



Workerism's Inimical Incursions: On Mario Tronti's Weberianism

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Abstract

This article considers the engagement of Mario Tronti – one of the leading figures of classical Italian workerism [*operaismo*] – with the thought of Max Weber. Weber constituted one of Tronti's most important *cattivi maestri*. By analysing Weber's influence upon Tronti's development, this article aims to show the ways in which this encounter affected his Marxism and political theory in general. In particular, during the period of the debate in Italian Marxism about the thesis of the autonomy of the political, Tronti increasingly adopted Weberian terminology and theoretical points of reference. Ultimately, the article argues that Tronti's heretical method led him to incorporate and to re-propose theoretical and political problematics that are characteristic of bourgeois political theory: namely, the dyad administration/charisma, and a teleological and anthropological approach to history. Focusing upon this heterodox encounter therefore enables us to understand one of the trajectories of the transformation of Marxism that occurred during its recurrent *rendezvous* with the 'Marx of the bourgeoisie'.

Keywords

workerism, *operaismo*, Mario Tronti, Max Weber, autonomy of the political, friend/enemy, charisma, partisanship

Words, however you choose them,
always appear things that belong to the bourgeoisie.
But this is the way it is. In an enemy society
there is no free choice of the means for fighting it.
And the weapons for proletarian revolts
have always been taken from the bosses' arsenal.¹

1. Tronti 2006a, p. 14. For comments on a previous version of this article, I am thankful to Harrison Fluss, Jan Rehmann, Peter Thomas, Massimiliano Tomba, Steve Wright, members of the *Historical Materialism* editorial board and the anonymous referees.

1. Introduction

In a recent publication devoted to the founding fathers of Italian *operaismo*, Mario Tronti retrospectively described one of the dilemmas that troubled the circle of early workerists in the following terms: ‘the dispute [inside *Quaderni Rossi*] was whether to start from Marx or from Weber; we resolved it by finding a synthesis and saying: “let’s start from *Marx Weber*.”’² There is a noticeable discrepancy between the importance that Tronti here attributes to Max Weber and the relative neglect of such an influence in the growing secondary literature devoted to the workerist tradition of Italian Marxism.³ However, it would not be an exaggeration to regard Weberian references as something of a *Leitmotiv* of the entire tradition, from Panzieri’s regular quotations and allusions, to Negri’s early works and Cacciari’s enduring engagement. Indeed, Weber was such a constant point of reference in workerism’s early years in particular that it could legitimately be described as a ‘Weberian Marxism’, a concept first essayed by Merleau-Ponty in 1955 in his *Adventures of the Dialectic*.⁴

It is not the aim of this essay to reconstruct the full extent of the workerists’ engagement with Weberian themes.⁵ Rather, I aim to focus in particular upon the ways in which the Marxism of one particularly significant figure of that

2. In Borio, Pozzi and Roggero (eds.) 2005, p. 292 (my italics).

3. Two Italian studies have analysed Panzieri’s relationship with Weber’s work: Cavazzini 1993 and La Rosa 2005. There is not yet a study in English.

4. Similarly, a full account of Marxist engagements with Weber lies beyond the purposes and the scope of this essay. For a summary of some of the most important contributions, see Löwy 1996.

5. A full study of the workerist tradition’s ‘Weberianism’ would undoubtedly uncover a series of implicit and explicit references. For instance, as Steve Wright notes, ‘many within the Turin circle of *Quaderni Rossi*, including Panzieri himself, were partial to Weber’ (Wright 2002, p. 25). Panzieri’s interest in Weber can be traced back to his enthusiasm for sociology. He regarded Weber ‘as the most important figure in the history of sociology [who] gave Marxist theory serious consideration’ (Panzieri 1965). Negri devoted the second part of his master’s thesis [*tesi di laurea*] to Weber and later published a long review-essay on Weber scholarship (see Negri 1967). In later works, he has continued to refer to Weber, especially regarding his typology of domination (see Hardt and Negri 2000; Negri 2008). Former workerist Massimo Cacciari devoted numerous studies to Weber. Self-admittedly inspired by Tronti’s Postscript to *Workers and Capital* (but apparently also by Negri’s work on German philosophy), Cacciari regarded Weber as the necessary complement to Lenin’s theory of organisation, arguing that Weber was ‘the great author’ who suggested to him the articulation of ‘negative thought’ (see Trotta and Milana (eds.) 2008, p. 834). Vittorio Rieser (an early member of *Quaderni Rossi*) published a book in 1992 with the suggestive title *Factory Today: The Strange Case of Dr Weber and Mr Marx* [*Fabbrica oggi (lo strano caso del dottor Weber e di mister Marx)*]. Finally, Alberto Asor Rosa, a literary critic and close associate of Tronti in *Quaderni Rossi* and, later, *Classe Operaia*, criticised the ‘Weberian wing’ (especially Rieser) inside *Quaderni Rossi*, paradoxically, for not being consistently Weberian (see Asor Rosa 1965).

