of his birth. Next year, by the way, will be the centenary of his death, and so today we are anticipating that celebration. A section of the Congress was dedicated to the controversial theme of value freedom in the social sciences. And I say controversial not just because there was a battle of interpretations but also, I think, an ambiguity in Weber himself. For this exceptional personality had lived a long and complex inner struggle between the politician and the scientist.

4. Hans Mommsen, Introduction to Max Weber, *Parlamento e governo e altri scritti politici*, Turin: Einaudi, 1982, p.viii.

I like to think that the extended period of psychic instability which for years prevented him from teaching was maybe linked to this existential dissensus.

From my partisan working-class point of view I always respected and admired these great bourgeois – of conservative stamp – who intellectually departed from their class and from whose reservoirs of thought we were able to draw for our own needs, sometimes more so than from many of the figures of our own traditional so-called progressive baggage, where we found little or nothing that could help us.

I'm thinking of Aby Warburg, of Walter Rathenau; among other things, it's a singular fact that they all paid – so to speak – for their irregularity with periods of personality disorder.

It's one of the mysteries of thought that when it comes up against an inimical reality, while it fights, it senses a perilous vacillation of the sensible soul within itself. I know something of that.

But going back to the 1964 Congress: Talcott Parsons, precisely with reference to the theme of value freedom and objectivity, found there Weber's announcement of an end of ideology – having broken the trilemma of historicism, utilitarianism and Marxism. Habermas replied saying he envied the ability of American colleagues to welcome Weber so freely and generously into their tradition. Such hospitality, he said, is much more difficult for the German tradition. 'We cannot forget' – insists Habermas – 'that Carl Schmitt was a legitimate disciple of Max Weber'. When reviewing his text for publication he added this note: 'Accepting friendly advice, I consequently used another turn of phrase, effective in its ambivalence: Carl Schmitt was a "natural son" of Max Weber.'⁵

5. Adorno et al., *Max Weber e la sociologia oggi*, Milan: Jaca Book, 1967, pp. 106–7, 128.

For what it's worth, Weber had more than one 'natural son'. With his complex and problematic nature, to which we will return, he was the teacher of thinkers from diverse and opposed tendencies. Let's take just one, the antipode of Schmitt. When the elderly Lukács wrote a preface to the reprinting of the revolutionary book of his youth, *History and Class Consciousness* (1922), and recalled his first developmental steps towards Marx, he confessed to having viewed Marxist sociology 'through methodological lenses amply conditioned by Simmel and Max Weber'.

Anyway, it's true: Weber-Schmitt poses a problem, but it's our problem. Forceful political thought is risky, always. It exposes itself to history's retorts, which are never predictable, since human history is not moved by the idea of reason, as historicists still wedded to the Enlightenment may think. If it was like that, it would be easy to govern one's own time, or turn it upside down. But neither is easy. You elaborate a theory and then practice, even in the very act of applying it, overturns it for you. Is that enough to falsify the theory? Habermas would say yes. I would say no.

I say instead that we have to take the risk of leaving ourselves exposed while remaining lucidly aware of the possible consequences. Can we forsake learning from the teaching of a great thinker only because they made a mistaken practical choice or because they were instrumentalized by a hateful regime? Do we have to deny ourselves the works of Gentile, of Heidegger and even Nietzsche, to stay with relatively recent times, even though we could go back further? What would you do – not listen to Wagner because Hitler listened to him? Forceful political thinking knows that, unexpectedly or preventively, it is necessary to come to terms with the tragic side of history – that is to say, with true history. This thinking is by nature realist. By contrast, progressive weak thought, in its desire to be historicist, does not grasp history, because it is by nature ideological.

What, then, is meant by forceful political thought? It means for me the thought of a partisan point of view. The opposite of every kind of neutralization and depoliticization. It may be antagonistic towards the present state. And, as far as I am concerned, it is. But it is not necessarily just this. It can indeed be revolutionary but it can also be conservative. Indeed, in the face of the threatened subversion of the present order a forceful and partisan conservative thought may be elaborated and assumed.

For the entire epoch of twentieth-century European and global civil wars there has been this divergent accord between two opposite practico-political positions, armed with a shared theoretico-political apparatus. But then, at the same time, both partisan positions sought to mask their positions with an ideology of universality. That was false consciousness. And Marx taught us the critique of ideology as false consciousness in order correctly to carry out a truthful analysis of the real. This is the underlying reason, little understood to date, why I hold together the workers' revolution and the conservative revolution.

In the era of post-revolutionary restoration that it has fallen to us to live through, the partisan opposed points of view have remained in reality – an inevitable and stubborn fact in a polarized, divided society – but without a thought capable of expressing them. The shared ideological apparatus of the two sides has not only merely masked but has suppressed the given of a conflictual reality. Weak democratic political thought is precisely adapted to this function. But we thus bear witness to the final crisis of modern politics.

The result is a dramatic fall in the intensity, energy and power of politics. The poverty of the contemporary political class follows, as if with intent, this drift of the times. The vacuum of the ruling classes – visible at a planetary level thanks to globalization – stands dramatically before our eyes. Thus the terrain of modern political institutions subsides. In the much discussed

cleft between elites and the people, there is a double crisis – at the summit of politics and at the base of the social. There is no political direction of processes, only the political disorientation of the mass. All this, at least, here in the West – I would suspend judgement on events in the East.

Thus, Weber–Schmitt helps me to keep alive *the criterion of the political*. But I would not want to flatten the one onto the other; I want to correct one with the other. I'm not much attracted to being the 'natural son' of any thinker. I'd prefer to think of myself – or to feel myself to be – the 'natural son' of a history. And the paternity or maternity – you may choose freely within this difference – I recognize in my case in the great history of the workers' movement. I feel myself the child of this history, both in thought and in life. From this point of view, like a vulture I would seize the prey of thought wherever I may find it and for whatever ends it may serve. With the end of that history – for that history is over, but one remains the child even of dead parents – we have at the same time been left orphans of a unified Marxist thought; orphans, careful, not of Marxism but of Marxism as a unified system of thought. And this is why we have decided to 'keep searching' not to replace, but to add. I have corrected Schmitt with Benjamin; Benjamin with Taubes; Taubes with Kojève – a constellation that is not only political-theological but also, I can say today, is today's actual and traversable anthropological-political frontier.

Our compass and point of orientation is Schmitt's Machiavellian counsel: 'know your enemy better than your enemy knows himself'. Can Weber be read and put to use in this horizon? This is the theme that we must now finally confront.

Max Weber's Central Question is the title of a 1987 book by Wilhelm Hennis. We have located the problematic character of Weber's personality in the inner dissensus between the scientist and the the politician. I would like to insist on this point.

Is it just by chance that the two lectures on *Science as a Vocation* and *Politics as a Vocation* share the term 'vocation'? Obviously not. They are the two professions/vocations of Weber's existence, in conflict.

In the lecture on science we find the curt affirmation: 'Every time the scientist puts his value judgements first their knowledge of the fact ceases.' Weber quickly adds that this observation goes beyond the remit of his argument and would require a long explanation. A sign of indecision. And he confronts the possibility or otherwise of using science for orientation in practice. And this is precisely what is of interest to us here. To present a practical attitude scientifically is – he says – an essentially absurd enterprise, 'For among the different values that preside over the ordering of the world there is an irreconcilable contrast.' Weber agrees with the elder [James] Mill on at least one point: 'If one proceeds from pure experience, one arrives at polytheism.'⁶ And there is a grain of truth in this. Weber continues:

If anything, we realise again today that something can be sacred not only in spite of its not being beautiful, but rather because and in so far as it is not beautiful ... something can be beautiful, not only in spite of the aspect in which it is not good, but rather in that very aspect.

He claims to have learnt this from Nietzsche and to find it expressed poetically in Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* and continues: 'It is commonplace to observe that something may be true although it is not beautiful, not holy, not good.' In other words, between the singular value orders, between singular values, there is a 'conflict between the Gods'.⁷

He continues: we find a maximum point in Christ's Sermon on the Mount – do not resist evil, offer the other cheek.

6. Max Weber, *Science as a Vocation*, in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, Abingdon: Routledge, 2009, p. 147.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

A worldly ethic would tell us: you must resist evil until it no longer prevails. The choice is between a religious and a martial dignity. He concludes: 'According to our ultimate standpoint, the one is the devil and the other the God, and the individual has to decide which is God for him and which is the devil.'⁸ Is this relativism? No, to me it looks like pessimism and decisionism fused together. In other words, realism.

Weber explored the insoluble antinomies that the irruption of the twentieth century had deployed, certified by the great crisis of modernity; he was not anti-modern, but a critic, a tragic critic, of the modern. The consequence will be the twilight of the West, the final phase of which we are today living through, not as a violent suppression but as more of a slow extinction.

You cannot do politics as a scientist or science as a politician. There is no peaceful separation but a conflictual dissensus between them, which you need to know how to live as such. And that is how Weber lived and suffered it. And we, like him, are living and suffering it.

We erred during the time of *operaismo*, of Italian 'workerism', in defining as 'workers' science' the political point of view of the antagonism against capitalism. We were under the influence of the contestation of historicism inspired by Galvano Della Volpe. Marx too erred in talking about 'scientific socialism'; he was under the influence of the positivist challenge to idealism.

I was rather disappointed when rereading Weber's lecture on 'Socialism' delivered in Vienna on 13 June 1918 before an audience of officers of the Imperial army. It shows understanding of the Marxist revisionism represented by German social democracy but incomprehension of the other revision of Marxism, namely Russian Bolshevism. How could it be otherwise for the great

8. Ibid.

bourgeois? Nevertheless, it was precisely the year 1919 and the Russian biennium of 1919–20 that would change this attitude.

When the Workers' and Soldiers' Council of Heidelberg invited Weber to their meetings he agreed to attend and contribute. He appreciated the sober objectivity of those simple people who set to work without too much chatter. As his wife recalled, Weber's participation in the proletariat's struggle for an existence worthy of human beings was always great; he always refused the temptation to join the Social Democratic Party in order not to accept the inevitable compromises with the party bosses who held the reins of that organization. He ended *in extremis* joining the German Democratic Party, even committing himself to an unfortunate candidacy for the National Assembly.

There is an ineluctable law of motion: raising the aim of political thought is fated to create an abyssal detachment from political practice. A perfect coherence between theory and practice in politics is only possible in the rare moments of a state of exception. In the usual normal state such coherence is always imperfect. And you must manoeuvre your attitude with demonic dexterity across the two terrains of thinking and of action. This is the mirror of the imperfection that characterizes the human being.

It is by departing from this realization that Weber, in my view, could arrive at formulating with responsible conviction in *Politics as a Vocation* those famous and terrifying verdicts that so irritate the beautiful souls of democratic progressives:

he who lets himself in for politics, that is, for power and he who lets himself in for politics, that is, for power and force as means, contracts with diabolical powers and for his action it is *not* true that good can follow only from good and evil only from evil, but that often the opposite is true. Anyone who fails to see this is, indeed, a political infant.⁹

9. *Politics as a Vocation*, in *From Max Weber*, p. 123.

Often the opposite, not occasionally. And not just recently, but forever. 2,500 years ago, in Indian literature, in the Upanishads, in the Bhagavadgita and I would say also in the Chinese treatises on the art of war, propositions can be found that would make Machiavelli's *The Prince*, says Weber, seem 'harmless'.

A negative anthropology is essential for holding together thought and political action in a divergent accord. In brief, the ethics of responsibility and of conviction do not stay together of their own accord; you have to hold them together, articulating and preferring the one or the other, from one moment to the next, in the *longue durée* and in the contingency of history.

It is evident how important in Weber's formation was Nietzsche's transvaluation of all values and Burckhardt's philosophy of history.

This is also how I read the most controversial and famous pages of Weber on charisma, in particular on the Caesarist option in selecting leaders. Extremely relevant pages today.

The problem of democratization is still among us. There is a conflict today between what is left of liberal democracy and emerging so-called illiberal democracies. And it is spoken of as if it were something new. Almost a century ago Max Weber had stated it, shall we say, in more rigorous terms: 'This is the only choice: either authoritarian democracy (*Führerdemokratie*) or a kind of "machine" organization or democracy without leaders, that is to say dominion of the "professional politicians" without vocation, without the intimate quality of charisma that makes a leader.'¹⁰ What is new today is that these two forms of democracy resemble each other more than they can be told apart. They have reciprocally contaminated each other. Leaderless democracies no longer exist, and in place of the charismatic leader has emerged the media personality. Sovereignty does not belong to the people,

10. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

but to the mass – that is to say, to opinion. It is no longer party organizations but the media that exercise the function of political direction.

The current epoch of which Weber spoke is our time of anti-politics ‘in which purely sentimental means are applied of the kind used by the salvation army. The current situation may be defined as a “dictatorship founded on the exploitation of the sentimentality of the masses”. Political will is manifested as the ‘power of the demagogic word’.¹¹ Today’s democratic solutions are, no less than yesterday’s totalitarian solutions, dominated by this power of demagogic speech, parliamentarianism just as much as populism.

And so, by different pathways, the need for a leader returns. Except that, in the same way in which we have professional politicians without vocation, so too we have leaders without charisma.

Weber’s idea of democracy, between parliament and government, is that of a guided democracy.

What interests me here, more than the consequences, is to explore the causes of the Weberian Caesarist temptation. Adopting the framework of history of mentalities as practised by the Annales school, I would say that Weber, along with Warburg and Rathenau, mentioned earlier, originated in the high bourgeoisie that bordered the old aristocracy, in strong opposition to the low bourgeoisie, which is much more widespread, socially diffuse and tends towards a kind of ancient plebs. A spectacle that we have before us now. And in the middle the neglected and fragmented world of work.

From the beginning, I conceived of the working class as an aristocracy of the people, capable of assuming its place as a political elite in the form of the Gramscian party/prince. My

11. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

operaismo does not contradict but rather founds the autonomy of the political.

We might say, with a kind of Goethean ever-so-serious wit, that this part of the operation consists in the introduction of an abusive *r* – with which we can say ‘Marx Weber’. And this is the sense in which you will have seen the ironic side of the title given to this lecture, ‘Weber and Workers’.

What, then, is the party/prince? It is a charismatic leading class. Can the ‘talent of grace’ be collective? It can be, or can become so, with the irruption into history of the working-class subject. Did it become so? Only partially. We know these historical experiences; some of them I have studied – the three Internationals with their leaders, the Bolshevik group with Lenin. And one of them I lived through: the political class of the Italian Communist Party with Togliatti.

A leader is necessary. But his charisma must be an expression and manifestation of a charismatic leading class. Borrowing from Robert Michels the concept of the circulation of elites, it is a matter ensuring the regular circulation of leaders.

A brief parenthesis and then on to a conclusion.

What sense do such discourses have in the present phase? Who are we entrusting them to? There is no social subject. There is no political subject. We are in Weber’s predicament, yet a hundred years later; constrained to mark our thought with increasing tension and energy in the face of the flatness of objective conditions.

During these years and decades we have done nothing else than to follow Weber’s advice: arm yourself ‘with that steadfastness of heart which can brave even the crumbling of all hopes’. These are the words of the stunning finale of *Politics as a Vocation*, speaking of the one ‘who is sure that they shall not crumble when the world, from their point of view, is too stupid or too base for what they want to offer’ and who can

and must 'say in the face of all this, "it doesn't matter, let's go on!"'

In the meantime, and ours is this time of the meantime, with the usual vexing transition, vexing because we don't know whence and where to, it is vital to follow Weber's guidance for the cultivation of the self. Adding to it the Leninist counsel to be prepared, always, in order not to let oneself be surprised by history's brusque turnabouts, where one wagers one's life. Weber proposed three indispensable qualities for a politician of profession or calling: passion, a sense of responsibility, foresight. 'Passion in the sense of objectivity: passionate dedication to a "cause", to the god or devil that leads it.' A sense of responsibility with respect to this cause as a determining guide for action, recalling the passage from Machiavelli's *Florentine History* where 'he gave to one of his heroes the words of praise for those citizens who put the greatness of their city above the salvation of their soul'. And, finally, foresight 'or the capacity to let reality work on us with calm and interior concentration'.¹²

Distance between yourself and things, responsible action, passion for the cause. The wager is to hold together these three qualities. It is the wager of aiming at the impossible in order to achieve the possible.

At peace with yourself, at war with the world.

TRANSLATED BY ALBERTO TOSCANO

12. Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, p. 123.

2

The god and the warrior

MARIO TRONTI

I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant...
That the future is a faded song, a Royal Rose or a lavender spray...
Pressed between yellow leaves of a book that has never
been opened.

T.S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets*

To say our theme is old is an understatement.¹ It is in reality ancient, without conceding anything to the dimension of the eternal. It is in continual restatement and transformation. Up to today, when many essential things risk being lost because of the extinction of the figures that incarnate the problem. These figures have changed form over time, many have lost their names. The relation, however, between the one who is to think and the one destined to act remains the same. Two dimensions of living called to an encounter but unable to recognize each other without effort. They are rarely found in the same person, more in myth than in history: the philosopher king, the wise tyrant, the enlightened monarch, the great politician. More often they confront each other from opposite or just different banks and initiate a dialogue, usually at a high level, with a literary

1. From Mario Tronti, *Dello spirito libero: Frammenti di vita e di pensiero*, Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2015 pp. 233–40.

background, difficult to find again in the practice of everyday life. And yet the relation when made explicit is useful for both one and the other, or, as we would say today, for thinker and politician.

There is the security of someone used to thinking and the uncertainty of the one called to act. The first lets drop useless knowledge while the second frees themselves from a necessary contingency. Thought is as free as action is conditioned. And the responsibility of whoever must decide is incomparably heavier than the freedom of the one who advises. Actions are weighed, not counted, someone said with reference to another more concrete area. Thoughts are deprived of weight and are incalculable numerically; for this reason they are worth more than gold. And so the responsible free spirit is the late modern synthesis of a very ancient relation.

The scene is the second to third century BCE or soon after, the date is uncertain and unimportant. Two armies confront each other for battle, the Pandavas on one side and the Kauravas on the other. In the middle Arjuna waits seated in his chariot, uncertain whether or not to sound the horn and commence the battle – this is the setting for the doctrinal synthesis of the Mahabharata known as the Bhagavadgita and is narrated in the form that we would call ‘poetic thinking’. The warrior (*kshatriya*) Arjuna faces an enemy host made up of usurpers to the throne, relatives, friends, almost brothers. As in every war, but especially in great wars, there is the dilemma: must I, then, kill fellow humans, my brothers and simple people like me, perhaps even belonging to the same class with whom I feel a solidarity of condition and struggle? The genial advice given by Lenin – ‘great war’ indeed – to the Russian peasant soldiers was: don’t shoot at the German worker soldiers but turn your guns and fire at the tsarist generals, and the German workers against the Prussian generals. What is revolution if not this simple act? But we were

at that moment of total, solitary, tragic immobility prior to the decision to release the dogs of war or to squeeze the trigger and kill another human being. A symbolic abstract of the contrast between will and necessity that in the uncertain tide of human affairs repeats the ever interrupted dialogue between the same figures – varying according to their historical form – between the philosopher and the tyrant, the counsellor and the prince, the cardinal and the queen, the grey eminence and the statesman, and finally the intellectual and the politician.

The god and the warrior is the form that this figure assumes in the Bhagavadgita and as this is India it does not know the before and after of Christ in which the narrative dimension is sacred but human historic relations are profane. Krishna is an avatar of Vishnu, but Arjuna is a manifestation of self-conscious action. The contrasting relation is between one who measures the wisdom of the sacred texts and the other who is obliged to translate it through realization in concrete actions. Reason is half in one and half in the other camp. Politics is not the sum but the synthesis of these two positions. It is not dialogue but dialectic that counts; not the relation but the conflict. The two positions must collide in order to overcome themselves, holding in the result the reason of both the one and the other.

I am not interested in rediscovering our needs for the Hegelian dialectic as an apparatus of consciousness and systematization of the reality of the world, whether natural or historical. We subjected it to critique when we were young and that will do. But, as the substantial functioning of political action, it in this sense is worth rediscovering because it does function as a description of the real movements of historical contradictions. The master-slave dialectic is the supreme political discourse and practice; it remains so and will remain so for as long as a divided society exists, which is perhaps forever. Western modernity as expressed in disordered order or in the ordering disorder of

capitalism moved and continues to move in this way in spite of the frequently announced end of history; indeed it can only finish in two ways, as collapse or as reversal.

