

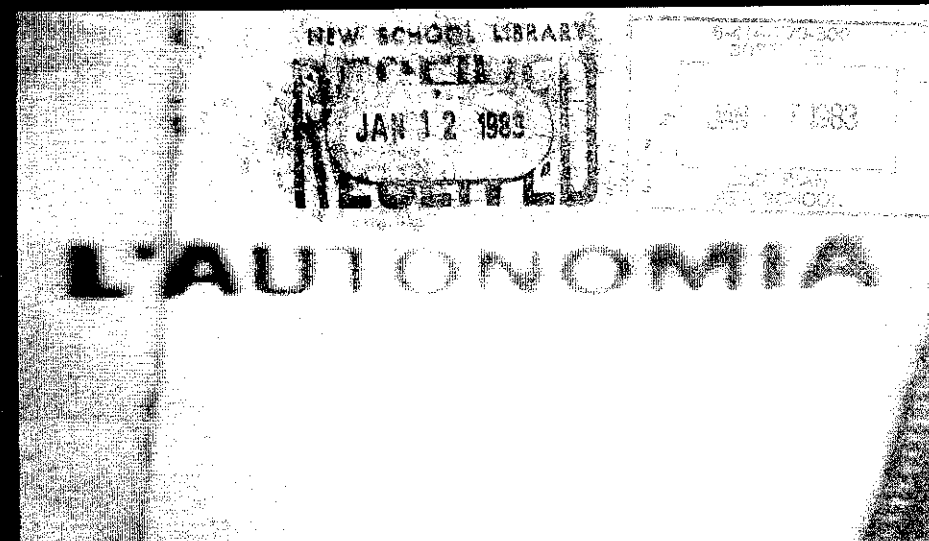
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# The Strategy of Refusal

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This article, written in 1965, is part of the "Initial Theses" in Tronti's *Operai e Capitale* ("Workers and Capital"). Tronti's first contributions were the result of a collective political reformulation of revolutionary strategy developed by *Quaderni Rossi* and *Classe Operaia*, together with Toni Negri, Sergio Bologna, etc. Tronti never left the ICP, but his work is widely recognized as seminal to the autonomous movement in Italy.

Adam Smith says — and Marx comments on the accuracy of his observation — that the effective development of the productive power of labour begins when labour is transformed into wage labour, that is, when the *conditions* of labour confront it in the form of capital. One could go further and say that the effective development of the political power of labour really begins from the moment that labourers are transformed into workers, that is, when the whole of the conditions of society confront them as capital. We can see, then, that the political power of workers is intimately connected to the productive power of wage labour. This is in contrast to the power of capital, which is primarily a social power. The power of workers resides in their potential command over production, that is, over a particular aspect of society. Capitalist power, on the other hand, rests on a real domination over society in general. But the nature of capital is such that it requires a *society based on production*. Consequently production, this particular aspect of society, becomes the aim of society in general. Whoever controls and dominates it controls and dominates everything.

Even if factory and society were to become perfectly integrated at the economic level, they would nevertheless forever continue to be in contradiction at a political level. One of the highest and most developed points of the class struggle will be precisely the frontal clash between the *factory, as working class and society, as capital*. When the development of capital's interests in the factory is blocked, then the functioning of society seizes up: the way is then open for overthrowing

and destroying the very basis of capital's power. Those, however, who have the contrary perspective, of taking over the running of the "general interests of society", are committing the error of reducing the factory to capital by means of reducing the working class, that is, a part of society, to society as a whole. Now we know that the productive power of labour makes a leap forward when it is put to use by the individual capitalist. By the same token, it makes a political leap forward when it is organised by social capital. It is possible that this political leap forward does not express itself in terms of organisation, whereupon an outsider may conclude that it has not happened. Yet it still exists as a material reality, and the fact of its spontaneous existence is sufficient for the workers to refuse to fight for old ideals — though it may not yet be sufficient for them to take upon themselves the task of initiating a new plan of struggle, based on new objectives.