tradition – namely, Mario Tronti – has been influenced by an ongoing engagement with the thought of the German sociologist.⁶ Although Tronti has never provided a systematic treatment of Weber's thought, Weberian terms and theoretical perspectives pervade his most important texts. In particular, Weber's political theory and depiction of the qualities of the political leader, together with the underlying totalising notion of rationalisation, have played an increasingly strong rôle in Tronti's theoretical development.

However, what is most distinctive about Tronti's engagement with Weber's thought, and the feature that perhaps makes it representative of an important

6. Though perhaps not as well-known internationally as other founding figures of workerism such as Negri, for instance, Tronti has nevertheless enjoyed recognition by a non-Italian audience for many years. At the beginning of the 1970s, the North-American journal *Telos* translated some sections of Tronti's main work *Workers and Capital*. More recently, Steve Wright's reconstruction of classical workerism emphasised the foundational importance of Tronti's contribution to this tradition of 'heretical' Marxism, and the journal *Historical Materialism*, and some of its editors in particular, have begun to explore the relevance of Tronti's thought for contemporary debates (see Wright 2002; Chiesa and Toscano (eds.) 2009; Mandarini 2009). Mario Tronti, born in Rome in 1931, began his political activity in a Roman branch of the PCI in the 1950s. At the end of the decade, while still a university-student in Rome, Tronti encountered the thought both of Galvano Della Volpe and of Raniero Panzieri, who had a profound impact on his intellectual and political development (for a reconstruction of Della Volpe's influence on workerism, see Alcaro 1977). He initially followed Panzieri's plan of creating a new journal (*Quaderni Rossi*) as a theoretical space for rethinking Marxism outside the constraints of Party lines and for analysing the changes induced by the ongoing process of massive industrialisation in postwar Italy. After the experience of *Quaderni Rossi*, which he abandoned in 1963 together with Antonio Negri and others, Tronti founded what became the new mouthpiece of classical workerism, *Classe Operaia*. His articles in these two journals were later collected in *Workers and Capital* (published in 1966 and reprinted in 1971 with the addition of a lengthy Postscript). This volume immediately became a manifesto of so-called 'theoretical workerism'. With his seductive prose and assertive rhetoric, Tronti's *magnum opus* systematised some of the main theoretical premises that have characterised Italian workerism ever since: the idea of the primacy of workers' struggles over capital, of the 'factorisation of society' as the increasing extension of the functioning of the factory to society as a whole, and the idea of politics as a war between arch enemies. The latter element was not only elaborated on the theoretical level, but also performed in a particular style of political writing, characterised by its harshness and vehemence. The end of the project of *Classe Operaia* in the mid-1960s marked the beginning of Tronti's increasing disillusion regarding the possibility of an effective politics at a distance from the traditional organisations of the workers' movement. From the 1970s onwards, he engaged actively inside the leadership-structures of the PCI, finally being elected from the lists of the PDS as a senator in 1992. Beside his directly political engagement, Tronti was also a professor in political philosophy at the University of Siena until his retirement in 2000, and subsequently became the Director of the Centre for the Reform of the State (CRS) in 2006. Alongside the now-classic *Workers and Capital*, Tronti is also the author of a considerable number of monographs and particularly articles on political theory and political philosophy, including interventions in contemporary debates.

dimension of the workerist tradition more generally, is its presuppositions. Unlike the advocates of many other Weberian Marxisms, Tronti has not proposed that Weber's thought, or elements of it, can be regarded as compatible with or complementary to Marxism. Rather, Tronti has argued that Weber's thought could provide a lesson for Marxism and even fill a gap in Marx's political theory precisely due to the fact that it was a form of 'enemy-thought', that is, a form of thought inimical to the perspectives and presuppositions of Marxism and the working-class movement. In this sense, Tronti's Weberianism exhibits the heterodox approach that was characteristic of workerism more generally, which aimed to learn from non-Marxist and, especially, conservative authors as a way of developing new perspectives in the Marxist tradition.