Arjuna says: I will not fight. And then he falls into a silence between despair and pain, with his eyes full of tears. ‘So I must kill with arrows all those I see lined up before me: fathers, grandfathers, teachers, uncles, brothers, nephews and friends’ (II.7), and let’s not forget that this is a song, ‘The Song of the Saint’. This is translated by Mascaró as ‘In the dark night of my soul I feel desolation’ and by Zaehner as ‘the profundity of my being is oppressed by the infection of compassion’,² by Gnoli ‘Oppressed by the shame of compassion, perplexed by justice and injustice’.³ Sanskrit, like the Hebrew of the Old Testament or the Aramaic of the New, lends itself to many subjective translations. So II.10–11 is for Gnoli:

Krishna smiling said to Arjuna, who found himself miserable between two armies, these words: ‘You cry for those who do not merit tears and say words of wisdom. [A note warns that the Kashmiri tradition says ‘and do not speak like a sensible man’.] For the wise cry neither for the dead nor for the living.’⁴

while for Griffiths it is:

Krishna smiled and spoke to Arjuna – there between the two armies the voice of God spoke these words: ‘Thy tears are for those beyond tears; and are thy words words of wisdom? The wise grieve not for those who live; and they grieve not for those who die – for life and death shall pass away.’⁵

2. Bede Griffiths, *River of Compassion: A Christian Commentary on the Bhagavad Gita*, New York: Amity House, 2002, pp. 12–13.

3. *Il Canto del Beato (Bhagavadgita)*, trans. Raniero Gnoli, Turin: Unione Tipografico-Editrice, 1976, p. 57.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, p. 13.

The god, then, is wise, while the warrior is still not. He cannot ever entirely become so. Wisdom is not to be found in action, only in observation. The thinking of the wise is of use to politics when thinking can orient itself. Before the battle, between two armies, arises the moment to think war. Living and dying are but a moment in the long stretch of time in which the decision takes place. The 'dark night of the soul' is the same as the contagion or the 'shame of compassion'. This is why it is possible to translate the same passage in such different ways. The god does not moderate the warrior but spurs him on to the decisive step and to break with delay. Doubt does not belong to the one who thinks, but to the one who acts, or who is compelled to act by a mysterious force. The warrior hesitates because he is more attentive than the god to the consequences of action. The ethic of conviction has a divine trait, the ethic of responsibility has a human character. The knower is more extreme than the politician. Because he is more free. Thinking seeks to carry action to the completion of the act, overcoming the limits of given conditions, objective as well as subjective. Generally the image of the counsellor is of one who envelops the man of action in a web of mediations and compromises that allow him to achieve his goal with minimal damage. The correct relation, however, is the opposite. The straight line is for the thinker, the curved line for the politician. Absolute and unconditional freedom, the unconditioned, is dangerous for whoever must blow the horn for the beginning of battle. The warrior must of necessity be shrewder than the god: 'Is the time right?' 'Am I ready?' Hamlet teaches that desperation and pain are for those who hesitate. Hesitation is the height of wisdom, but only if in the end I decide – to fight!

When Jesus wanted to show to the crowd of followers what made a true disciple, he announced that whoever did not carry their own cross would not become a disciple. He made a 'political' discourse:

For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and take counsel as to whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And, if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends an embassy and asks terms of peace.' (Luke 14:28-33)

This paradox, in the Kierkegaardian sense, is the paradox of Christianity. Here Jesus is not the god, but the warrior, who knows human nature better than God. He came down for this reason – to see up close. The father sent the son in order to know more. I read the exceptional event of the Annunciation politically, as the self-recognition of the limits of divine omniscience. Have not the tragic and inhuman – all too inhuman – events of the twentieth century, from the Holocaust to the atomic massacres, not been read as a manifestation of a limit to divine omnipotence. Dostoyevsky's cry 'Lord, why must children die' remains to date without response. The fall of human beings from the original disobedience through pride and ignorance has perhaps gone further than predicted? The God of the Old Testament, the powerful Lord of the army, spoke to one land and one people. But how to speak to the universe of humans and to the mystery of each single person, not in order to halt the fall but rather to reverse it by showing the way to redemption? Hence Christ's impossible mission. He did not come to console and advise passively accepting pain and desperation while waiting for a reward in the beyond. He came to teach humans to carry their crosses with dignity, to be free under the cross of existence, because this leads not to the acceptance of a condition but to the action necessary for its redemption. The liberty of the spirit is victorious over the death of the body. This is the political significance of the Resurrection. There is a line from Kojève that

is crucial for our discourse. Pagan morality says: become what you are, while Christian morality says become what you are *not*. A morality of conversion against one of permanence. For this we must begin with humans as they are, not as we think they should be. The Commandments on the tablets of the law were delivered to the Hebrews by the old God through Moses. The new God broke the tablets before the idolatrous humans and showed the way to liberation from the old human. Not the law, but the spirit, that blows where it lists, brings with it the change of everything, new skies and a new earth: 'Do not conform, but transform yourselves' Paul said to us, for the free spirit opens the divine gates that human history has closed.

Bhagavadgita II.27: 'For whoever is born, death is certain; for whoever dies, birth is certain. For such an inevitable thing you have no reason for tears' (Gnoli);⁶ 'Because everything that is born in truth must die, and after death truly comes life. Looked in the face it is inevitable, cease to suffer' (Griffiths).⁷ The god justifies action with a general conception of the world and of life. He knows how things go. Do not worry about killing; death is a provisional event, just as is life. But for the warrior knowledge does not suffice. Action must be able to justify itself. It is not destiny that underlies the action but the motive of the one who does it, who will be investigated for it. The confrontation [of Krishna and Arjuna] develops in the direction of giving to action more than just its consequences.

The clairvoyant sage is one who, dominating his senses, possesses a 'stable thought'. One who has a mind untouched by sorrows and is indifferent to pleasures may be called a sage with a stable mind. Lord of himself, immersed in contemplation, without care he is 'liberated from the I and from the Me' and so achieves a calm serenity. But Arjuna protests (in Gnoli's version)

6. *Il Canto del Beato*, p. 64.

7. *River of Compassion*, p. 21.

'If you think, Krishna, that reason is better than action, why do you force me into this act of violence?'⁸ The Enlightened one had already said: 'Concern yourself solely with action, not with its fruits. Never be motivated to act by the fruits of your action; nor, on the other hand, be attached to inaction.'⁹ But now he argues better, for indeed 'no one, even for an instant, can remain inactive'.¹⁰ Intelligent activity is of matter, of nature *prakriti*, while intelligent inactivity is of the soul, of spirit. An inversion of our criterion of object/subject, and perhaps up to a certain point – let's say up to the point of Hegel.

It is Kojève who cited the Cartesian *cogito* in order to show Hegel saying: yes, I think therefore I am, but *who* am I? I am not only a thinking but also an acting being. And not as 'I and me' but rather as a manifestation of subjective and then objective spirit and absolute infinity. As such, an absolutely self-conscious totality. If anything the crucial difference is that on one side there is a totality becoming in historical time, while on the other there is a given cosmic totality. We are driven to act by an innate force of nature, dragged to act against our will by 'constituents born of nature' – thus 'you must do the action that is prescribed to you'. Action is better than inaction, for 'this world is tied by bonds of action'. But never an action made in a spirit of sacrifice. Perform the action 'without attachment'. 'Without attachment continually do what you must do.'¹¹ What does action not for sacrifice and without attachment mean? I read it like this: not ethical but political action. I always ask myself, if the translation is so free then why not the interpretation? Did we not say from the beginning that the end of knowing justifies the means of seeking.

8. *Il Canto del Beato*, p. 80.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 82, 87.

Disenchanted action is much of what we have learnt from the lesson of the twentieth century. Sacrifice consists in everything for the action. Where there is a sacrificial action, expenditure is made in order to achieve superhuman goals, beyond the measure of what a simple human being can achieve. With an attachment to reason that does not admit of critique or detachment. And yet one is nothing with respect to the needs dictated by the collective cause. A reversal, simplified, too direct, immediate, schematic and rushed of that which was the 'I and the Me' into what must become 'We and Ours'. That was not the way. When the road is mistaken the destination is not arrived at. A full estimate of the anthropological nature of action has never been made. It was realized after the fact of a failed experiment that there was something deeper rooted and profound that inhibited the sudden realization of that sudden overturning. Human society must first of all measure itself against human nature, for whoever wants to maintain or to overthrow the prevailing structure. I have been convinced by thought and by experience that a moderate politics, gradual and reformist, must follow and not precede the revolutionary act of taking power, when the latter is indispensable under given conditions.

It is after the 'I will fight' that there comes the 'Thou shalt not kill.'

TRANSLATED BY HOWARD CAYGILL

3

Political Hegel

MARIO TRONTI

It would be interesting to receive some responses to a text like *Political Hegel*, which has many facets and, I am aware, is not easy to situate within any emergent framework of research.¹ A formal difficulty attends a discourse like *Political Hegel* that is not so much terminological or logical as it is to do with the intersection of diverse planes of discourse, especially as it establishes a hierarchy that inverts the traditional approach to such a problem that may at first glance appear only as a problem for the history of thought. I should first warn that we do not consider such a theme in terms of a reading of the history of thought from another perspective. It is not too provocative to say from the outset that I am talking not so much to the scholar of Hegel as to the political theorist and practitioner. The themes informing the complex of problems 'the political in Hegel' are more those that confront us today when facing certain political actions than of political theory. This is to say that the discourse on Hegel's political is also an internal research process not terribly interested in an external projection. An internal process that has

1. This is the text of a presentation of the main theses of Tronti's book *Hegel politico* (1975) delivered to a seminar at the Veneto Istituto Gramsci, 5 April 1976.

precedents and consequents. What, then, is this research within which we can include even a discourse on political Hegel?

The overall research, according to me, is one which addresses the problem of 'the political in capital', the political in capitalist society or, better, to use a fashionable term, not the political [*la politica*] but the 'political' [*il politico*], and we might for once follow the fashion of using the masculine substantive, because *il politico* with respect to the traditional locution *della politica* perhaps adds something while also cutting the knot of the traditional problem. When we say *il politico* we are speaking of both an objective and a subjective political. The objective political refers to the level of institutions, or that which was once called in the Marxist idiom the state machinery or mechanism of political domination, domination organized in the form of a giant machine, as Hegel himself emphasized. Objective and then subjective politics means political institutions and then political thought or theory; it means the state machine and then the political class, the moment of political decision, political choice and then ideology – that is, the ideological apparatus that is not thus confused with the moment of political decision and choice. This is the overall research into the political fact or the political terrain within capitalist society. So, given this definition of the research, the hypothesis unfolding within it can be formulated in terms of the problem of the relation between capital and the political not having so far a directly Marxist solution. But in the absence of such a solution in the tradition of workers' thought – the terrain on which we find ourselves inheriting the problem – it would seem as if there were no kind of solution. Capital and the political, with its objective institutions and its subjective elements, today presents a kind of relation that we are incapable of resolving, to put it bluntly, with the traditional instruments of workers' thought or those of Marxism drawn directly from the works of Marx.

The working class and the workers' movement have together paid dearly for not being in a condition to solve the problem of the relation between the political and capital, whether the class itself through a series of historical transitions, some victories and some failures, in the class struggle or the workers' movement through, again, a series of victorious and failed transitions. But then we must remember that this kind of problem is strategic: it engages with the perspective of an exit from the capitalist system, the possibility, practicality and the more or less close approximation of putting the overall mechanism of capitalism in crisis. When we confront the problem of the political-capital [relation] we cannot aim for a short-term solution, we cannot think of a tactical withdrawal precisely because we find ourselves committed to investing in a longer-term and more profound transition. It is well known that, whether in classical social democracy or with Lenin at the beginnings of the communist movement, the problem of power emerged in response to practical problems, basically oriented towards a theory of the party, whether within the state with social democracy or against the state with the communist movement. But in my view they confronted the problem tactically, without a historical pause, shortening and abbreviating the time of a process characterized by a long-term trend of development. I would say that in this we have to be Marxists – that is, closer to Marx in the sense in which he settled accounts with the classics of bourgeois thought, with the classical era in the development of capital; settling accounts with the classics of the thinking and history of capital becomes itself a political task and does not stand outside of the political. High-level theory serves practice in so far as scientific analysis or high-level theory serves a practice that may at this point raise itself to the level of strategy. In this sense an appeal to Marx is positive, not negative as before, but modified in the sense that in the passage to practical action – that is, in practical

political action, concrete political action – concrete politics must always return to the last instance of the Leninist definitive solution of problems on the battlefield. Once a strategic reconstruction of political theory for practical ends has been achieved it must lead theoretical research truly and not just hypothetically according to a reckoning with short-term, immediate, practical and concrete transitions.

Looked at in this way, a number of problems arise for research. With respect to the relation between capital and the political, should this depart from the beginnings of this relation or from the final stage, the point at which the relation has arrived? Does it depart from the moment of transition *to* capitalism with all it entails at the level of political thought, or does it depart from the moment of transition *from* capitalism, the moment of the exit from capitalism that more or less corresponds to the contemporary era. Is it a matter of pursuing a historical or a logical route? In order to avoid both, which for me quickly fall into epistemological traps, the choice falls on Hegel as a mediator between the two extremes, at least as a point of approach to the discourse. And not, to repeat, because logic and history coincide in Hegel, but rather because Hegel, and especially the political Hegel, represents a turning point in a complex cycle of the capital–political relation, offering a model in which the growth of the political as thought, as theory, basically achieves its highest level. After this, to use somewhat allusive terminology, there begins a period of the revenge of the social, a period in which the very terrain of the political, and not just political thought, buckles to other needs and becomes effectively subordinate to other categories and other forces that often coincide with a certain degree of the development of social relations, and with a certain degree of development in the relations of subordination between the classes. This is why in a discourse of this kind the point of departure might indeed be someone like Hegel.

There is another reason, which is basically that Hegel is close to Marx's politics; he in part anticipates him, in part exceeds him and is in part something completely different. Here, however, we must raise an interesting point that concerns not only the history of bourgeois thought: political Hegel is in reality defeated by political Marx in the sense that the Marxist way of seeing the relation between capital and the political became the point of reference for both workers' and bourgeois thought. Something is gained through this strange inversion or reversal of the hierarchy of the classics, since with this direct reference to Marx political activity and political action are directly tied to the moment of subversive practice. But according to me this proximity between political activity and subversive practice has been carried out more in the spirit of an ideological forcing than in that of pursuing a new political direction, of a new way of doing politics informed by a new understanding, a new scientific knowledge of the political moment. All of which has consequently resulted in the practical management of power remaining within the hands of a dominant political class. On the one hand – and this seems to me to be where the question is going – the definition of the political terrain at the level of thought has been powerfully and directly influenced by the thought of Marx through its impact on the social sciences. On the other hand, though, and in contrast to the level of thought, the concrete, practical and material ways of doing politics that consist in knowing how to manage concretely a certain level and form of power in the various moments of capitalist development have remained too firmly in the hands of the dominant political class and thus also in those of the dominant class at the level of capitalist production.

Thus certain things have been lost which were nevertheless important and which, not by chance, have been and will be recovered in the recent interest lent to this problem. Dario Borso's book *Hegel Politics of Experience* (1976) is very interesting from

this perspective and identifies some of things that have been lost, even for those of us who have followed a tradition of Marxist thought from the workers' point of view. The view of Hegel as an important critic of the concept of bourgeois revolution and of revolutionary ideology, even ideology in general, disappeared, an important moment in any practical approach to the political problem. Now there is also, of course, a critique of ideology in Marx, and I would say that this interest provides a moment or point of departure for Marx, above all the young Marx, that adds something to the Hegelian thematic from which it then deviates. And this we mentioned earlier, namely the capacity to read at the same time political activity and practical upheaval on the terrain of class struggle. Hegel was a powerful moment of self-criticism in the same bourgeois thought that produced ideology, at the level of the myth – and it was no more than this – of a bourgeois revolution. There is in Marx the equivocation of becoming heir to a part of the classical bourgeois tradition of thought that called itself revolutionary thought, which however coincided with the highest ideological level reached by that tradition. The idea of making itself heir to this line of thought weakened, in my view, the Marxist critique of ideology, making it scientifically unproductive. Mainly because it did not take account of the important fact that there was already a rethinking of such ideological planes within bourgeois thought, that there was indeed a self-criticism of bourgeois thought, something already present in some of the openings of Hegel's politics unforgiving of a thought that touched or inflated some of the ideological planes.

One of the things that can be used from the political philosophy of Hegel is this overall discourse of the critique of bourgeois thought that preceded him and that preceded the political level of stabilization of the political system of capitalism, a level of political stabilization that is as evident in the later Hegel as in the work of Marx and indeed all of the nineteenth-century

bourgeoisie. What happened is that exactly this level of political stabilization that the forces of bourgeois capitalism attained at the political level ensured that the relation between capital and the political remained for decades, perhaps for even the entire nineteenth century, and for me even up to the 1930s, a problem let us say of a secondary contradiction. There was not, then, a dramatic problem, a critical problem for capital, precisely because political stabilization was understood in terms of constructing a kind of relation between the economic and the political, between the social and the political, in which the political domain was subordinate to the plane of economic and social relations, or more precisely that of production. There thus began a long period in which – even if this still demands reflection because it is still not certain that things were this way – we see that the specific model for doing politics, the specific moment of the functioning of the political machine, was violently subordinated to other ends. I speak of this period since it is possible to find in the history of capital other moments in which the relation between the political and the economic, between politics and economics, is, according to this point of view, totally reversed; for me the entire period of the so-called transition to capitalism is one which sees the terrain of the political moving in an active and subjective manner as a motor of the process. It is thus not true that the classical political state intervenes passively as a reflex at a certain point in the history of capital when everything is already prepared; it is not true that this modern state, this bourgeois modern state, is the new suit or hat that capital puts on when it has already smartened up and is ready to present itself to the workers – that is, as an ideological disguise to deceive the other class. The process of formation of the modern state is one which objectively and materially intervenes as an active motor within the process of the transition to capitalism. In this sense it is important not to think of the liberal state as

the first form of the bourgeois state, because there is a form of the modern bourgeois state that is non-liberal, pre-liberal, that beyond the ideological apparatus typical of liberal legitimation in fact legitimated something more, namely the process of capitalist primitive accumulation. The absolute state – the first modern absolutism – is for me the first true form of the modern bourgeois state, without which the passage to capitalism is inconceivable.

This is not so much about the autonomy of the political as about a lack of autonomy on the economic terrain; there is no autonomy of the social relation, no autonomy of production from the political when the decisive moment arrives for a transition to a different economic and social formation. In such moments we see that the political objectively bends the economic terrain to its own demands; thus the political is an element that lives its own political life, that sets in motion its own laws that must come to be known and to be seen concretely. The discourse of the transition to capitalism is important for our discourse in the contemporary transition of capitalism seen as a problem of the exit from capitalism. Again, in the phase of the second transition, the new transition, the problem of the first transition to capitalism is repeated; and again there is a potentiality of the political that we must understand and in some way get to own and control. Indeed when the great crises of the 1930s demolished what was called the hundred years' peace from 1814 to 1929, when this era ended (the era which contained Marx and the political Marx and within which historical materialism was born as the idea that the political terrain is, for good or bad, a consequence of a certain development of the social relations of production), the terms of the problem were reversed: the economic crisis became above all political, a crisis of political instrumentation, a crisis of political intervention in the economy. It is not by chance that this fundamental structural crisis came after 1917, following the

threat of a breakdown of the capitalist system at an international level that raised anew the problem of a new transition out of capitalism. Even if the awareness of this problem can only today be extracted with effort from the mists of projects, of traditions and of struggle not always on the best terrain and so on, it is true that only today can we begin to understand that there is a reconsideration of the relation between capital and the political no longer thought in terms of the subordination of the political to capital but more specifically in terms of the objective and subjective forces of the political. It is not coincidence that from the capitalist standpoint the problem posed today is one of an escape from crisis, achieved with the new instrumentality of the state even if it is difficult to manoeuvre and does not make the same leaps as capitalist development. And this holds not only from the standpoint of capital; there is also a return of the importance of the political from the workers' point of view. Yet recent new definitions of the concept of economic crisis according to the Marxist tradition remain beyond any political problematic and thus any sense of a real problem.