So, can we say that we are still living through the long historical period in which Marx saw the workers as a "class against capital", but not yet as a "class for itself"? Or shouldn't we perhaps say the opposite, even if it means confounding a bit the terms of Hegel's dialectic? Namely, that the workers become, from the first, "a class for themselves" — that is, from the first moments of direct confrontation with the individual employer — and that they are recognised as such by the first capitalists. And only afterwards, after a long, terrible, historical travail which is, perhaps, not yet, completed, do the workers arrive at the point of being actively, subjectively, "a class against capital". A prerequisite of this process of transition is political organisation, the party, with its demand for total power. In the intervening period there is the refusal — collective, mass, expressed in passive forms — of the workers to expose themselves as "a class against capital" without that organisation of their own, without that total demand for power. The working class *does* what it is. But it is, at one and the same time, the *articulation* of capital, and its *dissolution*. Capitalist power seeks to use the workers' antagonistic will-to-struggle as a motor of its own development. The workers' party must take this same real mediation by the workers of capital's interests and organise it in an antagonistic form, as the tactical terrain of struggle and as a strategic potential for destruction. Here there is only one reference point — only one orientation — for the opposed world views of the two classes — namely the class of workers. Whether one's aim is to stabilise the development of the system or to destroy it forever, it is the working class that is decisive. Thus the *society of capital* and the *workers' party* find themselves existing as two opposite forms with one and the same content. And in the struggle for that content, the one form excludes the other. They can only exist *together* for the brief period of the revolutionary crisis. The working class cannot constitute itself as a *party* within capitalist society without preventing capitalist society from functioning. As long as capitalist society does continue to function the working class party *cannot* be said to exist.

Remember: "the existence of a class of capitalists is based on the productive power of labour". Productive labour, then, exists not only in relation to capital, but also in relation to the capitalists as a class. It is in this latter relationship that it exists as the working class. The transition is probably a historical one: it is productive labour which produces capital; it is the fact of industrial workers being organised into a class that provokes the capitalists in general to constitute themselves as a class. Thus we see that — at an average level of development — workers are already a social class of producers: industrial producers of capital. At this same level of development the capitalists, themselves, constitute a social class not of entrepreneurs so much as *organisers*: the organisers of workers through the medium of industry. A history of industry cannot be conceived as anything other than a history of the capitalist organisation of productive labour, hence as a working class history of capital. The "industrial revolution" necessarily springs to mind: this must be the starting point of our research if we are to trace the development of the contemporary form of capital's domination over workers, as it increasingly comes to be exercised through the objective mechanisms of industry, and also the development of capital's capacity to prevent these mechanisms being used by workers. This would lead us to see that the development of the relationship between living labour and the constant part of

capital is not a neutral process. Rather, it is determined and often violently so, by the emerging class relationship between the collective worker and the whole of capital, *qua* social relations of production. We would then see that it is the specific moments of the class struggle which have determined every technological change in the mechanisms of industry. Thus we would achieve two things: one, we would break free of the apparent neutrality of the man-machine relationship; and two, we would locate this relationship in the interaction, through history, of working class struggles and capitalist initiative.