In this essay I therefore aim to identify the specificity of Tronti's engagement with Weber by framing it within the broader idea of the necessity of 'learning from enemies'. What are the theoretical assumptions of such an idea? What are its historical and political consequences? Above all, what lessons can an avowedly Marxist research-project today learn from both Weber's thought itself and the particular way in which Tronti proposed to learn from such an 'enemy'?

2. 'Seedbeds' for a reception of Weber in Tronti's early writings

Tronti begins to quote Weber extensively only in the Postscript to the second edition of *Workers and Capital* in 1971. The Postscript has sometimes been read as a *coupure* that marks Tronti's departure for the supposedly 'politico-abstract' elaboration of the thesis of the 'autonomy of the political' of the 1970s, in contrast to the more 'political-conjunctural' focus of the militant interventions of the 1960s.⁷ Tronti's engagement with Weber would thus seem to be linked to this second stage of his intellectual trajectory, as opposed to his early work.

Nonetheless, it would be difficult to understand the ways and forms in which Tronti referred to Weber without mentioning some of the most important points elaborated in his early writings. A closer consideration reveals that we can in fact find in these writings the assumptions and presuppositions that arguably constituted the fertile soil or 'seedbeds', so to speak, for a certain reading and 'incorporation' of Weber's thought. These 'seedbeds' for a reception of Weber in Tronti's early writings can be schematically summarised in the

7. See Peduzzi 2006; Terzi 2007.

following four elements:⁸ first, the nexus factory-society-state, conceived in terms of increasing rationalisation, departing from the former and progressing to the latter; second, a privileging of the political dimension in terms of a *Kampffplatz* in the analysis of the opposition between workers and capital; third, the necessity of an ‘hetero-integrationist’ approach aiming to fill the gaps in Marxian and Marxist political theory; and finally, the necessity of the analysis of bourgeois thought as a crucial stage in the project of developing a ‘partisan perspective’.

2.1. ‘Rationalisation’

One of the early workerists’ most significant analytical contributions was the idea of the increasing extension of the factory’s functioning to society as a whole. Tronti’s famous essay in *Quaderni Rossi* of 1962, ‘Factory and Society [*La fabbrica e la società*]', later republished in *Workers and Capital*, was highly influential in diffusing this point of view. As Tronti put it, ‘at the highest level of capitalist development, the social relation becomes a *moment* of the relation of production, the entire society becomes an *articulation* of production, that is, the whole society lives as a function of the factory and the factory extends its exclusive dominion over the entire society.’⁹ By arguing that the ‘factorisation’ of society and of the state was a necessary consequence of industrialisation, Tronti re-proposed a hypothesis that had already been formulated by Panzieri, although in a significantly different way.¹⁰ Whatever their differences in formulation, however, they were united in affirming a conceptual framework that was at least indirectly or implicitly influenced by Weber (in Panzieri’s case, via his reading of Lukács),¹¹ but which was also explicitly acknowledged. Panzieri in fact quoted Weber directly in the context of his remarks on the factory-society-state nexus, attributing to him the understanding of the link between the application of the principle of calculation

8. These elements, while not exhausting Tronti’s numerous and significant remarks of the period, certainly appear among the most important ones.

9. Tronti 2006a, p. 48.

10. Maria Turchetto provides one possible interpretation of this difference when she suggests that, in Panzieri, ‘the idea of a “plan” that extends from factory to society essentially refers to the phenomenon of growing capitalist *concentration* and its effects. In Tronti, by contrast, the idea of the extension of the factory above all refers to the phenomenon of the *expansion of the service-sector* in the economy. It was Tronti’s interpretation that prevailed in the subsequent development of *operaiismo*, where it played a crucial rôle. These premises in fact gave rise to the idea of the “social worker”’ (Turchetto 2008, p. 292).