The themes contained under the formula 'political Hegel' go beyond considerations of the person even if, as said, it is at least a correct point of departure. For when we inquire into the practical political level implied in Hegelian theory we find that it is couched not in terms of a break in power but in terms of its management. In current workers' thought the terms of the management and the breaking of power have sometimes clashed, combined, been confused with each other, but I can say with certainty that they have never met. We must today try to hold together the two things: while the prospect of overcoming the current political terrain, and in Leninist terms breaking the state machinery, must not be neglected in the theory and in the practice of struggle with the capitalist system, this does not mean that this Leninist semantics of breaks cannot be confronted, assessed and prepared

by taking account of terms associated with the management of power. It remains doubtful whether it will be possible to hold together these two faces that are both in reality and ideologically contradictory. As something in real contradiction it should be taken seriously, for like all real contradictions it concerns true problems that confront us and that we must in some way resolve, because we cannot have blind faith in a spontaneous solution to contradictions of this kind. For me, breaking the state machine is quite improbable today without going through the management of it. Political Hegel tells us that it is only possible to break this machine from within and above. This involves the attempt to confront the terms of the contradiction without abolishing it and preferably before blowing it up. The contradictions must be governed, which is to say it is necessary to govern the difficult relation between capital and the political.

A last thing: when we say 'the relation between capital and the political' we refer to a problem that we cannot leave to bourgeois theorists or the capitalist political class to resolve. The relation, the problem, the contradiction that sometimes emerges between capital and the political is something that today the working class must confront in the first person, for the best way to beat the class adversary is always to pivot on that point which is at that moment the most fundamental contradiction for the class adversary, that is the acute moment of contradiction, the critical transition: there is no other method. On the one hand we must understand the adversary in the grip of its contradiction, and on the other not wait for this contradiction to resolve itself or be resolved by capital. I am not saying that capital is incapable of resolving this contradiction and that it must be resolved by the workers' movement. Mine is a different discourse: it is even possible that capital can temporarily resolve its own contradiction in contrast with the political terrain, but before it does so its contradiction must be confronted by the workers; it must be

used and governed by the workers in such a way that it does not lead to a new hundred years of peace, a new level of stabilization of the capitalist system, but rather serves the need of the class to exit from capitalism – that is to say, to effect a new transition.

The subjectivity that is Hegel's point of departure and that leads to a political realism of interest to us – because this is fundamentally Hegel's itinerary, a subjectivity full of political realism – is in this sense one of the moments, one of the itineraries and transitions, that can inform the steps towards the conquest of this other and new dimension of the political problem of class.

TRANSLATED BY HOWARD CAYGILL

4

Remarks on terror and the political

MARIO TRONTI

MARIO TRONTI There is no doubt that for a macroscopic phenomenon like terrorism the causes must necessarily be objective ones.¹ In this I agree with Mahler, who sees these causes in the left even in the ideology of left, claiming that ‘terrorism is a symptom of the ideological crisis of the entire socialist movement and no one may absolve themselves from this responsibility.’ Thus I too accept with Amato that to deal with terrorism it is necessary to account for it realistically as part of the problems internal to today’s left. Just as I am convinced of Mahler’s other claim that complements it, namely that ‘only the left can truly overcome terrorism’. It is a lapidary claim that we cannot avoid sharing.

I am, however, less open to those arguments about the causes of a ‘terrorist personality’ laid out by Bolaffi. These bring together the echo of a romantic critique of capitalism and an existential discourse just a little too ‘Frankfurt’ in which the ‘authoritarian personality’ becomes today’s ‘terrorist personality’.

1. These remarks constitute Tronti’s contribution to a debate with Giuliano Amato, Angelo Bolaffi and Stefano Rodota, ‘The Italian Left and Terrorism’, on the publication of the Italian translation of Horst Mahler’s *For a Critique of Terrorism (Per la critica del terrorismo*, Bari: De Donato, 1980). They offer valuable insights into Tronti’s views on power, politics and violence and his critique of terrorism and the significance for him of the social movements of 1968 and Rossana Rossanda’s argument that the disappointment of the aspirations of 1968 was a major cause of the resort to a politics of terror.

Such an approach might be of interest for analysing the development, growth and crises of an individual terrorist, but by this route we will not get to the basic causes of terrorism. And perhaps this is because of the risk of giving the terrorist the image of a child of crisis. Such images are for me too general to be productive of a politics, even if this crisis – if only – was considered in Habermas's sense of a crisis of legitimation.

Mahler's analysis goes deeper into the objective causes when he attributes to the left a certain incomprehension of social complexity, and for me as for Amato especially when he confronts the fundamental cause that is the utopia of the destruction of the state. Amato speaks of the 'need for the state'. According to me, simultaneous to the need for the state that at the level of the mass is provoked by terrorism, there was perhaps preceding an opposed need in the terrorist subject, that of the destruction of the state and a taking up of opposition to the state in reciprocally destructive terms.

Here we enter perhaps into the merits of the interrelation between the terrorist phenomenon and the theoretical traditions of the workers' movement. There is no doubt that the direct attack on the existence of the state was a central thread of the workers' movement; this cannot be denied. Its matrix is to be found in Marx's politics, he who had not even developed a theoretical model of the state but had peddled an image of the bourgeois state as only an apparatus of domination, oppression and thus of repression. There was no discussion of the concept of the state machine within which it was possible to find even the moments of government, of mediation and of democratic command but just the idea of the state apparatus, the 'committee for managing the affairs etc.', which is a militarized view...

GIULIANO AMATO ... that concerns solely the monopoly of force, whose legitimacy is only put in question when that monopoly is not recognized...

MARIO TRONTI ... and whoever feels excluded from this monopoly of force has basically the right to use the same arms of violent state oppression to free themselves.

But what is here a bare reference to Marx's politics becomes a tradition in the Stalinist version of Marxist–Leninism which accepts the terrain of the state in so far as it intends to use it fully, whether to construct another kind of society or to defend this alternative kind of society from other states. It is the matter of a logic of developing the fact of the state in terms of force, of violence and thus of reciprocal force and violence.

Certainly all this throws up in the air the classic bourgeois theory of the state, which was behind this theoretical analysis of the workers' movement. To sum up, I have the impression that with the terrorist phenomenon there comes to the surface a tie between the state and the political that adopts the same violence that the state always historically contained within itself....

Having already discussed a certain tradition to which we attribute the terrorist phenomenon we should, for the sake of a better understanding of it, underline its novelty. We find ourselves before new forms of political struggle, especially in Italy, if we want to call them this – new forms that break with the same tradition of the workers' movement in which, given that we theorized violence, we never reduced it to a private matter, as do the terrorists.

I criticize the limits of terrorist violence and not violence in general. The limits of terrorist violence are precisely its reduction to a relation between a private force and the state. This was never the case with the workers' movement. Whenever there was resort to violence this was always considered as a public instrument – that is, a political instrument, never as in terrorism. Real political violence, that which sustains a relation of forces, resolves itself in a conflict that is not always peaceful, but this political violence is not terrorism, even if it is a theorization of civil war, in the sense of class conflict, between social forces....

I would make an important distinction between the causes of terrorism, objective causes, and the horizon within which they are situated. As Mahler says, terrorism is a phenomenon that forms part of the left, but that doesn't mean that the causes of terrorism are intrinsic to the left; it's useless to continue to imagine that Meinhof or Curcio are manipulated by a puppet master, preferably of the right, who is using them for other ends. Evidently the 'terrorist personality', if we wish to continue using this term, grows from within the problems of the left even if the general causes of terrorism are larger, and above all much larger than the political uses of terrorism.

Bolaffi has quite correctly proposed a sharp alternative: are the causes of terrorism to be sought in a drive for transformation or in a block to its process? Faced with this choice I do not entertain much doubt: the real cause is the second. For if we say that terrorism issues *positively* from a drive to transformation then we give it a dignity that, according to me, it does not merit, because we make it a positive phenomenon that expresses something, perhaps in a mistaken way. This is a thesis that does not hold and is unacceptable, not for moral reasons but because I think it is objectively mistaken. The other hypothesis is more productive, that in the face of a block to the process of transformation it is possible that a reaction such as terrorism might emerge.

We must, however, situate all this within a larger and complex context that is the capitalist manoeuvre that has been grafted – with a powerful charge of initiative – onto the mass struggles of 1968–69 and as an active response has consciously and politically changed the class composition. With the result? It has produced a new social terrain, a social that is different but no less complex than that of the past, but certainly more political. (According to me the thematic of 'social complexity' does not help much; it's a nice phrase and easy to use.) This process of the politicization of the social is derived not only from the push of the great struggles

that at the end of the 1960s forced a block upon power and disrupted its equilibrium, but also from the system's subsequent reaction.

Thus there emerged a stronger political call for change, but at the same time as the impossibility of this call prevailing became ever more evident in spite of the growth of the left and the changes in general social consciousness. It was seen that it was impossible to win a deepening of the terms of democracy using the arms provided by the existing political system. From this block in the process of transformation sprang the leaks that constituted the specifically Italian version of the terrorist phenomenon, in the sense of a difficult nut to crack since it created a kind of mini social bloc between a clandestine nucleus and – differently from other countries – a minimum of social consensus.

Also, the same difficulty that we as a communist party often identify as a zone of indifference with respect to terrorism among intellectuals and the marginalized can be said to express in reality the diffused sensation of this block in the process of transformation. The idea spreads that old cards of the democratic game are no longer able to win, and this produces a backlash...

Let's take as another point of departure the hard core of terrorism that is the Red Brigades. For me the Red Brigades are an entirely political phenomenon whose internal structure repeats a political structure that diverges considerably from recent bourgeois politics, from capitalist politics. In fact the clandestine structure of the Red Brigades stands for a state, a state form; in the end theirs is a state apparatus that would claim a monopoly of alternative force to that of the state. But the central question is that the image of the state that the Red Brigades adopted no longer corresponds to the contemporary political state and, above all, does not correspond to the field larger than the state which is that of the political that contains and exceeds the fact of the state. We find ourselves before a divergence in the

very terrain of the political itself: the tradition of state force, of the totally violent state, is adopted by the clandestine structure of terrorism while the traditional state has adapted itself to the mutations and social transformations of these years, giving itself indeed the instruments to pursue politics that correspond to all the folds of society.

Togliatti's view of a politics that corresponds to all the folds of the social has been applied in Italy by the Christian Democrats, by their system of power, which is to say by a type of politics that adapts constantly and does not follow rules of principle or values but pragmatically adheres to flexible and adaptable issues. But this proceeds in parallel with another complex of phenomena, which are all real social transformations accomplished in these years.

From the reformist defeat that preceded the actions of the late sixties – 1968 to 1969 – a movement emerged that did not propose a new reformism but wanted more; it wanted moments of rupture though not general or revolutionary rupture, but rather real and material ruptures in the Christian Democrat system of power, to intervene and put it in crisis, which is exactly, at certain points, what seems to have happened. Afterwards, though, the response to this demand for a real rupture was the attempt to construct within the political system a new level of reformism through the strategy of the historical compromise. This created further rigidity precisely in the interior of those forces within which the terrorist phenomenon would explode.

But beside this there is a political system that is weak at the level of government while wanting to maintain intact the force of the state without achieving it: weakness of government, force of the state and, beside this, the thing most visible to everybody, a miserable political class that for me is a determinate element in the flight towards 'mad' solutions such as political terrorism.

What, then, is the limit of this political democracy that we confront today? Is it the fact that it cannot become a subject of

transformation – it just can't – but instead is *invested* by social transformations initiated by others, by in part autonomous social forces and relations, which it is limited to only registering passively. It is a political democracy that *reacts* but does not *act*; reacts in the sense that it is still able to mobilize itself, as we have seen, when it is directly attacked. It is a democracy, in this vital sense, that has strong moments of reaction but does not attack social and political structures. Thus it is not an active element.

It is this that produces gaps between political democracy as it is today and the drive from within where emerges the terrorist area. There are many reasons for this. For example, I see in this reactive capacity a strong passive legacy of anti-fascism, as a defence of values rather than active instruments of intervention in social relations – defence of values that no longer correspond to the growing political sense of the masses.

We find ourselves, then, before an entirely political phenomenon that wants a response, but a political one. For this reason I remain as unconvinced by social analyses of terrorism as by the idea that it can be brought to a head by a non-political response....

ANGELO BOLAFFI Instead might we begin to consider terrorism as part of some Hegelian 'cunning of reason' through which, or in the name of which, the political system might think to practise a real reduction of the complexity of political demands, such as the level of democracy and restrictions on the movement of the working class and of new political movements?

MARIO TRONTI You say there is a 'cunning of reason'. Let's recall that a few months ago there was a date on proposals for institutional reform in which we were all in some way interested. Now the increase in this terrorist phenomenon has, among other

things, had the result of completely blocking this debate, shifting it to second place and initiating a kind of creeping institutional counter-reformation without definite projects, day by day, that attempts to modify some rules of the game and to favour certain laws, as demonstrated by the latest decree on terrorism.

We have two kinds of response to terrorism: one is penal, the other ideological. For the first, it does not particularly bother me that this kind of response justifies terrorist strategy, according to the idea that it is the response terrorism wishes to provoke, aiming at broadening the process as authoritarianism gets tighter. My real worry with the first response is that it closes the space of movement for the struggle in general, for the process of transformation, and in this way risks justifying clandestine nuclei that work with the hypothesis of the closure of any real movement and of the struggle in general.

Then there is the other type of response, the ideological. This response holds that appeals to national unity and solidarity joined with the values of the political system, *just as it is*, will in the long run sap the forces of terrorism. This is a solution that surely will not resolve the problem of terrorism and may even aggravate it by serving as a multiplier of terrorism. Let us remember that all of the phases in which the process of national unity seemed to be accelerating were also those of the growth of terrorism....

I believe instead that a process of reaction is initiated spontaneously that is then used by the forces of the system. Thus, if terrorism is a political phenomenon it is a matter of removing its political basis and, for me, this can be done only by the relaunch of an idea or project and an organization of the forces of the left.

This must be a project of transformation with adequate instruments and new forms of organization, something unprecedented that does not just repeat old models. If it is true that the model of clandestinity with a minimum of social consensus is what is specific to Italy, then the first thing to do is to cut this tie

– that is, remove the minimum of consensus from the clandestine nuclei, completely isolate it as what it is. Only in this case can a military response be effective – that is, after the isolation of the hard core of terrorism. It is clear that neither of the two elements can be eliminated, but the first is the political one....

Only the left can defeat terrorism. In this sense we must as the left adopt the strongest sense of the concept of political transformation, but instead we have for a long time tied this concept of transformation always and only to the social or to the overcoming of an economic model. Transformation in Mahler's sense – that is, one that does not fear approaching institutional equilibria if there is an alternative that is not impossible – that is to say a different political and institutional system intelligible to the masses and hence capable of gathering together new forms of social consensus.

Now, the level of government is one that is adopted, let us say, in terms less tactical than hitherto and more in strategic and projectual terms. That is to say, to bring out a level of managing contradiction that will also bring with it efficiency and democracy at the same time. This does not seem to me to be something impossible to achieve, given the body of experience and theoretical refinement that the workers' movement possesses, especially in Italy.

To construct a project for a democracy in transition, for a democracy that decides and is able to resolve contradictions and not assume them passively and to just register them, is a democracy that can win against the opacity of social relations in the sense that it gives the measure for the possibility of change.

That's what needs to be done. After which the terrorist phenomenon will be reduced to a minority matter that can be beaten with the normal instruments of any kind of functional state.



VOCATIONS OF THE POLITICAL

5

The autonomy of means and politics as a partisan vocation

ELETTRA STIMILLI

That Max Weber is one of the key authors in Mario Tronti's reflections is not a mystery. He himself said, when speaking of the political experience of forming the journal *Quaderni rossi*, that one of the most contentious issues among the editorial group concerned doubts about whether Marx or Weber should be their point of departure. Setting out from 'Marx Weber' was Tronti's preferred solution,¹ which, irony apart, nicely sums up the importance he lends to Weberian thought.

My aim in this short essay is not so much to analyse if and in what sense Tronti was influenced by the thought of Max Weber. This has been done by Sara Farris in her 2011 article published in *Historical Materialism*.² My main objective is to use and confront the thought and analyses of Weber and Tronti in an interpretation of the present.

Among other things, 2019 marked the centenary of the publication of Weber's celebrated lecture *Politics as a Vocation* and was marked by a conference at Kingston University on 'Weber's "Vocation" and the Autonomy of the Political' that brought

1. Guidi Borio, Francesca Pozzi and Gigi Roggero, *Gli operaisti*, Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2005, p. 292.

2. Sara Farris, 'Workerism's Inimical Incursion: On Mario Tronti's Weberianism', *Historical Materialism*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2011), pp. 29–62.

together the centenary with the long-awaited English translation of *Workers and Capital*. The day was dedicated to the discussion of both Weber's and Tronti's texts. Sharing the day with Tronti, who was present and intervened with a lecture that captivated a full hall, was for me enormously satisfying. For the occasion I felt impelled to focus on an aspect apparently secondary to both authors but in my eyes central to any claim for their contemporary relevance. The following reflections are elaborations upon the intervention I made on that occasion.

Expropriation of means

One of the most interesting aspects of *Politics as a Vocation* is Weber's forceful attention to the intimate relation between politics and life: 'The significance of political action', according to him, can only emerge from 'the whole way of life'.³ On the one hand Weber's lecture meant to identify politics with the 'leadership' or the 'influencing of leadership of a *political* association', specifically the state, while on the other it conceives of politics in the broad sense of a *selbständig leitender Tätigkeit*, 'autonomously directive activity'.⁴ While in certain respects Weber completely identifies politics with the institution of the modern state, it is nevertheless the case that the questions emerging in this text are much more complicated than this. Indeed, according to Weber, the problem of politics is tied intrinsically to the concept of power.

Politics as a Vocation is unquestionably one of Weber's most accomplished analyses of the theme of power. The question of power is explored in relation to the institution of the modern state. It is here that Weber discusses the now classical thesis of

3. Max Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, in *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, Abingdon: Routledge, 2009, p. 77.

4. *Ibid.*

the state as a legitimate institution for the monopolization of physical force as a means of power. What is particularly interesting about this discussion is that Weber argues for this thesis by using the Marxist concept of 'expropriation'. It becomes a decisive element in defining the function of means in relation to the role assumed by power.

There is a complex relation connecting the means of politics with its ends, posing a question addressed by both Weber and Tronti at length. My aim, however, is to intensify the urgency of bringing forward the decisive role played by *means* in both of their positions. I believe this to be the most important link between the positions of Weber and Tronti. They share the attempt to define the *autonomy* of political means with respect to the self-directed processes that define the modern forms of power that neutralize political force.

If the state is identified by Weber as the legitimate institution for monopolizing physical force as a means of power, then this monopoly of violence is the direct result of the 'expropriation' on the part of the state of all the objective means of power previously held by individuals. That Weber describes this process as 'expropriation', evidently referring to Marx, means we cannot interpret this as but a marginal comment in a wider discourse. Indeed Weber gives a crucial role to means in a passage that shows both the unavoidable parallel between politics and economics while raising the possibility of articulating political 'vocation' around a different use of means.

For Weber a system such as 'today's state' in which the administrative personnel do not possess their own means of administration (just as according to Marx workers do not possess their own means of production) is one where the rigorous "separation" of the material means of administration from the administrative staff has already been accomplished. According to him, this 'holds in the same sense in which today we say that

the salaried employee and the proletarian in the capitalistic enterprise are “separated” from the material means of production’. If Marx, then, analyses the way in which the means and relations of production come to be expropriated, Weber considers the expropriation of the ‘means of administration’. It might be said that Weber integrates Marx’s relations of production with the relations of administrative domination and subordination. It is especially interesting to note how, according to Weber, the German Revolution of 1918 was the attempt to ‘inaugurate the expropriation of this expropriator of the political means, and therewith of political power’.⁵ The significance for Weber of the Marxist concept of expropriation extends beyond a process internal to economic domination and involves the various types of domination that classical Marxism would define as ‘super-structural’. This point, as is well known, became important for Tronti, especially following the appearance of *The Autonomy of the Political* (1977) when the economy was no longer considered the sole motor of the capitalist machine and where he definitively distanced himself from what he defined as Marxist ‘monotheism’.