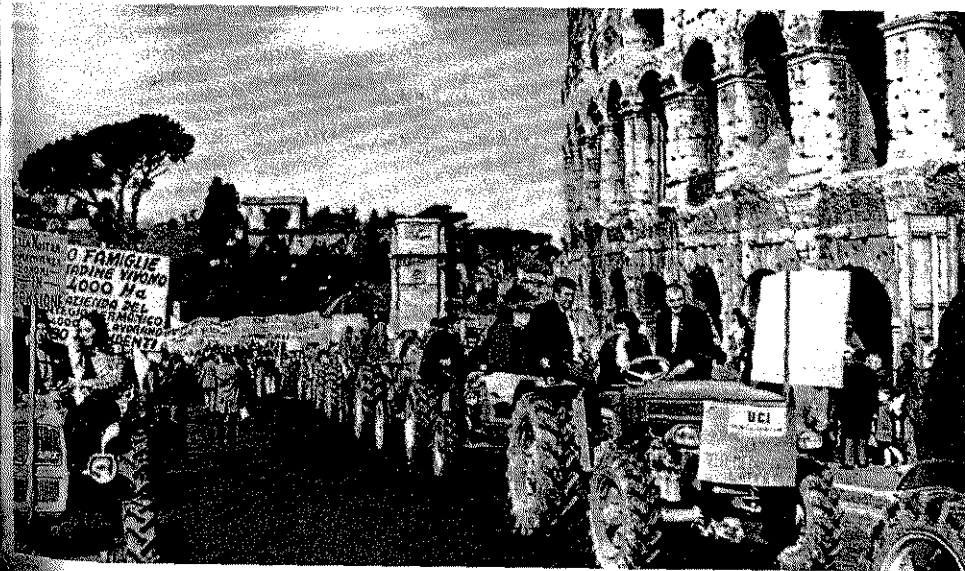
It is wrong to define present day society as "industrial civilisation". The "industry" of that definition is, in fact, merely a means. The truth of modern society is that it is the *civilisation of labour*. Furthermore, a capitalist society can never be anything but this. And, in the course of its historical development, it can even take on the form of "socialism". So... not *industrial society* (that is, the society of capital), but the *society of industrial labour*, and thus the society of workers' labour. It is capitalist society seen from this point of view that we must find the courage to fight. What are workers doing when they struggle against their employers? Aren't they, above all else, saying "No" to the transformation of labour power into labour? Are they not, more than anything, refusing to receive work from the capitalist?

Couldn't we say, in fact, that stopping work does *not* signify a refusal to give capital the use of one's labour power, since it has already been given to capital once the contract for this particular commodity has been signed. Nor is it a refusal to allow capital the product of labour, since this is legally already capital's property, and, in any case, the worker does not know what to do with it. Rather, stopping work — the strike, as the classic form of workers' struggle — implies a refusal of the command of capital as the organiser of production: it is a way of saying "No" at a particular point in the process and a refusal of the concrete labour which is being offered; it is a *momentary* blockage of the work-process and it appears as a recurring threat which derives its contents from the process of value creation. The anarcho-sindicalist "general strike", which was supposed to provoke the collapse of capitalist society, is a romantic naïveté from the word go. It already contains within it a demand which it appears to oppose — that is, the Lassallian demand for a "fair share of the fruits of labour" — in other words, fairer "participation" in the profit of capital. In fact, these two perspectives combine in that incorrect "correction" which was imposed on Marx, and which has subsequently enjoyed such success within the practice of the official working class movement — the idea that it is "working people" who are the true "givers of labour", and that it is the concern of workpeople to defend the dignity of this thing which they provide, against all those who would seek to debase it. Untrue... The truth of the matter is that the person who provides labour is the capitalist. The worker is the *provider of capital*. In reality, he is the possessor of that unique, particular commodity which is the condition of all the other conditions of production. Because, as we have seen, all these other conditions of production are, from the start, capital in themselves — a dead capital which, in order to come to life and into play in the social relations of production, needs to subsume under itself labour power, as the subject and activity of capital. But, as we have also seen, this transition into social relations of production cannot occur unless the class relation is introduced into it as its content. And the class relationship is imposed from the very *first* moment and by the very fact that the proletariat is constituted as a class in the face of the capitalist.