11. As Cavazzini has noted in one of the rare discussions of ‘Weberian workerism’, Panzieri’s ‘approach to Weber’s problematic . . . on the regulatory principles of capitalism’ (Cavazzini 1993, p. 72) was structured through the filter of his reading of *History and Class Consciousness*.

in the capitalist enterprise and the bureaucratic organisation of society as a whole.¹² ‘Rationalisation’, a pre-eminently Weberian concept,¹³ thus became a key-concept for understanding increasing ‘factorisation’, that is, the progressive extension of capitalist relations to the entire society, not only for Panzieri but also for Tronti. As Tronti argued, echoing Weber’s analysis of capitalist logic as the octopus of rational, totally instrumental action that increasingly pervaded the Western world, the process of ‘growing rationalisation of the productive process has to be extended now to the entire network of social relations’.¹⁴ It is this notion of rationalisation, already present in *Workers and Capital*, that will later constitute the latent theoretical framework by means of which Tronti, in the 1970s, interprets the autonomy of the political as the autonomisation of the state-apparatus in the course of capitalist development.

2.2. ‘Politicism’

Tronti’s employment of Weber’s theoretical apparatus from the 1970s onwards focused in particular on Weber’s theory of politics, as developed above all in *Politics as Vocation*. Nonetheless, Tronti’s early essays were arguably already characterised by a *politicist* focus that displays certain significant Weberian dimensions.¹⁵ Tronti’s most renowned assertion in the 1960s was the idea that the working-class struggle had been ‘the principle’ of capitalist development,¹⁶ an idea that was intended to be more ‘performative’ than ‘informative’ or analytical.¹⁷ Above all, it was a pre-eminently political proposition. By assuming that capitalist development is pushed forward by ‘struggle’, i.e., by the expression of organised, political action, Tronti put the focus of his analysis on the political/subjective moment of the contradiction between workers and capital. In this way, the problem was largely defined in political and tactical

12. Panzieri 1972, p. 197.

13. For Weber, the process of rationalisation constituted the omnipervasive dimension of the Western capitalist world. It represented the release of economic behaviour from goals that were not informed by the rational search for profit, and the affirmation of a structure of the state in which the impersonality of bureaucracy had replaced the links of personal loyalty towards a traditional lord or a charismatic chief. See Weber 1978.

14. Tronti 2006a, p. 69.

15. On the separation between economics and politics in early *operaismo* and the primacy of politics in Tronti’s early analysis see, in particular, Bellofiore 1982.

16. As Tronti wrote: ‘Even we have seen, first, capitalist development, and then the workers’ struggles. It is an error. We need to overturn the problem, change the sign, begin again from the beginning [*principio*]: and the beginning is the struggle of the working class...capitalist development is subordinate to workers’ struggles, it comes after it’ (Tronti 2006a, p. 87).

17. ‘The idea of starting from workers’ struggle, as Tronti himself suggested, had a ‘performative’ rather than informative purpose insofar as it aimed to create the very climate for fighting against pessimism and subalternity and to place workers at the centre of history. See also Tomba 2007.

terms already in the 1960s. The depiction of the struggle between workers and capital as essentially a battlefield of moves and counter-moves anticipates in certain important respects Tronti's characteristic representation of politics as a war between arch enemies. What is worth highlighting here, however, is the way in which this 'politician imperative' led Tronti to conceive of politics in terms that can be regarded as much closer to Weber's and Schmitt's image of a clash between different values than to Marx's idea of politics as 'class-struggle' founded upon social contradictions.¹⁸ This latter element has been emphasised in a particularly clear way by Gianfranco Pala. As he argues, workerism was affected from the beginning by a "mythological" tendency in seeing the workers' antagonism based on proletarian "values" *presupposed* as alternative, instead of *posed* by real material and social contradictions of the capitalist mode of production in its becoming... Politically such a reference to presumed workers' "values" degenerates into a purely ideological instrument that is presupposed to be "autonomous" (finally arriving at the result of the so-called "autonomy of the political").¹⁹ A certain type of politics, conceived as the combative confrontation between opposite factions on the terrain of the state, then becomes, as we will see, the new and sole terrain of the contradiction between workers and capital, and, according to Tronti, the only possible ground on which workers could regain their centrality.