The spirit of capitalism

In his celebrated thesis on the origins and development of capitalism Weber takes the ‘capitalist enterprise’ as the central object of his analysis. This aspect of his argument is particularly relevant today when the entrepreneurial structure has become so pervasive as to transform all areas of individual and social life in its image. With the predominance of neoliberalism at a global level, the enterprise – the capitalist enterprise – has become central to all social relations. A peculiar form of ‘enterprise in itself’ pervades all branches of contemporary society. The

5. Ibid., p. 81.

growing linkage between economic and financial processes that we have witnessed over the past decades, along with the gradual financialization of the most important global economic interventions and the growing influence of financial operations on the market, could not have reached the level evident today without the unremitting transformation of each individual life into 'human capital'.

Weber's thesis on the origins of capitalism can be brought into the present if we trouble to note that the juridical domination of the state and the economic domination of the capitalist enterprise are for him two sides of the same broader phenomenon of power. In both cases what is in play is the monopolization of the means by which power can be exercised. However, the relation between means and ends, while appearing linear, cannot conceal its own intrinsic complexity, as Weber was quick to note.

The monopoly of force assumed by the state legitimates violence as means of power. But law, in tightening the relation between violence and power, makes it difficult to effect a clear distinction between means and ends. Within the juridical power of the state, law remains intrinsically tied to the violence that founds it. In other words, violence is not a simple means of power, and power – being intrinsically tied to violence – always risks becoming a means in itself, without any other objectives to pursue beyond the increase of its own power.

Something similar takes place in the economic sphere with respect to a feature that Weber considers in relation to his thesis on the origins of capitalism and that renders explicit the apparently marginal link between state and capitalist enterprise revealed in *Politics as a Vocation*. If the state is based on the monopoly of violence as a means of power with no other end than its own increase, then the capitalist enterprise is based on the monopoly of the means of production with no other end than the augmentation of its own profit. What is at stake here is

an auto-teleological process that, united with the control of the means of power and domination over the means of production, makes the logic of accumulation of growth and development – of state and capitalist enterprise – a central feature of Weberian theory, especially as worked through in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

In *The Protestant Ethic* the principal feature of the capitalist economy is identified as the pursuit of profit as an end in itself; it has nothing to do with the satisfaction of personal utility, particular needs or with individual pleasure. In the capitalist mode of production acquisitive activity is the highest goal of human life and not a simple means for satisfying needs or interests. This is the guiding inspiration of capitalism, its ‘ethic’ or that which Weber called the ‘spirit of capitalism’. It may be said that the mechanism that feeds the ‘spirit’ of the capitalist economy is precisely the revolutionizing of the linear relation between ends and means. The same revolution is in some respects also at play in the legitimation of the juridical power of the state.

In the light of Weberian theory the efficacy of economic power may be individuated as follows: it is not that the violence of the law can be neutralized in a way that maximizes the effects of its power, but that this process is only possible through the preventive and essential neutralization of means that come to serve this end without conserving any autonomy. This is its force and it is also the condition of possibility of its current planetary expansion.

The core of this mode of domination consists in its capacity to permeate the life of the individual. The life of men and women comes to be implicated in a self-destructive global effort whose scope seems none other than that of augmenting its own power. It is not just specific actions and labouring activities that are directly implicated in this process, but the very individual

faculty, especially the capacity of each to enter a self-relation and to produce value. The fact that this attitude can assume the form of a dependence freely and faithfully produced implies the participation of the individual in a self-destructive global effort that is an end in itself and that has no goals outside of itself. We might say with Weber that the 'spirit' of capitalism basically coincides with the singular existence that has been 'called' to adapt itself to capitalist modes of production. The 'calling' assumes the sense of a 'vocation' that animates capitalism as a form of life and a form of power.

Power, domination, potential

As is clearly evident in *Politics as a Vocation*, the concept of power is central to Weber's political theory, especially when it concerns the theory of the state. It may be said that Weber introduces this concept specifically in order to discuss the modern state. But its application to the state is also an expression of the clarity with which Weberian theory had proleptically identified the signs of the crisis of the state form. In other words, according to him the modern state is not just a particular and historically determined structure of a broader concept of power in the West. The dialectic between state and power did, however, allow Weber to offer a more complex definition of modern political form that remains timely even today. Juridical and economic power are the two poles of this definition.

One side of the Weberian theory of power emphasizes the state as the principal modern political institution. Here the state assumes an essentially juridical shape where the juridical force of state power is identified with a form of obedience. But Weber's discourse on power – even state power – cannot be reduced to a mode of domination, or, to use his term, *Herrschaft*. With respect to potential, *Macht* or power is a relation of forces that

cannot be reduced to the legal sphere or submitted to juridical domination. According to Weber, power must also be legitimate if it is to function or effectively serve as a relation of forces. But its legitimacy does not emerge through the law or through its supposed suspension, as it does in Carl Schmitt. Power does not just issue from violent domination or – the same thing – through the legitimation of the monopoly of violence as a form of external imposition to which each must submit themselves. On the contrary, power assumes the form of self-control, with Weber speaking of a form of ‘interiorization’ of orders as the very form of its individualization.

If the claim to legitimacy for every form of power demands a ‘recognition’ that forms, so to speak, its ‘interior’ dimension, its interiorization, however, is not limited to this. The most important operator of the legitimation of power for Weber is not ‘recognition’ but ‘faith’, a fundamental element of the religious sphere extensively researched by him in this sense without neglecting to show its intrinsically political turns. ‘Faith’ as a political operator does not consist in the recognition of something pre-existently true and valid once and for all but in the constant production of its validity and value.

Politics as a Vocation also refers to ‘faith’ as a source of the state’s validity and the foundation of the legitimization of obedience to its power and the origin of the very concept of ‘political vocation’ or of ‘politics as a vocation’. Within the Weberian distinction of the three types of legitimate domination, ‘faith’ plays a determinant role in ‘charismatic domination’. Even the ‘official duty’ of a ‘specialist functionary’ is a ‘faithful duty’. But ‘faith’ is above all for Weber the fundamental operator of the capitalist economy. In the constitution of economic power ‘faith’ is precisely the form of its legitimacy as a *Lebensführung*, a ‘way of life’ or mode of existence conformable to capitalism: it is faith that animates capitalism as a form of life.

In bringing to the present Weber's thesis on the origin of capitalism it is worth noting how a particular kind of faith has today assumed singular force in the functioning of global economic domination. From the moment that the 'entrepreneur of the self' became the central figure of economic power, 'believing' in the self, or more precisely 'believing' in oneself as one with faith in the market, is the dynamic underlying many processes of the global economy. Fundamental to this is the mechanism of valorization that founds the capitalist economy and that has become ever more self-referential through the process of financializing the economy.

The mechanisms that drive the stock market are increasingly dependent on a particular kind of faith: it is the faith of stockholders, connected more to the credit of the financial community than to the real value of goods exchanged. By contrast, work in its classical sense has been progressively transformed and re-configured as 'work on the self', a form of investment in 'human capital' that requires constant revalorization. The unprecedented investment in life in all its forms has implicated the singular existent in the construction of a global enterprise whose peak is manifest in the predominance of financial markets.

Among the signs of a radical change in modes of production over the past decades are the rise in flexibility and precarity of labour and the emergence of new forms of autonomous labour. In this context, the most sought-after individual components on the labour market are no longer tied simply to the quantity of labour necessary to complete production, but are tied rather to specific qualities of the singular. In other words, the 'credit' that labour power has always been able to offer (because it consists in the anticipation of its use value) is today being transformed into the moral condition of a debt that cannot be paid.⁶ It consists of

6. See E. Stimilli, *Debt of the Living: Asceticism and Capitalism*, New York: SUNY Press, 2017; and *Debt and Guilt*, London: Bloomsbury, 2018.

a radical form of indebtedness that infects the singular existent in a radical sense, with the subject finding itself in constant pursuit of the trust – always insufficient – necessary to confront the process of valorization in which it is immersed.

A fundamental stage in the process consists in the radical transformation of the market into a political institution. The enormous mutation of the capitalist modes of production has been possible due to the constitution of states that are flexible, reactive and oriented to the market and to consumption. In other words, capital has become at the same time the subject and the object of a global political initiative reorganizing under its hegemony the relation between politics and the economy and transforming states into managerial states or enterprises in the service of enterprises.

The crisis of the modern state anticipated by Weber with a theoretical desperation similar to that expressed explicitly by Tronti, above all in the 1990s, is today evident to everybody. That the announcement of this crisis by both authors was accompanied – in different ways – by a certain paralysing nostalgia should not inhibit or prevent us from taking what remains significant in them for understanding the present.

Power as means

Tronti's reflections on the theme of the 'autonomy of the political' represent the attempt to use politically the state machine against capital, internally to capital. This project is oriented towards a use of institutions, without illusions, by the working class for a political control of capitalism that for Tronti will allow the overcoming of a phase of stagnated conflict that for him characterized the Italy of the second half of the 1970s. This is not the place to address the complex questions tied to this problematic phase of Italian history, one remembered

for its radical social and political conflict in which Tronti's position could have been interpreted as a justification for the 'historic compromise' between the Italian Communist Party and Christian Democracy.⁷

The importance Tronti lends to the state and institutions was tied to the possibility of identifying in them a new site of political struggle capable of stemming any political initiative on the part of capital. Although he intuited the recomposition of the political initiative of capital at the end of the 1970s, Tronti perhaps underestimated the gravity of the turn towards a neo-liberal politics that would lead to a radical modification of the capitalist modes of production, a profound transformation of the very institutions of the state and the conquest of hegemony by the market as a political institution.

If it is possible to understand the workers' perspective as an inquiry from below, one characterized by a reflection capable of grasping change at its sources, and if, as Paolo Virno maintained in an interview, this was not just a 'retrospective reflection' but an investigation in 'real time' that for many was tied to the experience of a 'change of paradigm'⁸ from Fordism to post-Fordism, it remains the case that this theoretical and political avant-garde underwent a transition not without conflict and internal breaks that led to the transformation of workerism into post-workerism.⁹ Tronti never accepted this transformation, remaining indifferent throughout this phase of transition to the modifications undergone by capitalism,¹⁰ regarded by him as a

7. See Antonio Negri, *Proletari e Stato. Per una discussione su autonomia operaia e compromesso storico*, Milan: Feltrinelli, 1976, pp. 38–42.

8. See Fabio Milazzo, *Linguaggio, politica e 'natura umana'*. Un'intervista a Paolo Virno, haecceitasweb.com/2011/01/18/linguaggio-politica-e-natura-umana-unintervista-a-paolo-virno.

9. A theoretical and political experience of international significance, as witnessed by the publication of Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno, *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

10. See his remark in the introduction by Matteo Cavalleri, Michele Filippini and Jamila M.H. Mascot, in Mario Tronti, *Il demone della politica. Antologia di scritti (1958–2015)*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2017, pp. 37–8 n63.

cause of the end of the 'great history of the twentieth century', that of industrial capitalism and the working class as its intrinsic condition of possibility.

With the predominance of neoliberal politics the possibility of using the state against capital proposed by Tronti as an effective realization of the 'autonomy of the political' with respect to economic forces was not just blocked by capital's political use of the state internal to capital but also proved to be strategically bankrupt.

The end in the 1990s of that brief but intense period that was Tronti's twentieth century forced him to confront his errors. The demand to identify the 'political' with the possibility of finding a sphere of autonomy in the state, a sphere autonomous of the economy and capable of serving as a means to construct a different social system, was recognized as erroneous. Nevertheless, or perhaps even because of this recognition and very much in the line of descent from Weber, Tronti continued to ask the question of politics as a vocation and to maintain a direct dialogue with institutions. He reckoned with the 'diabolical powers' of the political while remaining knowingly responsible – like Weber – of the fact that such powers are hard to escape in political practice. In this sense, politics is not completely independent of ethics, even if it differs from it.

Weber saw the main difference between the political and ethical spheres to consist in the special importance lent by politics to means, acknowledging that 'for politics the decisive means is violence'. For Weber the *Gesinnungsethik*, or ethic of conviction, and the *Verantwortungsethik*, or ethic of responsibility, are not antithetical but are 'rather supplements, which only in unison constitute a genuine human being – a human being who can have the 'calling for politics'.¹¹

11. Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, p. 128.

The sense of a radical critique of the world as it stands is equally strong in Tronti, yet always informed by a political realism arising from the need to flee what appears as an ineluctable destiny, one marked by the defeat of modern politics. One of Tronti's eminent qualities is his coming to terms with this defeat, even if this reckoning ends by showing itself to be an impossible gesture in which failure always becomes a destiny.¹²

It is possible to say on the basis of the earlier analysis of Weber on the origins of capitalism that Tronti recognized with a conscious sense of tragedy that the 'historically capitalistic relation of reproduction ... is now internal to the human'.¹³

This was affirmed in *Twilight of the Political* (1998), which opens what has been described as his third phase of reflection, following the first coinciding with the publication of *Workers and Capital* (1966) and the second with the 'autonomy of the political'.¹⁴ Indeed *Twilight of the Political* even maintains that 'when a process is victorious [in human interiority] it is victorious everywhere'.¹⁵ Yet, in spite of the pessimistic tone assumed after the turn from the autonomy of the political, Tronti never abandons his partisan dimension, the essential condition for the strong 'partiality' that is evident in *Workers and Capital* that aims at suspending capitalist logic.

The force of partiality

The separation of the two moments that capitalist logic tends to unify – the labour process and the process of valorizing capital – is one of the crucial points of *Workers and Capital*. It is at the origin of the contrast between workers and capital. According to

12. See Mario Tronti et al., *Politica e destino*, Milan: Sosella, 2006.

13. See Mario Tronti, *La politica al tramonto*, Turin: Einaudi, 1998, p. 32.

14. On this periodization, see the clear and effective introduction by Cavalleri, Filippini and Mascari in Tronti, *Il demone della politica*, pp. 11–63.

15. Tronti, *La politica al tramonto*, p. 32.

Tronti, the core of this contrast consists in the *Doppelcharakter*,¹⁶ or dual nature, of workers' power: it is at the same time an internal function of capital and an element that creates value beyond capitalist measures of value. The force of the antagonistic subject emerges from this ambivalence. It is at the same time 'within and against' capital: within as internal to capitalist valorization and against as a creative element of value exceeding value itself. This ambivalence cannot be identified with two accommodating elements but is at the origin of a struggle, a conflict between two diverse and opposed dimensions. Their force and effectivity make victory impossible. When labour power discovers itself to be a part of capital it is able to oppose itself to the whole of capital.

In this sense it is very interesting to see today, as already in the 1960s, that Tronti focuses on labour power as credit already contributing to capitalist modes of production: a credit that in the course of the valorization process of capital transforms itself into debt and thus into a condition of submission and dependence.¹⁷ With today's transformation of the modes of capitalist production, however, this condition has been wholly identified with the material and at the same time moral dimension of debt.

The 'subjective' and 'partial' choice to assume the 'point of view' of labour power as the key to a strategic reading in *Workers and Capital* was intended to break the 'enchantment' and to recognize elements of a potential rupture within the apparently coherent logic of capital. This 'partial' and 'subjective' point of view is the 'politically autonomous element' interior to capital. In this sense, the re-evaluation of potential 'autonomy' of the political terrain after the publication of *The Autonomy of the Political*¹⁸

16. See Mario Tronti, *Operai e capitale*, Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2006, p. 121.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

18. While the final version of the text dates from 1977, the first version dates from 1972. See *L'autonomia del politico in Il demone della politica*, pp. 283–312; 'The Autonomy of the Political', trans. Andrew Anastasi, Sara R. Farris and Peter D. Thomas, in *Sull'autonomia del politico*, *Viewpoint Magazine*, 26 February 2020

in 1972, while problematic in many respects, does not represent a real turn with respect to *Workers and Capital*. Rather, it should be considered as a reflection internal to Marxism that attempted to produce, we might say in a Weberian sense, an interaction between superstructural elements and the economic base that served to delineate a field of political autonomy.

After the decline of the partiality of the workers, Tronti came to recognize the diffusion of a process of alienation at a social level.¹⁹ If this diffusion ends by passing from the external ahuman world to human interiority 'as in the interiorization of a system of interior values', then for Tronti 'the vindication of differences' becomes 'the new frontier for the revolt of the subject' with 'politics as the organization of differences' remaining for him the sole position capable of preserving an 'ethically subversive sign'.²⁰

Power as a means to autonomy and not an instrument dedicated to domination remains in Tronti his partisan condition without however concealing a certain ambiguity. While it continues to emerge as an essential element for a use of force directed towards 'political organization' without which there would be no real exercise of power, it also, especially in late Tronti, increasingly becomes a political use of the force of subjectivity, which only in this sense can adopt an unexpectedly subversive aspect.

In this phase of his work Tronti conducted an interesting dialogue with the Italian feminism of difference.²¹ For him feminism, along with the workers' movement, was one of the few movements to grasp the dichotomous intensity of difference, the force of the partiality of the feminist point of view, even

19. Mario Tronti, *Noi operaisti*, Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2009, p. 100.

20. Mario Tronti, *Con le spalle al futuro*, Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1992, p. 14.

21. See Tronti, *La politica al tramonto*, p. 44; 'La politica e il politico al maschile', in Mario Tronti, *Dall'estremo possibile*, ed. P. Serra, Rome: Ediesse, 2011, pp. 201–8; Mario Tronti, *Dello spirito libero: frammenti di vita e di pensiero*, Milan: Il Saggiatore, p. 188; Tronti, *Noi operaisti*, p. 107. See also Maria Luisa Boccia, 'Differenza operaia, differenza sessuale' and Ida Dominijanni, 'Eredi al tramonto. Fine della politica e politica della differenza', in Tronti et al., *Politica e destino*, pp. 65–73, 125–43.

though, from his point of view, it did not know how to manage this force politically. What is especially relevant from my point of view is that Tronti approaches feminism at the same time that he discovers the religious dimension as a 'disorderly spirit' or extreme point of tangency between subjective singularity and the space of the social capable of opening unpredictable perspectives 'beyond' and 'different' to the dominant state of things. But in this respect the subversive dimension of spirituality consists in an interest directed towards preserving the catechontic and de-escalating dimension of political theology sufficient to 'organize the chaos of the contingent'.²² In the same way, but with respect to feminism, the adoption of the political charge of his partiality is united with his critique of '68. As part of the contestation of '68, feminism risked becoming confined in the groove traced by the progressive and emancipatory movements of the bourgeois revolution, thus disseminating throughout society the 'poison of the antipolitical'.²³ It is from this point of view that Tronti maintains that 'the maturation of civil society, the conquest of new civil, trade union and political rights provoked a collective leap in consciousness but above all contributed to promoting the health of Italian capitalism in its prolonged pursuit of modernity.' Indeed, for him it was this way that the 'epoch, still open today, of the re-privatization of the whole social relation' began.²⁴

Tronti was one of the few male intellectuals to enter into direct dialogue with feminist thought and practice. In a certain respect he grasped that the political force of feminism consisted in its justified attempt to distance itself from the liberal limits of emancipation. His position does, however, evince some fundamental contradictions. While identifying politics exclusively

22. Mario Tronti, with Massimo Cacciari, *Teologia politica. Al crocevia della storia*, Milan: Albo Versorio, 2007; Mario Tronti, *Il nano gobbo e il manichino. La teologia come lingua della politica*, Rome: Castelvecchi, 2015.

23. Tronti, *Noi operaisti*, p. 50.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

with the forms of organization and mediation at the public and institutional level of the 'partisan' struggle, Tronti also arrives at denouncing as 'unpolitical' or even 'anti-political' all of the social movements whose political character was neutralized by precisely that public dimension where Tronti continued to find the political.

Yet the political force that the contemporary transnational and intersectional feminist movements have demonstrated in a number of diverse situations consists primarily in a notable capacity to resist the different forms of neutralization to which it has been subjected, including the privatization of social relations imposed by neoliberal politics. It is precisely as a partial or indirect point of view that the transnational feminist movement has been able not only to show the complicated antagonistic relation between production and reproduction internal to capital²⁵ but also to involve women as an avant-garde in political movements that are at once universal and unique – for each and for all – thus emphasizing the contradiction that lies in the distinction between the public and the private at the origin of the modern state and the definition of politics as occupying an exclusively public dimension. It is in this sense, I think, that the concrete proof that today 'the private is political' will offer new perspectives to institutions, should these really wish to be political, beyond being expressions of effective forms of contrast with respect to a renewed domination of capital at a global level.