Thus, the worker *provides* capital, not only insofar as he sells labour power, but also insofar as he *embodies* the class relation. This, like the inherent social nature of labour power, is another of those things acquired by the capitalist *without payment*, or rather, it is paid for, but at the cost (which is never subject to negotiation) of the workers' struggles which periodically shake the process of production. It's no accident that this terrain is the terrain that is chosen tactically by the workers as the ground on which to attack the employers, and is therefore the terrain on which the employer is forced to respond with continual technological "revolutions" in the organisation of work. In this whole process, the only thing

which does not come from the workers is, precisely, labour. From the outset, the *conditions of labour* are in the hands of the capitalist. And again, from the outset, the only thing in the hands of the worker is the *conditions of capital*. This is the historical paradox which marks the birth of capitalist society, and the abiding condition which will always be attendant upon the "eternal rebirth" of capitalist development. The worker cannot be *labour* other than in relation to the capitalist. The capitalist cannot be *capital* other than in relation to the worker. The question is often asked: "What is a social class?" The answer is: "There are these two classes". The fact that one is dominant does not imply that the other should be subordinate. Rather, it implies struggle, conducted on equal terms, to smash that domination, and to take that domination and turn it, in new forms, against the one that has dominated up till now. As a matter of urgency we must get hold of, and start circulating, a photograph of the worker-proletariat that shows him as he really is — "proud and menacing". It's time to set in motion the contestation — the battle, to be fought out in a new period of history — directly between the working class and capital, the confrontation between what Marx referred to in an analogy as "the huge children's shoes of the proletariat and the dwarfish size of the worn-out political shoes of the bourgeoisie".

If the conditions of capital are in the hands of the workers, if there is no active life in capital without the living activity of labour power, if capital is already, at its birth, a consequence of productive labour, if there is no capitalist society without the workers' articulation, in other words if there is no social relationship without a class relationship, and there is no class relationship without the working class...then one can conclude that the capitalist class, from its birth, is in fact subordinate to the working class. Hence the *necessity* of exploitation. Working class struggles against the iron laws of capitalist exploitation cannot be reduced to the eternal revolt of the oppressed against their oppressors. Similarly, the concept of exploitation cannot be reduced to the desire of the individual employer to enrich himself by extracting the maximum possible amount of surplus labour from the bodies of his workers. As always, the economic explanation has no other weapon against capitalism than moral condemnation of the system. But we are not here to invent some alternative way of seeing this problem. The problem is *already* the other way round, and has been right from the start. Exploitation is born, historically, from the necessity for capital to escape from its *de facto* subordination to the class or worker-producers. It is in this very specific sense that capitalistic exploitation, in turn, provokes workers' insubordination. The increasing organisation of exploitation, its continual reorganisation at the very highest levels of industry and society are then, again, responses by capital to workers' refusal to submit to this process. It is the directly political thrust of the working



class that necessitates economic development on the part of capital, which, starting from the point of production, reaches out to the whole of social relations. But this political vitality on the part of its adversary, on the one hand indispensable to capital, at the same time is the most fearful threat to capital's power. We have already seen the political history of capital as a sequence of attempts by capital to withdraw from the class relationship; at a higher level we can now see it as *the history of the successive attempts of the capitalist class to emancipate itself from the working class*, through the medium of the various forms of capital's political domination over the working class. This is the reason why capitalist exploitation, a continuous form of the extraction of surplus value within the process of production, has been accompanied, throughout the history of capital, by the development of ever more *organic* forms of political dictatorship at the level of the State.

In capitalist society the basis of political power is, in truth, economic necessity: the necessity of using force to make the working class abandon its proper social role as the dominant class. Looked at from this point of view, the present forms of economic planning are nothing more than an attempt to institute this organic form of political dictatorship within *democracy* as the modern political form of class dictatorship. The intellectual consensus as to the future State-of-well-being — of which G. Myrdal speaks — that society which J.S. Mill, K. Marx and T. Jefferson alike would probably approve, might even be realisable. We would find ourselves with a synthesis of liberalism, socialism and democracy. Liberalism and democracy would finally be reconciled, finding an ideal mediator in the shape of the social State — a system commonly known as, quote, "socialism". Yet here too we would find the inexorable necessity of working class mediation, even at the level of political theory. As for the workers, they would find in this "socialism" the ultimate form of automatic — i.e. objective — control; political control in economic guise; control of their movement of insubordination. The surpassing of State capitalism by a capitalist State is not something that belongs to the future: it has already happened. We no longer have a bourgeois State over a capitalist society, but, rather, the State of capitalist society.