2.3. 'Hetero-integration'

Tronti's engagement with non-Marxist thinkers – at least in explicit terms – begins largely in the 1970s. Nonetheless, it is possible to trace back the theoretical presuppositions on which such an engagement was based already to his early writings. Tronti's openness to bourgeois and conservative thinkers (Schmitt and the *élitists*, among others) was especially rooted in his conviction of the need to 'abandon' what he called the 'petrified forest of vulgar Marxism'.²⁰

18. This element has been also highlighted by Illuminati, according to whom the thesis of the autonomy of the political 'can be represented with the Weberian metaphor of the transition from the monotheism of a totalising *Weltanschauung* to the polytheism of contradictory values, from omni-comprehensive rationality to the arbitrary choice between substantially irrational values, though each of them has their own structural coherence' (Illuminati 1980, p. 114).

19. Pala 1995, pp. 62–3. Tronti himself seems to have been conscious of the risk of falling into a 'value-like' position entailed in the politician version of class-struggle. In the mid-1970s, he observed that 'taking away the firm ground of objective relations from workers' centrality, the firm ground of structural elements, risks setting them adrift in a sea of "values"' (Tronti 1978, p. 20). Nevertheless, a few lines later, he reassessed that it was 'necessary to find another and more functional objective anchoring for the concept of workers' centrality. Anchoring with politics is the test of the moment' (Tronti 1978, p. 21).

20. Tronti 2006a, p. 11.

This proposition was not only due to the early workerist desire for novelty and the discovery of new paths of research against dogmatic readings of Marxism.²¹ Rather, it was also due to Tronti's argument that Marx's theory itself was insufficient. According to Tronti, 'modern workers' science' could not rely forever upon historical materialism in its classical form, because historical transformations entailed the necessity of 'updating' or 'changing the form of science' that the working class needed to develop for its struggles.²² On the basis of this 'anti-dogmatic' position, Tronti could thus increasingly refer to non-Marxist authors and theories in a way that Norberto Bobbio would later call in the 1970s 'hetero-integrationism',²³ or the recourse to other theoretical traditions in order to find necessary concepts and systematic theories that could not be found within one's own theoretical paradigm. Bobbio recommended that Marxists adopt such a strategy in his critique of those Marxists who, instead of conceding that Marx did not provide a full theory of the state and politics, persisted in trying to find one in Marx's texts or in those of his followers, 'between the lines'. In his early writings, Tronti was clearly not referring to Bobbio's chronologically later position; nonetheless, his hetero-integrative approach *avant la lettre* could be regarded as a sign of an openness that would later result in a varied and intense engagement with non-Marxist political theorists, amongst whom was Weber.

2.4. 'Partisanship'

Tronti has often been read as a strong adversary of bourgeois claims of objectivity and as the advocate of working-class unilateral and self-sufficient knowledge. This interpretation is based upon his repeated and emphatic insistence on the necessity of assuming a 'partisan perspective'. Against the false bourgeois pretension of a universality that could accommodate all positions, the early Tronti argued that '*synthesis*... can only be *unilateral*, can

21. Many young intellectuals at the beginning of the 1960s regarded the politics and culture of the PCI with scepticism, when they did not reject it entirely, especially after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. Tronti insists particularly on this point: 'Without this transition [1956] workerism would not have existed' (in Trotta and Milana (eds.) 2008, pp. 29–30).

22. As he wrote in 1965: 'from the workers' point of view, the *form* of science is chosen, on the basis of the weapons that it can procure in order to fight capital. Neither the forms of struggle, nor those of science are given once and for all. ... It is certain that to consider historical materialism still as the modern form of workers' science means to write this science of the future with the quill of the medieval scrivener. We think that any transformation that constitutes an epoch in the history of workers' struggles poses the problem for the workers' point of view of changing the *form* of its science' (Tronti 2006a, pp. 209–10).