25. We acknowledge the important work in this direction by feminist *operaisti* like Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Leopoldina Fortunati and Silvia Federici. See Mariarosa Della Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community*, Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1975; Silvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework*, Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1975.

6

Ira et studium, or, tragedy as vocation

ALBERTO TOSCANO

A ‘revolution without models’ can only take its bearing, aside from empiricism, which is to say from science, also from pessimism, which is to say from politics.

Mario Tronti, *Hobbes and Cromwell*

To a Swiss man declaring that the State must be loved, Weber allegedly replied: ‘What? We need to love this monster too?’

Karl Jaspers, *Max Weber*

In the midst of painting a pitiless picture of the power politician as braggart and demagogue (‘His lack of objectivity tempts him to strive for the glamorous semblance of power rather than for actual power. His irresponsibility, however, suggests that he enjoy power merely for power’s sake without a substantive purpose’), Max Weber, in *Politics as a Vocation (Politik als Beruf)* identifies his principal fault as the absence of that ‘knowledge of tragedy with which all action, but especially political action, is truly interwoven’.

It is perhaps not inopportune to recall here – as a nod to our present predicament – that Weber’s historical sociology of the politician draws some of its figures of modern demagogy from the annals of British parliamentary democracy. Speaking of Gladstone, for instance, he notes that

It soon became obvious that a Caesarist plebiscitarian element in politics – the dictator of the battlefield of elections – had appeared on the plain. ... How does the selection of these strong leaders take place? First, in terms of what ability are they selected? Next to the qualities of will – decisive all over the world – naturally the force of demagogic speech is above all decisive. ... One may call the existing state of affairs a ‘dictatorship resting on the exploitation of mass emotionality’.¹

Incidentally, the American inauguration of this figure of plebiscitary demagogic (or populism, to use the contemporary shop-worn term) is Andrew Jackson, whose portrait now graces the Oval Office.

This essay will inquire into the nexus between Weber’s ethical anatomy of power and Mario Tronti’s prescriptive and historical understanding of ‘autonomy of the political’ using the question of tragedy as its prism. Using Tronti’s own valedictory lecture of 2001 (‘Politica e destino’/‘Politics and Fate’) as an initial framework,² supplemented by Massimo Cacciari’s 2006 introduction to a volume comprising the two vocations which reprises their original title (*Il lavoro intellettuale come professione/Geistige Arbeit als Beruf / Intellectual Labour as Vocation*),³ we will explore some of the multiple, and not necessarily convergent, figures of the tragic in Weber’s ‘Vocations’ and his broader oeuvre. In particular we will try to identify the articulation between the fateful character of capitalist modernization – envisioned in *The Protestant Ethic* as a mighty coercive ‘cosmos’ determining the destiny of every individual born into its mechanism ‘until the day that the last ton of fossil fuel has been consumed’ – and the concluding vision of the politician as a latter-day tragic ‘hero’.

1. Max Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, in *From Max Weber: Essays In Sociology*, ed. and trans. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 107.

2. Mario Tronti, ‘Politica e destino’, in *Il demone della politica. Antologia di scritti 1958–2015*, ed. Matteo Cavalleri, Michele Filippini and Jamila M.H. Mascari, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2017.

3. Massimo Cacciari, ‘Introduzione’, in Max Weber, *Il lavoro intellettuale come professione*, Milan: Mondadori, 2006.

a sober hero of 'passion and perspective'. First, I will touch on how the revolutionary conjuncture of 1917–19 served to shape this image, by considering the place of the political vocation or profession in Weber's writings on the Russian February Revolution, as well as the rival conception of ethics, politics and tragedy advanced more or less contemporaneously by his friend Georg Lukács – allegedly a negative model of the pure ethics of conviction or principle.

Weber accounts for the tsar's downfall in terms of his 'fatal insistence on *wanting to rule on his own*', of the 'vain romanticism and self-pity of the outward *appearance* of power'; he could only imagine this because he was allowed to *appear* to rule on his own by Stolypin, but in the event that could not suffice since – in a lesson which will be fully elaborated in *Politics as a Vocation*:

even the most outstanding civil servant is not necessarily a good *politician*, and vice versa. And the Tsar was certainly not a good politician. The special qualities necessary for this difficult area of responsible activity – including the strict *objectivity*, the steady sense of *proportion*, the restrained *self-control*, and the capacity for *unobtrusive* action which it calls for.

By contrast to the inability of monarchy, with its tendency to the 'romantic imagination' to achieve such capacities, it is, argues Weber, in the context of a 'very strong and broadly based autonomous *parliamentary power*' – though one pointedly unlike what was present in the Germany of his time – that the requisite talents for leadership may be cultivated. Let us recall also the articulation in *Politics as a Vocation* of the critical difference between the politician and the civil servant. Of the latter, Weber writes:

Sine ira et studio, 'without scorn and bias,' he shall administer his office. Hence, he shall not do precisely what the politician, the leader as well as his following, must always and necessarily do, namely, *fight*. To take a stand, to be passionate – *ira et studium* – is

the politician's element, and above all the element of the *political leader*. His conduct is subject to quite a different, indeed, exactly the opposite, principle of responsibility from that of the civil servant.⁴

The articulation of democracy and the selection of an elite is evident here, as Weber prefaces his defence of parliamentarianism with the claim that 'Great politics is always achieved by small groups of people', though ones who have 'the *freely given* dedicated support of a sufficiently broad, powerful social stratum' and who 'know hot power struggles are carried out in situations where regulations, commands and military or bureaucratic obedience are *not*, in the nature of things, appropriate methods'.⁵ The article on Russia's transition is a powerful sociological and conjunctural anatomy of the weakness of Russian pseudo-democracy, held hostage by a reactionary nationalist bourgeoisie's grip on the financial sinews of war, the weakness (he thought) of a working-class opposition, and the still marginalized role of what Weber perceived as the key latent social actor at the time, namely the peasantry, with its objective interests in peace, leading to the conjecture that the difficulties attendant on resolving the land question 'could only be resolved by means of a Socialist Revolutionary *dictatorship* lasting for years'.⁶ But, it must be recalled, not to paint an unduly cosmetic picture of Weber, that his liberal nationalism and complex assumption of bourgeois partisanship had a nasty side, as in his perorations in this selfsame article against what he considers the danger of a German social democracy being enticed by Russian socialists (like Kerensky) themselves in hock to a combative and reactionary bourgeoisie and landowner class. In a passage where passion and prejudice seem to have the upper hand over objectivity, proportion, judgement and self-control, and in which

4. *Politics as a Vocation*, p. 78.

5. Max Weber, *The Russian Revolutions*, ed. and trans. Gordon C. Wells and Peter Baehr, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995, p. 245.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 249.

the *Dolchstoßlegende* is fused with a kind of racial delirium, Weber writes:

The situation is now as follows: alongside material factors the attitude of Russian socialist leaders rests on a fundamental assumption: with an army of negroes, ghurkas and all the barbarian rabble in the world standing at our borders, half crazed with rage, lust for vengeance, and the craving to devastate our country, they assume that German Social Democracy will still be a party to the fraudulence of the present Russian Duma plutocracy and, morally speaking, stab the army which is protecting our country from savage nations in the back.⁷

A remarkable page from the same man who made possible the German translation of *The Souls of Black Folk*, and who wrote to its author (and erstwhile attendee of his lectures) W.E.B. Du Bois that he was ‘absolutely convinced that the “colour-line” problem will be the paramount problem of the time to come here and everywhere in the world’.⁸

For my material, I want to turn to two texts of the early Lukács, ‘Bolshevism as an Ethical Problem’, written in December 1918, and ‘Tactics and Ethics’, written in February 1919. These two texts, concerned as their titles suggest with communism and ethics, fall just on either side of Lukács’s ‘conversion’ to revolutionary socialism, from a position that has been variously described as an ‘ethical rigorism’ and a ‘metaphysics of tragedy’ (to adopt the title of an essay of his from 1910 incorporated in *Soul and Form* – a book that deeply impacted both Max and Marianne Weber), founded on a conviction, equal parts Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky, that truth cannot find materialization in this world, that the will, political or otherwise, is repelled by a reality awash with compromise and corruption. This is a view which, writing in 1915 to Paul Ernst (to whose tragedies the

7. Ibid., p. 255. This is from the article ‘Russia’s Transition to Pseudo-Democracy’, originally published in Friedrich Naumann’s *Die Hilfe* on 26 April 1917.

8. Joachim Radkau, *Max Weber: A Biography*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009, p. 229.

Soul and Form essay was devoted), Lukács encapsulated with a view of two irreconcilable ethical perspectives which partially anticipates Weber. Writing of a Russian writer and leader of the Socialist Revolutionaries' 'Fighting Organization', responsible for several assassinations in the early 1900s – to whose work he had been introduced by his wife Ljena Grabenko (herself an active 'terrorist' in 1905 – she had allegedly carried a bomb hidden under someone else's baby in her arms), Lukács told Ernst:

I do not see any evidence of a disease in Boris Savinkov. I see in him a new expression of the ancient conflict between the first ethics (duty to society) and the second ethics (imperative of the soul). Inevitably, the order or priorities produces dialectical complications when the soul embraces humanity rather than itself. Both the politician and the revolutionary must sacrifice the soul in order to save it.⁹

Significantly, even for the pre-Bolshevik Lukács, the standard objections to Bolshevism – among which he underscores the judgement of prematurity and the accusation that it is a value- and civilization-destroying politics – are ineffective. About the first, he notes: 'In my opinion, there is never a situation where one can actually know and foresee things with an absolute certainty. For the human will, intent on immediate self-realization at all costs, forms an integral part of the "ripe" situation as part of its objective relations.'¹⁰ As for the second, it is an inopportune rejoinder to a politics that heralds a transvaluation of values. The only question thus remains: 'What is our chance of realizing our convictions immediately and without any compromise?'

9. Cited in Árpád Kadarkay, 'The Demonic Self: Max Weber and Georg Lukács', *Hungarian Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1–2 (1994), p. 90, who also quotes Churchill's view of Savinkov: 'He was that extraordinary product – a Terrorist for moderate aims.' Note also how Lukács's line strangely resonates with Weber's borrowing from what he terms a beautiful passage in Machiavelli's *History of Florence* in which the author of *The Prince* 'has one of his heroes praise those citizens who deemed the greatness of their native city higher than the salvation of their souls'; *Politics as a Vocation*, p. 126.

10. Georg Lukács, 'Bolshevism as an Ethical Problem', in *The Lukács Reader*, ed. Árpád Kadarkay, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, p. 216.

'Compromise' here serving as a synonym for democracy: is the latter to be considered a mere tactic or an integral component? At the basis of Lukács's account of the 'ethical dilemma' of Bolshevism is of course his dualism of ethical goals and worldly means, or what he calls the 'divorce between soulless empirical reality and the human, utopian ethical will'.¹¹ Marxism is split into economic necessity and ethical utopia, and the victory of the proletariat itself is defined as a mere 'precondition' for a genuine ethical revolution and not the thing itself. In this dualist schema the problem of actualization is the problem of violence, and the problem of violence is the problem of evil, which lies at the core of the 'ethical dilemma' faced by sympathetic intellectuals such as Lukács himself:

We either seize the opportunity and realize communism, and then we must embrace dictatorship, terror and class oppression, and raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class in place of class-rule as we have known it, convinced that – just as Beelzebub chased out Satan – this last form of class rule, by its very nature the cruellest and most naked, will destroy itself, and with it all class rule. Or we insist on creating a new world order with new means, the means of democracy (for real democracy was but a demand and never a reality even in the so-called democratic states), and thereby run the risk that most of humanity is disinterested in the new world. And if we are subsequently unwilling to impose our will on humanity, we must wait and whilst waiting continue to instruct others and spread the faith until humanity's own conscience and will gives birth to what its conscious members have already known for a long time as the only possible solution.¹²

Contrary to the ethical critics of Marxism that crowd the long philosophical cold war that refuses to end, Lukács has the lucidity to indicate that *both* positions 'conceal and succour potentially terrifying sins and countless errors'.¹³ On the one hand,

11. *Ibid.*, p. 218.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 219.

13. *Ibid.*

democratic compromise permanently threatens the incorporation of the conformism of allied classes and liberal politicians. On the other, Bolshevism tries to vault, with the sheer power of its conviction over the properly tragic problem of means and ends ('can the good be achieved by evil means, and freedom by tyranny; can there be a new world if the means to its realization are only technically different from the rightly abhorred and abjured means of the old order?'¹⁴). Can we, asks Lukács quoting Dostoyevsky, 'lie our way through to the truth'?

Two months later Lukács's 'lesser evil' argument for democratic compromise flips – one might argue, on the basis of the same dualistic matrix – into a steadfast attack on compromise. The key concepts in his account all bear the marks of the translation of his tragic mindset into his new militant position. Thus, *tactics* are defined in terms of the link between ultimate objective and reality, and a distinction is made between an immanent politics that remains within the parameters of the constituted order and a revolutionary 'socio-transcendent' politics, which *denies* 'the moral *raison d'être* and historico-philosophical appropriateness of both past and present legal orders; how far – if at all – they are to be taken into account is therefore an exclusively tactical question'.¹⁵ Where 'Tactics and Ethics' draws a caesura is in its (ultra-leftist, or 'anarcho-Bolshevik' to borrow Löwy's apt expression) claim of the centrality of Hegelianism, there where 'Bolshevism as an Ethical Problem' detached Marx's politics from dialectical articulation. Thus, it is the 'philosophy of history', understood in terms of the 'objective possibility' of revolution as afforded by a 'tendency', which signals the chance for overcoming a properly *tragic* dualism. It is this dialectical framework which makes the *means* of socialist revolution, unlike those of a

14. *Ibid.* p. 219.

15. Georg Lukács, 'Tactics and Ethics', in *Tactics and Ethics: Political Writings 1919–1929*, London: New Left Books, 1972, p. 4.

bourgeois revolution, not alien to its goal. In the juxtaposition of a political force capable of seizing the 'objective possibility' of terminating economic violence, Lukács counters the idea – common to the likes of Arendt – whereby political violence is perforce *mute*, refractory to political intelligibility (or to the *appearance* of politics, to use Arendt's terms). And yet the marks of Lukács's 'ethical rigorism' show through, and the idea of an *excess* of the ends over the means, of ethics over politics, in a sense, persists. The 'right' political conjuncture is but a prerequisite – though in a different sense than the term prerequisite is used in the 1918 essay – and the criterion for a *correct* political practice is 'whether the manner of the action in a given case serves to realize its goal [breaking the 'blind power' of economic forces and replacing it with something that 'corresponds to human dignity'] which is the essence of the socialist movement'.¹⁶ In a startling reversal, where the earlier text identifies the instrumentalization of evil (or violence) as the limit of Bolshevism, 'Tactics and Ethics' sees any *realpolitik*, any compromise or collusion, as the ultimate danger. Making a show of the kind of leftism that earned him Lenin's later rebuke, Lukács sees 'legal' means as corrupting revolutionary ends; 'every gesture of solidarity' with the reigning order, he says, is fraught with danger.

The question inevitably arises as to whether the removal of the minimal transitivity provided by the tendency, if not teleology, of historical development would turn Lukács's brand of communism into a *merely* ethical position, or return it to its earlier tragic configuration. As it stands, 'Tactics and Ethics' generates a kind of tragic Bolshevism. It recognizes the hiatus between individual ethics and collective tactics, but tries to think of how revolutionary politics might be defined as one in which adherence to the correct tactics would itself be ethical. The mediation

16. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

between these two dimensions constitutes the strained dialectic of Lukács's position, even hazarding a categorical imperative that would demand acting as if global political change depended on one's actions. At the same time, 'Everyone who at the present time opts for communism is therefore obliged to bear the same *individual* responsibility for each and every human being who dies for him in the struggle, as if he himself had killed them all.' And the only ethical standard for the tragic Bolshevik is *sacrifice*, the taking on of the guilt for a violence that can never be simply sanctioned or justified. In other words, there are correct and incorrect ways of being guilty. It is no surprise, then, when we find out in Löwy's superb study of Lukács that the Hungarian leadership of the 1919 revolution, Lukács among them, was wont to spend politburo meetings discussing *The Brothers Karamazov* and Kierkegaard. But the crucial point, a point that Lukács only tentatively sketches, and that will be the object of his magnum opus, *History and Class Consciousness*, is that these dilemmas cannot be resolved without a political epistemology, without a treatment of the *knowledge* (knowledge of the tendency, of objective possibilities) without which the undertaking of revolution would be just Beelzebub chasing out Satan.

This long Lukácsian detour has hopefully complicated his reduction, on the basis of the concluding sections of *Politics as a Vocation*, to someone who had resolved the 'ethical paradoxes' discussed by Weber without fully pondering the 'diabolic forces lurking' in all political violence – but especially in those revolutions which he frequently dismisses as 'carnivals' or 'violent collapses' (animated in part by his contempt for the 'windbags' of the Liebknecht Group) and whose theory he would leave as a promissory note in *Economy and Society*. Moreover, it lets us see how the materiality of historical time – the question of *tendency* – presented Lukács with an avenue for breaking the view of tragedy as a kind of deadlock of action, stuck between

more purity and a fallen world. But let us now turn back to the question of the figures of tragedy in Weber, and the way they come to be manifest in his sociological and spiritual portrait of the politician.

Schematically, we can see five figures of tragedy at work in *Politics as a Vocation*. The first, the most familiar, is the one of capitalism as irrevocable destiny, evidenced in the famous passage on the fossil-fuelled ‘iron cage’ of the *Protestant Ethic*, but here forcefully articulated in terms of the constraining dialectic of bureaucratization and charisma, but also of the determining force of the instruments of money and violent coercion in the constitution of the political domain. In his 1918 essay on *Parliament and Government in Germany under a New Political Order*, he had already formulated this tragic contradiction of liberalism and modern capitalism: ‘How is it at all possible to salvage any remnants of “individual” freedom of movement in any sense, given this all-powerful trend towards bureaucratization?’¹⁷ The specificity of capitalist fate is shadowed in Weber by a second figure of the tragic, that of the irredeemable irrationality of the world. As he remarks,

The age-old problem of theodicy consists of the very question of how it is that a power which is said to be at once omnipotent and kind could have created such an irrational world of undeserved suffering, unpunished injustice, and hopeless stupidity. Either this power is not omnipotent or not kind, or, entirely different principles of compensation and reward govern our life – principles we may interpret metaphysically, or even principles that forever escape our comprehension.

(It is not difficult to hear the echoes of this passage in the concluding remark about the ‘polar night’ of 1919.)

17. Max Weber, *Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 159. See also Nicola De Feo, *Weber e Lukács*, Bari: De Donato, 1971, p. 93.

Consequent on this acosmic pessimism, this absence of a naturally given order, the tragic is also insistently in Weber a matter of the uncircumventable conflict between different orders of value (the classical terrain of German philosophy's reflection on the tragic ever since Hegel's allusion to the *Antigone* in the *Phenomenology*). In *Politics as a Vocation* this is famously formulated in terms of *polytheism* – of a kind of reversion to a pre-Christian or pagan battlefield in the absence of any horizon of harmony of synthesis. It means that we 'are placed into various life-spheres, each of which is governed by different laws'. This polytheism is introjected into the subject, into the politician himself, in terms of the dwelling within him of different ethical principles. This is the fourth figure of the tragic, that of the inner split, which is also the challenge of an articulation in the politician as tragic hero for whom 'an ethic of ultimate ends and an ethic of responsibility are not absolute contrasts but rather supplements, which only in unison constitute a genuine man – a man who can have the "calling for politics"'. In Massimo Cacciari's words, 'Weberian phenomenology remains tragic: no superior point of view, no principle can judge of the conflict between values, to which the Politician belongs.'¹⁸ Therefore, to cite Cacciari again, the 'hero is not the one who resolves himself to the extreme, but the one who fully exposes himself to the tension of opposites and bears it'.¹⁹ The fifth and final figure is that of a heterogenesis of ends, which, in the condition of violence which is in the first and final instance that of political life and action as such, is the meaning of the 'diabolical' for the Weber of *Politics as a Vocation*. It is this inability to 'sup with the devil' which he condemns in the conviction politicians of revolutionary socialism. As he remarks,

¹⁸. Cacciari, 'Introduzione', p. li.