At what point does the political State come to manage at least some part of the economic mechanism? When this economic mechanism can begin to use the political State itself as an *instrument of production* — the state as we have come to understand it, that is, as a moment of the *political reproduction* of the working class. The "end of laissez-faire" means, fundamentally, that working class articulation of capitalist development can no longer function on the basis of spontaneous objective mechanisms: it must be subjectively imposed by political initiatives taken by the capitalists themselves, as a *class*. Leaving aside all the post- and neo-Keynesian ideologies, only Keynes has provided the capitalist point of view with a formidable *subjective* leap forward, perhaps comparable in historical importance with the leap which Lenin made possible from the working class point of view. However, this is *not* to concede that this was a "revolution" in capital's mode of thinking. If we look closely, we can see that this was already embodied in the preceding development. The capitalists have not yet invented — and in fact will obviously never be able to invent — a non-institutionalised political power. That type of political power is specifically working class power. The difference between the two classes at the level of political power is precisely this. The capitalist class does not exist independently of the formal political institutions, through which, at different times but in permanent ways, they exercise their political domination; for this very reason, smashing the bourgeois State does mean destroying the power of the capitalists, and by the same token, one could only hope to destroy that power by smashing the State machine. On the other hand, quite the opposite is true of the working class: it exists independently of the institutionalised levels of its organisation. This is why destroying the workers' political party does not mean — and has not meant — dissolving, dismembering, or destroying the class organism of the workers.

The very possibility of workers abolishing the State in society is located within the specific nature of this problem. In order to exist, the class of capitalists needs

the mediation of a formal political level. Precisely because capital is a social power which, as such, claims for itself domination over everything, it needs to articulate this domination in political "forms" which can bring to life its dead essence as an objective mechanism, and provide it with subjective force. In immediate terms, the nature of capital is merely that of an *economic* interest, and, at the beginning of its history, it was nothing more than the egotistical interest of the individual capitalist: in order to defend itself from the threat posed by the working class, it is forced to turn itself into a *political force*, and to subsume under itself the whole of society. It becomes the class of capitalists, or — which amounts to the same thing — it turns itself into a repressive State apparatus. If it is true that the concept of class is a political reality, then no capitalist class exists without a capitalist State. And the so-called bourgeois "revolution" — the conquest of political power by the "bourgeoisie" — amounts to nothing more than the long historical transition through which capital constitutes itself as a class of capitalists in relation to the workers. Once again, the development of the working class displays totally the opposite features: when the working class begins to exist formally at an organised political level, it initiates the revolutionary process directly, and poses nothing but the demand for power: but it has existed as a *class* from the start, from a long time before, and precisely as such, threatens bourgeois order. Precisely because the collective worker is that totally particular commodity which counterposes itself to the whole of the conditions of society, including the social conditions of its labour, so it manifests, as already incorporated within itself, that direct political subjectivity, that partiality which constitutes class antagonism. From the very beginning the proletariat is nothing more than an immediate *political interest* in the abolition of every aspect of the existing order. As far as its internal development is concerned, it has no need of "institutions" in order to bring to life what it is, since what it is is nothing other than the *life-force* of that immediate destruction. It doesn't need institutions, but it does need *organisation*. Why? In order to render the political instance of the antagonism objective in the face of capital; in order to articulate this instance within the present reality of the class relationship, at any given moment; in order to shape it into a rich and aggressive force, in the short term, through the *weapon of tactics*. This, which is necessary for the seizure of power, is also necessary *before* the need to seize power has arisen. Marx discovered the existence of the working class long before there were forms to express it politically: thus, for Marx, there is a *class even in the absence of a party*. On the other hand, the Leninist party, by virtue of having taken shape, gave the real illusion that there was already under way a specific process of working class revolution; for Lenin, in fact, *when the class constitutes itself as a party, it becomes revolution in action*. Here, then, are two complementary theses, just as the figures of Marx and