23. Bobbio 1978, pp. 100ff.

only be consciously science of class, of one class'.²⁴ At the same time, as we have seen, he argued for the necessity of engaging with bourgeois thought, stealing the arms for proletarian revolt from the 'bosses' arsenals', in the rousing words of *Workers and Capital*. Taken strictly, these two propositions would appear to be irreconcilable: on the one hand, an emphasis on 'partisanship' as the unilateral science of one class; and, on the other, a proposal to 'learn from enemies'. In order to understand this apparent contradiction, we need to analyse more closely the specific nature of Tronti's notion of a 'partisan perspective'.

Tronti's early writings elaborated an idea of partisan knowledge as an instantiation of struggle; as he put it, knowledge is 'tied to the struggle' because to know truly means 'to hate truly'.²⁵ Nonetheless, rather than an abrupt dismissal of the 'hated' position, Tronti also seems to suggest that the dimension of antagonism is constitutive of knowledge. In other words, knowledge becomes a perspective that can be shaped only in a conflictual relation with the other, in that reciprocal recognition of one's rôle and place in the world (the self-consciousness of both the slave and the master in Hegel's famous image). At the same time, the necessity of developing a partisan perspective does not imply the denial of the notion of objectivity, because, according to Tronti, the 'partisan' perspectives of both the bourgeoisie and the workers contributed to shaping the 'world of unitarian human knowledge'.²⁶

It can thus be argued that Tronti's criticism of objectivity was aimed, not against the notion of objectivity as such, but rather against a particular formulation of objectivity in terms of 'neutral knowledge'.²⁷ What Tronti criticised, then, was the idea of objectivity as negation of subjectivity, as the perspectiveless 'view from nowhere' (to paraphrase Thomas Nagel's apposite notion)²⁸ that was supposed to have been divested (undressed or neutralised) of its class – or 'partisan' – viewpoint. Tronti did not deny, however, the possibility of knowing the 'objective functioning' of society, conceived as the possibility of attaining to the 'scientific control of the whole', nor did he deny a particular idea of universality as the whole of knowledge that includes all the partisan viewpoints. Such mastery was lost, however, when there was the pretension to place oneself 'in the place of the whole'. This could lead 'only to the partiality of the analysis... , to understand only detached parts... [O]n

24. Tronti 2006a, p. 10.

25. Ibid.

26. Tronti 2006a, p. 8.

27. On Tronti's idea of partisanship and universal science, though from a slightly different point of view, see also Toscano 2009, pp. 117ff.

28. Nagel 1986.

the basis of capital, the whole can be comprehended only by the part.²⁹ It is thus possible to understand in what way the necessity of developing an ‘iron partisan logic’ could be reconciled with the idea of appropriating the enemy’s science. On the one hand, the enemy’s thought (*qua* thought which is itself intrinsically partisan) could help to form the workers’ partisan perspective, as its necessary opposite; on the other hand, the enemy’s thought, once purged of its ideological pretensions to neutral objectivity, could contribute to the totality of human knowledge of the social world, alongside its partisan opponent.

Although they belong to a phase in which there are not yet explicit references to Weber, Tronti’s early writings thus already contained certain elements that can be regarded as the ‘seedbeds’ on which a Weberian sensitivity *ante litteram* could germinate.³⁰ While they should not be read teleologically, as if they dictated the path of Tronti’s subsequent development, their identification nevertheless enables us to see that there was room for a favourable and responsive reading of Weber already in Tronti’s early thought. Such receptive elements will be developed in two strictly intertwined directions: on the one hand, the politicist and, particularly, hetero-integrationist dimensions can be seen as the basis of what will later be called the thesis of the ‘autonomy of the political’. Such a theory, in its turn, as we will see, presents a problematic which is typical of Weber’s own ‘politicism’; that is, the dialectic between politics-as-administration and politics-as-charisma. On the other hand, the conception of the class-struggle in terms of the confrontation between competing ‘partisan’ and ‘value-like’ positions in the political arena can be seen as the basis of a philosophy and anthropology of history that will become increasingly prominent in Tronti’s thought, particularly in his most recent writings.