¹⁹. *Ibid.*, p. xlv.

the early Christians knew full well the world is governed by demons and that he who lets himself in for politics, that is, for power and force as means, contracts with diabolical powers and for his action it is not true that good can follow only from good and evil only from evil, but that often the opposite is true. Anyone who fails to see this is, indeed, a political infant.... He who seeks the salvation of the soul, of his own and of others, should not seek it along the avenue of politics, for the quite different tasks of politics can only be solved by violence. The genius or demon of politics lives in an inner tension with the god of love, as well as with the Christian God as expressed by the church. This tension can at any time lead to an irreconcilable conflict.²⁰

This fivefold image of politics in a tragic key could be usefully linked to Hegel's pithy definition of tragedy in terms of 'consciousness of oneself as an enemy'. We could also connect it to the wonderful commentary that Tronti gives of the young Hegel's understanding of fate (*Schicksal*), a kind of meta-commentary of Cesare Luporini's reading of Hegel. Here politics is rediscovered as a 'freedom from history, which is nonetheless conditioned, determined, necessitated by history but which does not submit and surrender itself to this determination and conditioning' – for when, as with contemporary *Homo democraticus*, juridical, institutional, economic and technological limits are simply accepted, then all conflicts and contradictions lose their inner dynamism. When there is no alternative, in other words, there is no tragedy – this can only emerge in 'a vital determinateness, in a contrast that binds you, in a confrontation that obligates you', to cite Tronti's *Politics and Destiny*.²¹

Having sketched an approach to *Politics as a Vocation* in a tragic key, we will explore how the particular inflection given by the 'autonomy of the political' thesis to the modern disjunction and antagonistic articulation of politics and economy may also be understood in its own 'sober' tragic vein – placing political

20. *Politics as a Vocation*, p. 123

21. Tronti, *Il demone della politica*, p. 571.

action, especially of a subversive or revolutionary character, under the irrevocable sign of conflict, partiality and unintended consequences, and perhaps even of a kind of pessimistic political anthropology. It will be argued, however, that rather than merely reiterating a tragic conception of politics' specificity – of the kind that may be seen to range from Machiavelli and Hobbes all the way to Weber and a certain Lenin – Tronti's 'autonomy of the political' thesis supplements a largely static conception of the tragic predicament of the political with a dynamic one, in which conflict, partiality and the unintended consequences of action – as well as the praise for passion and perspective – are to be understood as intimately bound to political temporality, namely to the *lag* of politics (its *décalage* to bring an important Althusserian term to bear), which Tronti understands through the innovative notion of a *political cycle of capital*. In order to put this in some context we need first to remind ourselves of the specific place of the Weber–Lenin nexus in Tronti's articulation of the autonomy of the political, and then dispel some of the reductive images of that autonomy that circulate in the critical literature on *operaismo*. Consider the 1971 postscript to *Workers and Capital*:

The true theory, the high science, was not within the field of socialism, but outside and against it. And this entirely theoretical science, this scientific theory, had as content, as object, as problem, the fact of politics. And the new theory of a new politics arises in common in great bourgeois thought and in subversive workers' praxis. Lenin was closer to Max Weber's *Politik als Beruf* than to the German workers' struggles, on which mounted – colossus with feet of clay – classical social democracy. ... Certainly, Lenin did not know Weber's Freiburg inaugural lecture of 1895. Yet, he acts as if he knew and interpreted in praxis those words: 'As far as the dream of peace and human happiness is concerned, the words written over the portal into the unknown future of human history are: abandon all hope.' This is the greatness of Lenin. He was able to come to terms with great bourgeois thought, even when he did not have any direct

contact with it, because he could obtain it directly from the things, that is, he recognized it in its objective functioning.²²

We should also note the importance (later emphasized by authors like Moshe Lewin and C.L.R. James) of the late Lenin and the New Economic Policy for this reflection, and of what Althusser in one of his posthumously published texts intriguingly calls the formal subsumption of capitalism by communism. What is at stake is new ‘Marxist practice of the state’. Rather than a tragedy of political subjectivity (*il politico* understood as the politician) or a tragedy of political objectivity (*il politico* understood as the institutions of politics) we have here a far richer conception of political tragedy as a matter of *transitions*, into and out of capital – a conception which may be fruitfully contrasted with other conceptions of political tragedy as a question of transition and time, above all the one to be found in the writings of C.L.R. James. For the C.L.R. James of *The Black Jacobins*, but also of the numerous writings on Shakespeare and Melville (not to mention the allusions to Aeschylus), tragedy is the mutable form of a determinate historical content. It is not simply a matter of the complexity, unknowability or finitude of human action sans phrase, but of the way in which emancipatory collective action is unsettled and displaced, distorted and undermined by the collision between different imperatives and the rifts between non-synchronous temporalities. The actuality at stake here is that of an organic crisis, which both serves as the generative context for new ideas of politics and confronts these ideas with apparent incommensurabilities that only decisions without guarantees, actions without a norm, can face up to. Whence, interestingly, an argument on the part of James for the qualified defence – in an unapologetic theorist of politics qua self-emancipation of masses and workers – of the role of

22. Mario Tronti, *Workers and Capital*, trans. David Broder, London: Verso, 2019, pp. 290, 293.

great individuals in history. Social conflicts become tragic when 'society ha[s] slipped, it ha[s] no foundations any longer, and in that period, in the struggle for a new way, the individuals of energy, assumed a monstrous magnitude'. Tragic political individuals emerge in the throes of *transitions* (we could add, with the Tronti of the autonomy of the political, *two* transitions: into and out of capitalism) – the critical component in any modern conception of the tragic as a political form. As he remarks in his 1953 'Notes on *Hamlet*': 'It was Shakespeare's good fortune to live in an age when the whole economic and social structure was in the throes of revolutionary change on a colossal scale.'²³

If the vocation of the politician and the autonomy of the political can both be thought in terms of a condition of temporal unevenness, understood as the very matter of transition, then we may also wish to pose the critical question, to both Weber and Tronti, as to whether the work of the politician (or the horizon of the political) is always a matter of synchronization. Much of the force of the original workerist proposal lay, to paraphrase Bloch's *Heritage of Our Time*, in excluding from the purview of revolutionary thought what the German philosopher called 'non-synchronous people', to focus solely on the 'synchronous classes' which fought in and for the time of capital. The temporal dimension of the autonomy of the political thesis, with its critique of the Marxist presupposition of a correlation between the time of politics and the time of the economy, already departed from that workerist paradigm by stressing the potential syncopation of the political and the economic, the delays and anticipations that could not be registered by the traditional schemata of historical materialism. But it retained the notion of the political, namely of the politically organized working class, as an instance of synchronization, understood in particular

23. C.L.R. James, *The C.L.R. James Reader*, ed. Anna Grimshaw, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, p. 246.

as an antagonistic modernization of a state that capital could, strategically or inadvertently, leave lagging. To return, in a tragic key, to the autonomy of the political (and the political vocation, especially the communist vocation) today means revisiting the temporal questions which Tronti's interventions from the 1970s formulated with such trenchant urgency.

7

Warring gods: Tronti's political-theological turn

ALEX MARTIN

Mario Tronti's political-theological turn responds to the de-politicization of liberal order occasioned by the historic defeat of the twentieth-century workers' movement. In the face of the subsequent disappearance of the political from public view, Tronti affirms the paradoxical immanence of transcendence to the political. His politicization of transcendence enables Tronti to parochialize the enemy's victory, to sustain speculative commitment to life in excess of reified domination. Thinking in terms of transcendence draws out the peculiarity of three interrelated features of the political. First, following from its sovereign autonomy, the political exceeds society's otherwise near-total subordination to capital. Second, as a result of the ability of power to kairologically interrupt existing relations of force between classes, the futurity of the political exceeds the finite determinations of the historical present. Third, the extrarationality of the political decision, of the response *Homo politicus* must give to Max Weber's primordial political question, 'Which of the warring gods shall we serve?',¹ means the political exceeds the scientific experience of determinate social reality.

1. Max Weber, *Science as a Vocation*, in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, Abingdon: Routledge, 2009, p. 153.

Tronti's three phases of theory – *operaismo*, the autonomy of the political and political theology – all apply 'strong thought' to different terrains of struggle. For Tronti, the object of strong thought is to 'denounce the state of things, describe the real situation, individuate the enemy to combat, and prepare the means and the forms for defeating them'.² Tronti's enemy is not just the bourgeoisie, but also weak thought.³ Blind to the irrevocability of class antagonism, enticed by illusions of conciliatory synthesis, weak thought inadvertently expresses the cultural hegemony of the enemy. To succeed, strong thought must engage in critical self-reflection as well as in polemical self-affirmation. *Operaismo's* affirmation of the primacy of labour power contests the depiction by political economy of the worker as immanent to productive relations. The doctrine of the autonomy of the political, meanwhile, contests the depiction of politics as immanent to capital, a mere epiphenomenon. Weak thought thinks politics in terms of immanence – to economics, to history, to positive science. On the political-theological terrain, weak thought takes the form of complicity with bourgeois eschatology, with humanism's bastardization of its Judaeo-Christian inheritance. This depicts the eschaton, the final and perfective stage of history – paradoxically a secular incarnation of the Kingdom of God – as immanent to modernity. Transcendence is strong thought's rejoinder.

Extrapolitical *potestas*, power stripped of politics, derives its legitimacy from anti-political common sense. Tronti locates the masking of power via political eclipse in the tragedy of transition between the open class war of the mid-twentieth century and the imperial peace that grounds contemporary social relations.

2. Mario Tronti, 'Politica e spiritualità', in *Dello spirito libero: frammenti di vita e di pensiero*, Milan: Il Saggiatore, p. 225.

3. Tronti is here contrasting 'strong thought' with the post-metaphysical concept of 'weak thought' associated with Gianni Vattimo; see Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, eds, *Weak Thought*, trans. Peter Carravetta, New York: SUNY Press, 2012.

As Weber observes, reflecting on the Allied Powers' consolidation of victory following the First World War, losing parties are encouraged to confess their guilt, while victors are allowed to claim 'I won because I was in the right.'⁴ Peace treaties obscure the contingency that characterizes any collision in a field of force. Weber's analysis of the politics of the peace treaty is radicalized by Walter Benjamin. In signing up to the victor's terms, the losing party acquiesces to new frontiers.⁵ Having been imposed through force, these frontiers are officially sanctioned as new law, and celebrated at a peace ceremony. A demonically ambiguous form of equality with the victor is conferred upon the loser. The losing party having been pacified, frontiers are no longer experienced as a violent imposition. Instead they constitute a new form of post-conflict reason, a new common sense, whereby peace is no longer susceptible to being discredited. The ability to denounce the state of things, to discredit the peace, rests on the transcendence, in thought, of imperial frontiers.

An article of the enemy's lawmaking violence (*Gewalt*), it is little wonder that contemporary democratic reason disavows class antagonism. Foreshadowing the terminal defeat of the workers' movement seventy years later, the 1919 German Revolution, lived through by Weber and Benjamin, was likewise defeated by an anti-worker alliance between weak progressive thought and reactionary conservatism. Weimar democracy was to prove unsuccessful as a peace treaty, however. The losing party, insufficiently pacified, would not accede to the frontiers imposed upon it. The workers had been denied power, but the political had not been successfully eclipsed. The post-conflict reason that emerged from the defeat of the workers' movement has proven

4. Max Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, Abingdon: Routledge, 2009, p. 118.

5. Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', in *Selected Writings*, Volume 1: 1913–1926, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 259.

more durable, by contrast. The purposive purposelessness of democratic participation, anti-politically aestheticized – reduced to a Hobson's choice between progressive and reactionary blocs of a unitary bourgeoisie, to an 'immanence of ends'⁶ – ceremonializes the imperial peace, conserving existing relations of force between classes. The political emptiness of choice between immanent ends is testament, *ex negativo*, to the transcendence of decision that is authentically political.

Seeking to fortify its imperium in the face of claims made on universal history by more advanced *cives futuri*, the bourgeoisie maintains that the eschaton pursued by modernity has finally already been realized. The arrival of the future renders political decision obsolete. The 'end of history' thesis is really an end-of-politics thesis, an attempt to endow extra-political *potestas* with transcendent *auctoritas*. Politics having been reduced to history, futurity devolves into development, a quasi-infinite intensification of which is consistent with the perpetuation of existing relations of force between classes. Weak thought is given to imagine the future as continuous with the present, chronologically extended rather than kairologically interrupted. Tronti understands the anthropological consequences of immanentization in terms of mutation into Nietzsche's Last Man, unable any longer even to despise himself. The proletariat, that 'last great historical form of social aristocracy', has been plebianized. 'Put frankly, I am more worried about the decadence of the human-plant than I am about the environment',⁷ Tronti discloses. With the political in eclipse, we cannot transcend the eternal return of the present, even at the expense of our own life-support systems.

6. Mario Tronti, 'La sinistra e l'oltre', in *Per la critica del presente*, Rome: Ediesse, 2013, p. 141.

7. Mario Tronti and Massimo Cacciari, *Teologia e politica al crocevia della storia*, ed. Moris Gaspari, Milan: Edizioni Albo/Versorio, 2017, p. 30.

Divergent accord

By emancipating the whole of humanity, by becoming absolutely modern, the workers' revolution was to put the final touches to the *regnum hominis* embarked upon during the Renaissance, and carried forward by interim generations of moderns. Yet the counter-revolution turned out to be Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor. Modernity's Second Coming – the workers' revolution – was re-arrested and sentenced to death. In the event, it is not the grand reason of the Renaissance that has been universalized, but rather that 'little instrumental reason commanded by technology', and with this 'the domination of the bourgeois mentality over human condition'.⁸ The Promethean image of the proletariat has been 'shattered by Munch's scream', globalized development laying the groundwork not for the realization of the incarnate Kingdom of God, but for the reign of the Antichrist.⁹ Marx's revolutionization of the humanist philosophy of history may have 'postponed in advance the nihilism of the twentieth century'. But what weak thought's faith in bourgeois eschatology for a time concealed is now unambiguous: 'this project has failed. And with it also the idea of development as progress.'¹⁰ Historicism, always a quietist position, is now an untenable one. Strong thought must accommodate for the collapse of all hope in historical progress.

Such a hardening of the soul is, Weber insists, indispensable to the tragic vocation of politics as such. To demand that victory be historically assured is to be 'blind to the tragedy in which all action is ensnared, political action above all'.¹¹ Tronti concurs: praxis 'exposes itself to history's retorts, which are

8. Tronti, 'Politica e spiritualità', p. 224.

9. Mario Tronti, *Noi operaisti*, in *L'operaismo degli anni sessanta: da 'Quaderni rossi' a 'Classe operaia'*, Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2008, p. 26.

10. Mario Tronti, 'Karl und Carl', in *Il demone della politica*, ed. Matteo Cavalleri, Michele Filippini and Jamila M.H. Masciat, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2017, p. 553.

11. Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, p. 78.

never predictable, since human history is not moved by the idea of reason'.¹² It is more accurate to think of the field of force into which *Homo politicus* is thrown, with Goethe, as being neither divine, nor human, nor diabolic, but as aleatoric and lacking in continuity – which is to say, as demonic.¹³ In retrospect, it is apparent that there were never good grounds for hope to begin with, at least not in the sense of faith in the benevolent panlogicism of history. The critique of bourgeois eschatology via the experience of defeat leaves Tronti in a position comparable to that arrived at by Benjamin following his allegorization of allegory. Strong thought's preparation of the means and forms for defeating the enemy is not necessarily any more or less punctual now than it ever has been. The notion that the Grand Inquisitor's sentence means the game is up for good is exposed as being no less an article of weak thought than was last century's 'eschatological wait for the green light'.¹⁴

Passionate political conviction transcends immediately given social reality. It is predicated on determination to subversively alter rather than to accommodate itself to existing relations of force between classes. Tronti's conviction pertains not to the salvific actualization of absolute freedom, but to *operismo's* more sparing speculative proposition, namely that workers are capable of coordinating their own production. Such an answer to Weber's primordial question is undiminished by the experience of defeat. In the context of the confluence of irreducible polytheism and sedate secularism characteristic of disenchanting modernity, rather than sign up to the victor's terms, recanting and repenting, strong thought continues to fulfil the political obligation to decide redoubling extrarational commitment to a transcendent cause. As Weber details, it was a covenant with Yahweh, the

12. Mario Tronti, 'Weber and Workers', p. 21 above.

13. Walter Benjamin, 'Goethe's Elective Affinities', in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, p. 316.

14. Tronti and Cacciari, *Teologia e politica al crocevia della storia*, p. 32.

war god, that sustained the confederacy after the destruction of the states of Israel and Judah. Now, as then, defeat cannot be taken to mean that the covenant has been annulled. Instead, like Babylonian exile, ‘divinely ordained chastisement designed to bring chosen people back to former loyalty’,¹⁵ the defeat of the workers’ movement must be apprehended affirmatively, received as an occasion to renew commitment to an exclusive covenant with a partisan divine. This enables us to still say ‘in the face of all this ... “In spite of all”’.¹⁶

Tronti traces weak thought’s adoption of bourgeois eschatology to the rejection of progressivism, and therefore of immanence, by reactionary conservatism. The notion that intra-bourgeois enmity makes progressivism a friend of the workers was mistaken. The counter-revolution is a joint effort; whereas the reactionary bloc of the bourgeoisie relies on the progressive bloc for political aesthetics, the latter is reliant on the former’s ability to retain the political in view during its official eclipse. Tronti responds to the enduring visibility of the political to reactionary thought tactically, bringing strong thought of the left into ‘divergent accord’ with that of the right.¹⁷ Tronti admires, in particular, Hobbes’s cavalier weaponization of the doctrine of natural law in the face of attempts by recalcitrant property-owners to undermine the legitimacy of positive right.¹⁸ On Tronti’s reading, Hobbes seized the initiative by conceptualizing nature such that its first law be the one that prescribes the construction of the state. Tronti takes a comparable liberty with Hobbes’s doctrine of absolute sovereignty, drawing out its proto-communistic implications in service of his theorization of sovereign transcendence.

15. Thomas Fahey, ‘Max Weber’s Ancient Judaism’, *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 88, no. 1 (July 1982), p. 72.

16. Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, p. 128.

17. Tronti, ‘Karl und Carl’, p. 549.

18. See Mario Tronti, ‘Hobbes e Cromwell’, in *Il demone della politica*, pp. 333–68.

It is in this vein that Tronti targets Carl Schmitt's thought for counter-hegemonic appropriation. Schmitt's political theology has the advantage, for Tronti, of testifying to the ineradicability of antagonism from the political, as well as to the irredeemability of bourgeois modernity. Lenin may be Schmitt's nemesis, but the latter also recognizes weak thought, neglectful of the perennial vulnerability of the *nomos* to subversion – and of its dependence on stabilization from above – as an enemy. Marx's theory of revolutionary class struggle, it transpires, must be rejoined by an inversion of Schmitt's apocalypticism. 'Only together', Tronti claims, 'can Karl and Carl work out the tragic hermeneutic of the modern'.¹⁹ Divergent accord with Schmitt assists Tronti in his efforts to affirm transcendence, not in service of the catechontic defence of the *nomos* against a looming Antichrist, but via Schmitt's conceptualization of the state of exception, political scenario par excellence.

For Tronti, the state of exception is where theory and praxis finally coalesce. In the state of normality, politics is alienated from its object; imperial frontiers ensure that relations of force between classes remain stable, whatever the theorist might demand. But extrapolitical *potestas* is capable of negating its own outside only in so far as imperial frontiers hold. Where they are no longer capable of defining a continuous experience of reality, necessity gives way, and contingency reveals itself. The present loses its semblance of immutability, power is unmasked. From Tronti's perspective, the mid-twentieth century was a permanent state of exception with relations of force under constant renegotiation. 'In the great factories, the conflict was almost equal. We won and we lost, day by day, in a permanent trench war.'²⁰ With Schmitt as his point of departure, Tronti explores the implications of the state of exception for the interrelation

19. Tronti, 'Karl und Carl', pp. 555–6.

20. Tronti, *Noi operaisti*, p. 36.

between theory and praxis via a reading of the Bhagavadgita.²¹ In the state of normality, Arjuna is bound to abide by an ethic of responsibility, responding to Krishna's divine command with a sense of worldly proportion. When emergency strikes, however, Arjuna must throw aside his pragmatism and fight. As Schmitt recognizes, emergency induces political decision, debunking its putative obsolescence. Tronti understands this imperative in terms of 'the objective necessity of a subjective sovereignty'. Affirmation of transcendence entails valorization of the state of exception: Tronti describes as evil 'those long, dismal periods where nothing happens', good manifesting itself 'when you are forced to take a stand'.²²

Schmitt shares with Tronti – and Hobbes – a grave concern with the implications of society being denied politics. The two strong thinkers of the right lack Tronti's Marxist insight into anti-politics as an expression of the subordination of power to wealth, however. Hobbes naturalizes the dangers of anti-politics, depicting politics as the transcendence of nature rather than of capital. If Tronti's convergent *disaccord* with Marx derives from the latter's inattention to sovereign transcendence, then the divergence of Tronti's accord with Schmitt must be related to his ambivalence towards futurity. Schmitt's counter-revolutionary strategy for the negation of Leninism inadvertently guarantees the reoccurrence of the present. Schmitt is as deficient in Marx as Marx is in Schmitt. Weber's understanding of anti-politics as a form of life where 'the curse of the creature's worthlessness overshadows even the externally strongest political subbesses'²³ – a spectre of regression haunting disenchanting modernity – stands at the intersection between strong right and strong left on the phenomenon of anti-politics. For Weber, rather than the

21. See Mario Tronti, 'The God and the Warrior', p. 31 above.

22. Tronti, *Noi operaisti*, p. 29.

23. Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, p. 117.

subordination of power to wealth, it is the failure to adequately differentiate politics from science that is responsible for the contemporary brutalization of politics. Instrumental rationality is anti-political.

Taubes's eschatology, Benjaminian disorder

Tronti's concept of *anomos*, that which the katechon withholds, diverges radically from Schmitt's. The former is derived not from Hobbesian anarchy, but from the Pauline Letters. In the words of Massimo Cacciari, Tronti's fellow traveller and occasional antagonist,

Anomie means the Antichrist, who is essentially anomos because he rejects biblical law and not because he is in any way anarchic. L'apoleia is in turn connected to the refusal of the idea that Christ is the redeemer. It is in this sense that the Antichrist is destructive, because he refuses the idea of redemption, refuses the gospel, that is the 'good news' of salvation.²⁴

Tronti agrees with Schmitt that the *nomos* is genuinely imperiled, yet *nomos* in the former's sense, along with St Paul and Cacciari, means enduring receptivity to prophecy, openness to futurity. As Cacciari expounds elsewhere, 'anomie is a new order; it is a new *nomos*.'²⁵ Whereas Cacciari considers anomic *nomos* a diabolic form of political theology – 'no one is more theological than the Antichrist'²⁶ – Tronti agrees with Benjamin's characterization of it as a cultic religious practice, a bogus fundamentalism. The absolute of truth has become 'the absolute of power'.²⁷ For Tronti, because of its constitutive transcendence, the political as such is inimical to such total immanentization;

24. See Massimo Cacciari and Roberto Esposito, 'Dialogo sulla teleologia politica', *Micromega* 2, February 2014.

25. Massimo Cacciari, *The Withholding Power: An Essay on Political Theology*, London: Bloomsbury, 2018, pp. 69–71.

26. Cacciari and Esposito, 'Dialogo sulla teleologia politica'.

27. Tronti, 'Politica e spiritualità', p. 222.

political theology is negative theology. Tronti denounces the anomic nomos, the profane apotheosis of the present, with Benjamin, as false, secular theocracy.²⁸ It is a violation of the *Bilderverbot*, the Old Testament ban on making images of God. Affirming transcendence means separating extrapolitical *potestas* from the *auctoritas* conferred upon it by bourgeois eschatology.

For all this, eschatology need not be weak. Neither on account of the anomic consequences of its bourgeois iteration, as for Cacciari, nor owing to the a priori illegitimacy of its secular historicization, as for Karl Löwith, does Tronti consider eschatology unsalvageable. Where it genuinely admits of transcendence, an eschatological understanding of history can be polemically affirmed. Tronti accords with Jacob Taubes in the same breath as he does, divergently, with Schmitt. Crucially, Taubes's eschatology has Gnostic rather than Christian roots. It therefore resists imprisonment within the iron cage of Enlightenment reason, within which, for Tronti, 'there is nothing to risk since there is nothing obscure, there's even too much light.'²⁹ Taubes's apocalyptic eschatology, by contrast, expresses the equation 'cosmos = skotos'. Taubes's depiction of the profane in terms of a fallen cosmos, the creation of a malevolent divinity, provides the tenor for the terms on which strong thought must relate to anti-politics, to a world whose frontiers have been determined by the enemy's peace.³⁰

Attention to Taubes's influence helps to make sense of Tronti's claim that 'the political and theology enter each at the same time into their own crisis.'³¹ The eclipse of God during the Shoah, read by Tronti as an exposure of cosmic limits to divine omnipotence, is exemplary for his theorization of political eclipse. Taubes's

28. See Mario Tronti, 'Walter Benjamin. Frammento teologico-politico', in *Il demone della politica*, pp. 637–47.

29. Mario Tronti, 'Politica e profezia', in *Dello spirito libero*, p. 216.

30. Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, trans. David Ratmoko, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2009, p. 28.

31. Tronti, 'Walter Benjamin. Frammento teologico-politico', p. 640.

gnostic dualism, according to which ‘God and the world ... are estranged and divided, and therefore hold each other in mutual tension’, accounts theologically for the contradistinction of transcendence and immanence.³² Its constitutive transcendence makes it possible for the political to absent itself entirely. For Taubes, the eschaton definitively transcends bourgeois modernity; it absolutely cannot be realized this side of an Apocalypse destroying immanent order for good.

To fortify Taubes’s eschatology against the quietistic implications of investing faith in the inexorability of imminent apocalypse, Tronti turns to Benjamin, for whom historical time as such is best understood in terms of the Fall, in contradistinction to transcendent messianic time. Benjamin diagnoses Ernst Bloch’s eschatology as weak, his insistence that ‘nothing historical can relate itself on its own account to anything Messianic’, anticipating Tronti’s critique of weak eschatology, as the 1919 defeat of the German Revolution did the fall of the Berlin Wall.³³ Dashing the hopes of reformists, such events expose the weakness of bourgeois eschatology acutely. As a corrective, Tronti draws on Benjamin’s anarcho-theological valorization of disorder. The notion that messianic disorder, as a concept, not only fails to violate the *Bilderverbot* but is in fact a requirement of it, sets the stage for the violent intrusion of the estranged divine into the profane world. Its constitutive transcendence makes it possible for the political to go into eclipse; but when extrapolitical *potestas* is plunged into a state of exception, it cannot withstand the encroachment of the political into its immanent domain. Opposing oppression, generating happiness, is as close as we can get to approximating messianic time within the historical time of fallen modernity.

32. Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, p. 39.

33. Walter Benjamin, ‘Theological-Political Fragment’, in *Selected Writings*, Volume 3: 1935–1938, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Boston MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 305.

No assault on the state of normality has the right to speak in God's name; there can be no guaranteeing that any particular incidence of profane disorder really does qualify as weakly messianic. Yet the 'conflictual relation between profane order and messianic disorder' that emerges from his engagement with Benjamin provides Tronti with an opportunity to rethink the relationship between the philosophy of history and the phenomenology of spirit: political futurity is experienced immanently as disorder.³⁴ Tronti uses Benjamin's thought to translate Taubes's Apocalypse into disorder as a historical task. Without this, apocalypticism lapses into myth. Just as capitalistic development must be explained in terms of labour power as opposed to a blind force of nature – just as anti-politics must be related to the subordination of the political to capital – so must the destruction of immanent order rely on the praxis of disorder. Cacciari argues that, with the age of Prometheus behind us, we are consigned to Epimethean afterthought. For Tronti, we should opt neither for Prometheus nor for Epimetheus; 'war now is guerilla war, even the war of thought, the only one worth fighting'.³⁵

Tronti's remedy for the present impasse is clear. If we want to regain an outside to bourgeois modernity, to the imperial frontiers of post-conflict reason, and to the extrapolitical *potestas* that sustains this, the political must be revindicated. 'De-privatise the political, re-publicise: this is the task.' The peace must be discredited. This can only be achieved by affirming political transcendence, resisting the reduction of politics to economics, history or science. The futurity lost to Marxism as a result of the critique of bourgeois eschatology stands to be regained through the counter-hegemonic appropriation of Hobbesian–Schmittian sovereignty, mobilized against the state of normality in a spirit of Taubesian apocalypticism and

34. Tronti, 'Walter Benjamin. Frammento teologico-politico', p. 643.

35. Tronti, *Dello spirito libero*, p. 226.

Benjaminian anarchism. Without this futurity we are consigned to modernity's fallen cosmos, to reified domination. We are not entitled to expect the divine, but we do not have to put up with the diabolic. The revindication of the political hinges on a renewal of Weber's exclusive covenant with a partisan divine, on the fulfilment of our political obligation to decide; on the refusal to turn the other cheek. Without enduring conviction, the losing party is simply liquidated by defeat – and politics with this – emerging from the enemy's peace ceremony unable any longer to recognize itself. The workers' movement may have been defeated, but bearing witness to its struggle, recognizing it as a katechon that withheld both the eclipse of the political and the end of history, is vital. For the Antichrist falsifies the past and 'illusion is the tranquilizing idea that this struggle never was or never should have been'.³⁶

36. Tronti, 'Karl und Carl', p. 558.

8

Tronti, Weber and the demonology of the political

HOWARD CAYGILL

The collection of Mario Tronti's political writings edited by Cavalleri, Filippini and Mascot and published by Il Mulino in 2017 has the title *Il demone della politica (The Demon of the Political)* – a title clearly inspired by the closing pages of *Politics as a Vocation*, where Weber refers to the 'genius or demon of politics'. Mario Tronti returned to Weber's demon of politics in his lecture 'Weber and Workers', but I would like to reflect a little on the significance for him of the changes in Weber's demonology of the political between his two vocation lectures of 1917 and 1919. The references to demons in both *Science as a Vocation* and *Politics as a Vocation* are part of what Tronti describes in his *Philosophical Autobiography* as 'the season of the destruction of all the forms around the turn of the twentieth century', in which Weber was a major protagonist.¹ The demons as both cause and symptom of this destruction appear at crucial moments in the thought of not only Weber and his circle but also Maxwell, Nietzsche, Freud, Warburg and Benjamin. The return of 'demons' in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century thinking of crisis is not accidental but points to the working through of a

1. Mario Tronti, 'Autobiografia filosofica', in *Dall'estremo possibile*, ed. Pasquale Serra, Rome: Ediesse, 2011, p. 234.

demonic logic with its own concepts, laws and distinctions. Reflecting on the modern demonology informing Weber's work will allow us to see a major shift between his two vocation lectures from a demonic to a diabolical understanding of the political.

In *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, Stuart Clark makes the case for the existence of an internally coherent and wide-ranging discourse of demonology from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century. For Clark demonology was the first and perhaps most successful of the many 'transdisciplinary' movements that have contributed to the production of knowledge in modernity. Reflecting on the 'death of the demonologists' and their rebirth as a transdisciplinary 'intellectual resource' during the early modern period, Clark admits that 'I rapidly discovered that there was too much demonology embedded in early modern books – books of all kinds and on many subjects – for it to be attributed to one kind of writer.'² He thus pursues the work of demonologists across early modern thought in science, history, religion and politics revealing a sophisticated theoretical and conceptual discourse of demonology underlying the various appeals to the demonic and the diabolical.

For Clark the season of demonology came to a close in the eighteenth century but his approach can help to understand its revival during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This revival is characterized by a number of concepts and distinctions regarding demons that are of particular interest in understanding the 'demon of the political'. One of the most fundamental distinctions is between the demonic and the diabolical, along with what may be described as the demonological modalities of possession, the pact and demonic ambiguity.

2. Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. viii–ix.

The demonic and the diabolical

The distinction between the demonic and the diabolical in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century European thought was usually framed in terms of a Christian revaluation of the pagan daimon into a devil or at best a diabolically tinged demon. This historical account appears, we shall see, in Weber's *Politics as a Vocation*, but was also adopted by his contemporary Aby Warburg and slightly later by Walter Benjamin. Warburg developed a finely nuanced view of the survival of the pagan demons under Christianity that can be contrasted with Benjamin's and Weber's more linear historical accounts of their Christian transformation into devils. Warburg in his 1920 *Heidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten* (*Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Martin Luther*) is attentive to the ambivalence attending the transformation of the demons into astrological and, later, physical forces:

For since the end of antiquity the ancient Gods belonged as cosmic demons to the Christian powers and so incisively conditioned the practical form of life that one cannot deny the existence of a parallel regimen of pagan cosmology and especially astrology that was silently tolerated by the Christian church.³

Warburg's essay sets out to show how the tolerated demonic astrological forces assumed a different form during the Reformation. For him, the radical reformation of the Peasants' Revolt reactivated the satanic power of demonic forces: 'demonic antiquity receives from the passionately pulsating life of the Reformation itself a completely spontaneous, uncannily actual revival'.⁴ Warburg shows how the ambivalence surrounding the demonic sharpened, becoming with Luther a form of diabolical possession, while remaining in Melancthon a largely benign

3. Aby Warburg, *Heidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten*, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. II, ed. G. Bing, Leipzig and Berlin: B.G. Teubner, 1932, p. 491.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 515.

space for reflection and apotropaic demonic defence against possession by fate. Warburg shows that Luther was himself believed by opponents to be diabolically possessed, his demon transformed into a devil. Warburg's patient demonstration of a split within the Reformation on the problem of demonic and diabolical possession offers an interesting parallel to Weber's account of the demonic ambiguity of the Protestant calling. Tronti is one of the very few scholars to consider the parallels between Weber and Warburg in his essays 'Warburg and Us' and 'Memory and Politics' in *Dello spirito libero*, lending particular attention to their shared fascination with the affinities between madness, magic and sober end-directed activity and claiming a demonic source for the thought that 'paganism is modern communism'.⁵

Departing from and citing Warburg's essay, Walter Benjamin in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928) nevertheless opts for an almost exclusively diabolical interpretation of the Olympian and demonic legacies of antiquity. For him 'the gods project into the alien world, they become evil, they become creatures.'⁶ Not only this, there is also for him a concentration of the demonic forces into a single diabolical power: 'the concentration of the numerous pagan powers into *one*, theologically rigorously defined Antichrist meant that this supreme manifestation of darkness was imposed upon matter even more unambiguously than in a number of demons.'⁷ This move towards the diabolical was largely driven by Benjamin's theory of allegory and the theoretical need to identify matter and evil: 'The purely material and this absolute spiritual are the poles of the satanic realm; and the consciousness of their illusory synthesis in which the genuine synthesis, that of life, is imitated.'⁸ By emphasizing the

5. Mario Tronti, 'Memoria e politica', in *Dello spirito libero: frammenti di vita e di pensiero*, Milan: Il Saggiatore, p. 79.

6. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, London: Verso, 1998, p. 225.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 226–7.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 231.

diabolical in this way Benjamin is able to engage a redemptive inversion of the satanic 'with this *one* about turn'.⁹ However, as we shall see, this position is peculiar to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*; elsewhere and more consistently in his work Benjamin focuses on the ambiguities of the demonic rather than the absolute opposition of the diabolical.

Towards the end of *Heidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten* Warburg introduces the theme of diabolic possession. The theme of possession, however, does not play a prominent role in Benjamin's account of the diabolical, although it is central to Freud's 1922 essay 'A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis'. In an analysis that has many shared characteristics with Warburg's contemporary text, Freud reviews the case of a seventeenth-century artist, Christoph Haizmann, and his representations of appearances of the devil. Unfortunately, the demonological distinction between the diabolical and demonic that structures Freud's posthumous analysis of Haizmann is lost in the translations of the title *Eine Teufelsneurose im siebzehnten Jahrhundert* (literally 'A Devil Neurosis in the Seventeenth Century'), whether by Edward Glover in 1925 as 'A Neurosis of Demonaical Possession in the Seventeenth Century' or by James Strachey as 'A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis', in both cases substituting the demonaic for the diabolical. The distinction between the diabolical and the demonic is, however, central to Freud's analysis of Haizmann's pacts with the devil and subsequent possession by him. Indeed, it is Haizmann's inability to distinguish 'between the operation of the Evil Spirit and those of the Divine powers' along with his reduction of the demons to the devil – 'He had only one description for both: they were manifestations of the devil'¹⁰ – that

9. *Ibid.*, p. 232.

10. Sigmund Freud, 'A Seventeenth Century Demonological Neurosis', trans. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIX, London: Vintage Books 2001, p. 105.

signalled the difficulty of his working through his ambivalence towards his father. For Freud, Haizmann's inability to tolerate demonic ambiguity and his conversion of it into a manifestation of the diabolic proved a major source of his psychopathology.

Freud's case study is also interesting for its reflections on the discipline of demonology. In his preface he draws a parallel between demonology and psychoanalysis. Just as contemporary neuroses of childhood 'appear disguised as organic illnesses', so too 'the neuroses of those early times emerge in demonological trappings'.¹¹ He then in a cryptic paragraph points to the affinities between demonology and psychoanalysis:

The demonological analysis of those dark times has won in the end against all the somatic views of the period of 'exact' science. The states of possession correspond to our neuroses, for the explanation of which we once more have recourse to psychical powers. In our eyes, the demons are bad and reprehensible wishes, derivatives of instinctual impulses that have been repudiated and repressed. We merely eliminate the projection of those mental entities into the external world which the middle ages carried out; instead we regard them as having arisen in the patient's inner life, where they have their abode.¹²

It is striking that Freud is prepared to countenance such analogies between demonology and psychoanalysis – effectively between the exorcist and the analyst – but also that this affinity is founded on a shared understanding of the distinction between diabolic possession and demonic inspiration.

Freud's analysis of Haizmann focuses on the two pacts Haizmann made with the devil, pointing to the significance of the concept of the pact that would later be important for Weber. The notion of a pact, however – given an extensive analysis in Stuart Clark's history of demonology – is for Freud, and indeed Weber, narrowed and related exclusively to the diabolical. The

11. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

12. *Ibid.*

pact is a contract for the exchange of the soul for some worldly advantage as with Goethe's *Faust* or more ambiguously with the unfortunate Christoph Haizmann. While the pact can lead to ambiguous outcomes, as was certainly the case with *Faust*, this ambiguity of outcome is quite distinct from the ambiguity of the demonic. The latter does not follow a pact but rather a question. The demon is a gatekeeper, one who possesses knowledge that an inquirer desires, but who responds to questions in a wholly ambiguous way. This ambiguity is lost if the demon is reduced to the diabolical, for the demon as Freud insists can be both a diabolical and a divine power. Nietzsche's celebrated demon of section 341 of *The Gay Science* exemplifies this ambiguity:

What if some day or night a demon were to steal after you in your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'this life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it...' If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you.¹³

The demonic proposition is a form of test of the tolerance of ambiguity: would you 'curse the demon who spoke thus?' or answer 'You are a God and never have I heard anything more divine.' In either case, it is not that there is a pact or a bargain of possession, only the risk that demonic ambiguity 'would change you as you are or perhaps crush you.'¹⁴

Benjamin and Goethe

We have seen that among Weber's contemporaries interest in the demonic led in two directions. The first direction, taken by both Warburg and Freud, but also earlier by Dostoyevsky,

13. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York: Vintage Books, 1974, p. 274.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 275.

emphasized diabolical *possession*, adopting the Christian negative inflection of Socrates' daimon, who apparently possessed him on a number of recorded occasions. This thought emphasized the diabolical over the demonic, even if with Warburg and Freud the reduction of demonic ambiguity to diabolical possession is problematic. The second direction, also anticipated by Socrates, understands the demon as an intermediary, one who spoke, gave advice and who, in particular, asked and answered questions, but usually in ambiguous and potentially destructive terms. This was very much Walter Benjamin's understanding of the demonic. In 'Critique of Violence', published in the Weberian *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft*, Benjamin speaks of 'demonic ambiguity':

When frontiers are decided, the adversary is not simply annihilated; indeed he is accorded rights even when the victor's superiority in power is complete. And these are, in a demonically ambiguous way, 'equal' rights: for both parties to a treaty it is the same line that cannot be crossed.¹⁵

Benjamin cites Anatole France as an example of such demonic ambiguity: 'Poor and rich are equally forbidden to spend the night under the bridges.' The law is the same for everyone, but not everyone is the same before the law.

Benjamin's most extended reflection on the demonic, however, before his Karl Kraus essay of 1931, was his essay 'Goethe's Elective Affinities', which he began writing in 1919. Describing the demonic as 'something dark that in the gravest way has cast a shadow on the existence of humanity', he turns to Goethe, a source he shares with Weber. He, and even more so Weber, did not look to Goethe's *Faust* for insight into the demonic – demonologically speaking, *Faust* is an essay on the diabolical pact – but instead to the final section of his autobiography, Book XX of

15. Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings*, Volume 1: 1913–1926, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge MA and London, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 249.

Poetry and Truth (Dichtung und Wahrheit). Benjamin cites this chapter as an authoritative source for the idea of the demonic. Goethe wrote there of himself as a boy

perceiving something in nature (whether living or lifeless, animate or inanimate) that manifested itself only in contradictions and therefore could not be expressed in any concept, much less in any word. It was not divine, for it seemed irrational; not human, for it had no understanding; not diabolical [*nicht teuflisch*], for it was beneficent; and not angelic, for it often betrayed malice [*Schadenfreude*]. It was like chance [*dem Zufall*], for it lacked continuity, and like providence, for it suggested connection [*Zusammenhang*]. Everything that limits us seemed penetrable by it, and it appeared to do as it pleased with the elements necessary to our existence, to contract time and to expand space. It seemed only to accept the impossible and to scornfully reject the possible. This being [*Wesen*], which appeared to infiltrate all the others, separating and combining them, I called 'daemonic' after the example of the ancients and others who had perceived something similar.¹⁶

The demonic for Goethe and for Benjamin is indifferently mischievous, undoing our plans and forcing us to collide with and to judge our limits in the court of the impossible.

Goethe's and Benjamin's demon is neither divine nor angelic: it does not obey its own laws and is irrational; it can appear to show malice but is neither human nor diabolical because it has no calculating intelligence like a human and could be kindly (even though it could also show malice). This strange and unsettling force was like chance in that its effects were unpredictable, but also like providence since it ultimately directed its actions according to a broader context of meaning. It can play with space and time – contracting and expanding them – and was always on the side of the impossible against the

16. Goethe, cited by Walter Benjamin in 'Goethe's Elective Affinities', in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, p. 316. Translation amended with reference to Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, *Hamburger Ausgabe X*, Munich: Deutsche Taschenbuch Verlag, pp. 175–6. Goethe continues that he sought to avoid this demon wherever possible, preferring to hold it at bay through an image.

possible. Goethe goes on to note that the demonic is the enigma that 'all philosophies and religions have attempted prosaically and poetically to resolve'.¹⁷ And it is at its most terrifying when it loses its ambiguity and assumes a one-sided form. Then it can seem a monstrous force (*ungeheure Kraft*) capable of 'unbelievable violence' (*unglaubliche Gewalt*). It is this simplification of demonic ambiguity that for Goethe tips it towards the diabolical.

Weber: from the demonic to the diabolical

The view of the demonic that Benjamin draws out of Goethe makes a lot of sense when we look at Weber's descriptions of it. Indeed the suspicion gradually emerges when reading through the earlier of Weber's two vocation lectures that *vocation* itself – *Beruf* – has become the home of the demonic in modernity. The *Beruf* hosts all the historical ironies that Goethe described as demonic. Weber reflects on this in the final pages of the earlier vocation lecture *Science as Vocation* when he returns to the theme of the disenchantment of the world first elaborated in the 1905 *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. After proposing that moderns now inhabit many different value spheres, and hence are polytheistic with respect to values, he continues: 'We live as did the ancients when their world was not yet disenchanted of its Gods and demons, only we live in a different sense.'¹⁸ We move between many gods like the ancients – Apollo, Aphrodite, Herea – but unlike them our Gods and demons are disenchanted. Weber continues in a way that anticipates Warburg's view of the metamorphosis of the demonic:

Many old Gods ascend from their graves; they are disenchanted and hence take the form of impersonal forces. They strive to gain power

17. Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, p. 176.

18. Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, in *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, Abingdon: Routledge, 2009, p. 148.

over our lives and again they resume their ancient struggle with each other. What is hard for modern man, and especially for the younger generation, is to measure up to workaday existence.¹⁹

The demons are still with us, possessing and misadvising, but now in the form of impersonal historical forces to whose perplexities we find ourselves subject. And the final sentence of *Science as a Vocation*, while not yet as bleak as the diabolic ‘polar night’ that ends *Politics as a Vocation*, nevertheless makes a startling alignment between the vocation and the demon:

We shall set to work and meet the demands of the day, in human relations as well as in our vocation. This, however, is plain and simple, if each finds and obeys the demon who holds the fibres of *his* very life.²⁰

Here the demon *is* the vocation, but, in a way that would have alarmed Warburg, it is also fate: the demon holds the threads in place of the classical fates and twists them in what can seem to be horribly ironic postures and outcomes.

However malign, the vocation is not diabolic. The only hints of the diabolic in *Science as a Vocation* are to be found in Weber’s understanding of art and a casual reference to understanding ‘the ways of the devil’, later repeated in *Politics as a Vocation*. With respect to the former, aesthetics for Weber (with due reference to the work of his student Georg Lukács) departs from the existence of works of art and asks how they are possible, rescinding any question of ‘whether or not the realm of art is perhaps a realm of diabolical grandeur, a realm of this world, and therefore, in its core, hostile to God and, in its innermost and aristocratic spirit, hostile to the brotherhood of man’.²¹ The diabolical hostility of art to God is far from the ambiguity of the demonic. Indeed Weber in *Science as a Vocation* warns against the

19. *Ibid.*, p. 149.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

diabolical, calling on the vocation of knowledge to 'see the devil's ways to the end in order to realize his power and his limitations'.²² The devil, it seems, for Weber, is easier to understand and to see through than the demonic; the diabolical presents a posture of opposition that is more available to analysis than the ambiguities of the demonic.

In a sense Weber is very clear in his motives for locating politics within the zone of the demonic. It results from his effort to see politics as beyond good and evil, distancing himself politely but firmly from his 'esteemed colleague' F.W. Foerster and his book *Politische Ethik und politische Pädagogik* (1910), which proposed, in Weber's words, 'the simple thesis that only good can flow from good, only evil from evil'.²³ He was equally sceptical, however, of Jacob Burckhardt's arguments, 'which have caused so much astonishment, about the diabolical nature of power', in his study of Constantine and his *Reflections on History*. Politics for Weber, then, is beyond Foerster's good and Burckhardt's evil, but this beyond is located firmly in the realm of the demonic.

The demonic nature of the *Beruf* had been carefully worked through in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber's patient archaeology of the Protestant vocation is entirely alive to its demonic ironies. The ethic of labouring in one's vocation that was meant to ease the anxieties provoked by the predestinarian doctrine of Calvinist Protestantism became a subjective legitimizing force for capitalist accumulation. What was meant to free the Protestant soul from the ties of the world tied it even more remorselessly to that world. Weber, the master of great endings, describes the demonic ambivalence of the Protestant vocation: the intent that 'one serve God more than one serves men, formed one of the most important historical

22. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

23. Max Weber, *Political Writings*, ed. Peter Lassman and Ronald Spiers, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 362.

foundations of modern individualism'. But the demonic irony does not only fall on the pious Protestants, but also on all of us who inherit their demonic legacy: 'the protestant chose to work in his calling, we are forced to do so' – demonic ambiguity – the same *Beruf* that freed the Protestant now leads us into our iron cage.²⁴

Weber departs radically from *Science as a Vocation* when he subordinates the demonic to the diabolical in his 1919 lecture *Politics as a Vocation*. The lecture is striking for its oscillation between the demonic and the diabolical, with a reference to the Christian reception of the pagan demons serving to illustrate the metamorphosis of the demonic into the diabolical. In his discussion of the first of the qualities of the politician towards the end of the lecture – passion, a feeling of responsibility and a sense of proportion – Weber makes a reference to the demonic that is continuous with the perspective of *Science as a Vocation* on the demonic, in the context of the polytheism of values. Here he speaks of 'passion in the sense of matter-of-factness, of passionate devotion to a "cause", to the god or demon who presides over it' (*an den Gott oder Dämon der ihr Gebieter ist*).²⁵ Here the God or demon who presides over the cause – Aphrodite, Apollo, Ares – is not understood as a diabolical force but as source of demonic inspiration whose outcomes may be ambiguous but not satanic. Weber describes this ambiguity as a 'fundamental fact' of history in which 'the eventual result of political action stands often, no, almost inevitably, in a completely inadequate if not completely paradoxical relation to its original meaning'.²⁶ In the meditations on defeat and revolution that follow, the demonic vocation of

24. 'Der Puritaner wollte Berufsmensch sein, wir müssen es sein.' Max Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik und der 'Geist' der Kapitalismus*, ed. Klaus Lichtblau and Johannes Weiss, Wiesbaden: Springer Verlag, 2016.

25. Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*, p. 115; *Politik als Beruf*, in Max Weber *Gesamtausgabe*, I: *Schriften und Reden*, vol. 17, ed. Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Wolfgang Schluchter, Tübingen: J.C.B Mohr, 1992, p. 227.

26. *Politics as a Vocation*, p. 117.

politics just described changes its character into a demonic pact with violence.

Weber achieves this by means of mobilizing the argument for the Christian transformation of demons into devils that was at the same time being subtly questioned by Warburg. Following the discussion of Foerster mentioned earlier, Weber reflects that

The early Christians too knew very well that the world was governed by demons, that anyone who gets involved with politics, which is to say with the means of power and violence, is making a pact with diabolical powers [*mit diabolischen Mächten einen Pakt schließt*] and for his action it is not true that good can follow only from good and evil only from evil, but that often the opposite is true. Anyone who fails to see this is, indeed, a political infant.²⁷

However, even as he levels the accusation of political infancy, indeed making it even more forceful in a marginal note – ‘Whoever cannot see this does not see the problem of life, has not grown up to life, is politically immature, is a child’²⁸ – Weber’s own position falls back from demonic ambiguity to a simpler diabolical inversion, from internally equivocal to ‘opposite’ outcomes. And for the remainder of the 1919 lecture his emphasis tends insistently towards the diabolical pact. Thus he can warn that ‘Whoever makes a pact with violence, for whatever end – and every politician does this – is delivered over to its specific consequences.’²⁹ Or, as he will repeat even more pointedly, whoever does so ‘involves himself with the diabolical powers that lie in wait in all violence’.³⁰ The vocation of the political now entails making pacts with diabolical, uncontrollably violent forces. It is clear that Weber in 1919 believes the demon or *Beruf* of the political to be diabolical, and even the celebrated reference to the inner tension (*innere Spannung*) between the genius or

27. *Politics as a Vocation*, p. 123; *Politik als Beruf*, p. 241.

28. *Politik als Beruf*, p. 242.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 247.

demon of politics and the God of love inclines to identifying the former less with the ambiguous demon than with the rebellious Lucifer.³¹ Weber speaks in the next paragraph of those ‘diabolical powers that are at play’ (*jene diabolischen Mächte, die im Spiel sind*) in politics, adding in a marginal note that ‘whoever pursues politics allies themselves with diabolical powers’.³² And then, in an oblique reference to *Faust*, Weber warns of the deadly consequences of not being equal to the pact with the devil. He concludes on this theme, evoking those who were not equal to their own task or to the world, or who were, like *Faust*, incapable of living up to their vocation.

Tronti’s refusal

It is notable that Tronti does not follow Weber’s drift from the demonic towards the diabolical pact that we witness in the closing words of *Politics as a Vocation*. In his announcement of the ‘autonomy of the political’ in 1972 he never refers to it as a pact with the devil or a diabolical compromise between the workers and the state. His entry into the autonomy of the political in the early 1970s is certainly ambivalent, but this ambivalence is something to be tolerated, worked through and lived with rather than treated as posing an existential risk for the soul of the working class. This also characterizes his understanding of the turn to terror of some sections of the Italian left during the 1970s, which he insists is a banal political error arising from an ‘antipolitical’ intolerance of political ambiguity rather than a Weberian diabolical pact with violence.³³

The refusal of any reduction of demonic political ambiguity to the diabolical is especially clear in Tronti’s forthright and

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*, p. 249.

33. See Mario Tronti, ‘Remarks on Terror and the Political’, above, p. 51.

considered critique of democracy. Even while claiming that the workers' revolution was defeated by democracy, Tronti remains attentive to the constitutive, demonic ambiguity of democracy as a political form. In a 2005 address, 'Towards a Critique of Political Democracy', Tronti gives full measure to the demonic ambiguity of democracy: in it 'we find knotted together a practice of domination and a project of liberation – they always present themselves together, they are co-present'.³⁴ Tronti insists that the practice of domination and the project of liberation are not to be understood as the two faces of democracy since 'they are the single face, a *Janus bifrons*, of democracy'.³⁵ Their visibility depends on the balance of forces within society, but Tronti insists that democracy is constitutively, demonically ambiguous. The very word reveals this: 'the *demos* and the *kratos* are unique and univocal, rather than dual; they are not and cannot be split'.³⁶ The project of liberation does not make a diabolic pact with the project of domination, but the demonic ambiguity of democracy works in the same way to realize and undermine itself as the demonic in Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. Democracy for Tronti 'is antirevolutionary because it is antipolitical'. It is anti-revolutionary because it is ... revolutionary: *both and at once* the revolutionary project of liberation and the anti-revolutionary practice of domination. It is similarly political because at the same time ... anti-political. We can see the demon at work in Tronti's description of democracy's 'process of depoliticization and neutralization that pervades it, impels it, stabilises it'.³⁷ Tronti's method of driving the concept of democracy to an extreme is directed towards exacerbating the demonic, provoking an internal crisis between domination and

34. Mario Tronti, 'Toward a Critique of Political Democracy', trans. Alberto Toscano, *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2009), p. 69.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

emancipation. At no point does he follow Weber in driving the demon of the political beyond itself to the polar logic – the good and evil – of the diabolical.

Weber's second vocation lecture and Tronti's late work are both self-conscious admissions of defeat. However, they face the future very differently. By moving towards a diabolical understanding of the political as a pact with violence that can only fail, Weber ends his lecture with the prospect of generations of reaction. He adds a chilling marginal exclamation to his 'polar night of icy darkness and hardness': 'Aber – *Polarnacht!*'³⁸ That is to say, a night without end. The call of the watchman of Edom evoked at the end of *Science as a Vocation* – 'The Morning cometh, and also the night' – has now been silenced. Tronti, on the contrary, while admitting personal defeat, knows that the demonic constitution of the political means that domination is always haunted by emancipation and that what might seem defeat now might very quickly resolve into crisis and a chance for a historical break. The prophetic voice raised against domination can never be silenced: the morning cometh and with it the night but then the morning again. This is the demonic calling – the *Beruf* – of the political.

38. *Politik als Beruf*, p. 251.

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INTRODUCTION

Antifa, 2020

MARIO TRONTI

Mario Tronti at the Levellers' Memorial, 5 October 2019 Photo: Elettra Stimili

VOCATIONS OF THE POLITICAL

Demon, Cathédrale Sainte-Cécile, Albi, France, 2019 Photo: Peter Osborne

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VOCATIONS OF THE POLITICAL

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Index

- Aeschylus 94
Althusser, Louis 93, 94
Amato, Giuliano 51-2
Arendt, Hannah 88
Aron, Raymond 16
- Baudelaire, Charles 24
Benjamin, Walter 7-9, 23, 99,
106-10, 111, 113-15, 118,-20
Bhagavadgita 9-10, 27, 32-9, 105
Bloch, Ernst 95, 108
Bodin, Jean 7
Bolaffi, Angelo 16, 51, 54, 57
Borso, Dario 44
Burkhardt, Jacob 27, 122
- Cacciari, Massimo 81, 91, 106,
107, 109
Cavalleri, Matteo 111
Caygill, Howard 3-11, 111-27
Clark, Stuart 112, 116
Cromwell, Oliver 7, 80
Curcio, Renato 54
- Della Volpe, Galvano 25
Dostoyevsky, Fyodor 36, 84, 87,
89, 101, 117
Du Bois, W.E.B. 84
- Eisner, Kurt 17
Eliot, T.S. 31
Ernst, Paul 84, 85
- Farris, Sara 63
Filippini, Michele 111
Foerster, F.W. 122, 124
France, Anatole 118
Freud, Sigmund 111, 115-18
- Gentile, Giovanni 21
Glover, Edward 115
Gnoli, Raniero 34, 37
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von
29, 118-20, 126
Faust 117-18, 125
Grabenko, Ljena 85
Gramsci, Antonio 28

- Griffiths, Bede 34, 37
- Habermas, Jürgen 20, 21
- Haizmann, Christoph 115–117
- Hegel, G.W.F. 7, 38, 40–50, 91–2
- Heidegger, Martin 21
- Hennis, Wilhelm 23
- Hobbes, Thomas 7, 19, 80, 93, 103, 105, 109
- James, C.L.R. 94–5
- Jaspers, Karl 19, 80
- Kerensky, Alexander 83
- Keynes, John Maynard 15
- Kierkegaard, Søren 36, 84, 89
- Kojève, Alexandre 23, 36–7, 38
- Kraus, Karl 118
- Lenin, V.I. 6, 29, 42, 88, 93, 94, 105
- Lewin, Moshe 94
- Locke, John 7
- Löwith, Karl 107
- Löwy, Michael 87, 89
- Lukács, Georg 82, 84–9, 121
- Luporini, Cesare 92
- Machiavelli, Niccolò 7, 10, 19, 27, 30, 93
- Mahler, Gustav 5, 51, 52, 54, 59
- Martin, Alex 11, 97–110
- Marx, Karl 4, 5, 7, 9, 22, 44, 45, 47, 63, 65, 104
- Mascaró, Joan 34
- Mascát, Jamila M.H. 111
- Maxwell, James Clerk 111
- Meinhof, Ulrike 54
- Melville, Herman 94
- Michels, Robert 29
- Mill, James 24
- Mommsen, Theodor 19
- Musil, Robert 5
- Nietzsche, Friedrich 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 21, 27, 100, 111, 117
- Panzieri, Raniero 5
- Parsons, Talcott 20
- Quaderni rossi* 4, 5, 63, 101
- Rathenau, Walter 20, 28
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques 7
- Schmitt, Carl 8–9, 20–23, 70, 104–5, 109
- Shakespeare, William 94, 95
- Simmel, Georg 21
- Socrates 118
- Spinoza, Baruch 7
- Stimilli, Elettra 11, 63–79
- Strachey, James 115
- Taubes, Jacob 8, 23, 107–9
- Togliatti, Palmiro 29, 56
- Toscano, Alberto 11, 80–96
- Tronti, Mario 15–59, 31–39, 40–50, 51–59
- Autonomy of the Political* 66, 76, 68, 120, 122
- Political Hegel* 7, 40, 49
- Twilight of the Political* 7, 9, 75
- Workers and Capital* 3–6, 64, 75–7, 93

- Virno, Paolo 73
- Wagner, Richard 21
- Warburg, Aby 9, 20, 28, 111–17,
120, 124
- Weber, Marianne 84
- Weber, Max 5, 4–11, 6, 15–18,
63–79, 80–96, 111–27
Politics as a Vocation 4, 6,
10–11, 16, 24, 26, 29–30,
63–5, 67, 69–70, 74,
80–85, 89–92, 99, 101,
103, 105, 111, 113, 120–25,
127
Science as a Vocation 10, 11,
15, 24, 97, 111, 121, 123,
127
*The Protestant Ethic and the
Spirit of Capitalism* 68,
120, 122
- Zaehner, Robert Charles 34

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