3. Lenin and Weber in the Postscript of *Workers and Capital*

As previously noted, Weber begins to figure prominently in Tronti’s writings in the Postscript to *Workers and Capital*. Though not a *coupure* with his previous work, as I argued in the previous section, this text certainly marks Tronti’s transition towards the more defined problematic of the autonomy of the political which begins to be elaborated in the following year (1972).³¹ It is

29. Tronti 2006a, p. 10.

30. Tronti’s reading of Weber goes alongside his interest in Nietzsche and Schmitt, who also constitute recurring points of reference – in the case of the latter, increasingly so.

31. As a ‘transitional text’, the Postscript in fact should be understood in the broader

in this text that the theoretical and political tasks of the new decade are more clearly identified in the political understanding of class-composition and the historical conjuncture. Yet, such tasks, according to Tronti, required attempting to grasp what had happened ‘inside the working class after Marx’.³² He meant this literally. The new assignment of the Marxist research-programme at the beginning of the 1970s consisted in the historical recognition and analysis of those ‘great historical knots [*nodii*] . . . not yet touched by critical knowledge of workers’ thought’.³³ Focusing on these historical turning-points would enable the workers’ movement to understand the paths, dynamics and mistakes of the past, thus permitting it to overcome these limitations in the new conjuncture.³⁴

Above all, it was the historical ‘knot’ constituted by German ‘classical’ social democracy that appeared to have a privileged place in this analysis. According to Tronti, the theme of the ‘political organisation of the working class’ found ‘in the German-speaking world its place of election’, particularly in light of the dramatic growth of the SPD in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century.³⁵ However, such a strength was proportional to its theoretical poverty. As Tronti argued: ‘This miracle of organisation of German social democracy has, as a reverse side, an average level of intellectual mediocrity, a scientific approximation, a theoretical misery that could only produce the failure they produced. . . . Here is then the true illusion within which the tactical social-democratic horizon is always imprisoned: a sort of optimistic view of the historical process that moves forward due to a gradual unfolding of its part, instead of due to a violent crash with the opposite part’.³⁶ For Tronti, social democracy’s theoretical misery was due in particular to the progressivist and optimistic philosophy of history that it promoted, exemplified by its peaceful

framework of what the end of the 1960s represented for one of the leaders of the workerist-autonomist experience: the experience of *Classe Operaia* (the Negri-Tronti joint venture after *Quaderni Rossi*) came to end in 1967; in 1968, the student-movement exploded and accentuated the differences in the group around *Classe Operaia*; and, finally, workers’ struggles turned out to be less strong and mature than the workerists’ triumphalistic rhetoric of the 1960s had supposed or wished.

32. Tronti 2006a, p. 265.

33. Tronti 2006a, p. 269.

34. In this historical perspective, Tronti identifies and starts to articulate three privileged historical *knots*: the development of Marshall’s theory and the workers’ movement in England; the peak-period of German social democracy at the beginning of the twentieth century; and the workers’ struggle in the USA in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Each of these knots, according to Tronti, revealed specific developments of the confrontation between workers and capital, all of which needed to be analysed closely.

35. Tronti 2006a, p. 277.

36. Tronti 2006a, pp. 282–3.

portrayal of the *Klassenkampf*. The exception to this generalised ‘theoretical misery’ was represented by Lenin, the figure ‘who gave social democracy a theory of the party’. Lenin, perhaps even more than Marx, became the ‘muse’ of classical workerism. Tronti’s Lenin was the militant who ‘brought Marx to Saint Petersburg’, that is, the historical figure that had been able to reveal practically the misery of the social-democratic gradualist theory by achieving a communist revolution where it was assumed to be impossible. In light of this result, and consistent with his idea that the working class was the principle of history and not its passive spectator, Tronti launched the idea of the necessity of positing ‘Lenin in England’.³⁷ He meant by this the necessity of confronting the ‘theme of the struggle and organisation at the highest level of political development of the working class’³⁸ because ‘the link where the chain will be broken will not be that where capital is weakest, but that where the working class is strongest’.³⁹

However, Lenin had been able to develop what Tronti called the ‘laws of tactics’ not because of his proximity to workers’ struggles, but, on the contrary, due to his distance from them. This distinguished him from the main currents of German social democracy. Indeed, for Tronti, Lenin’s ‘logic was based on a concept of political rationality that was absolutely autonomous from anything, independent from the class-interest itself, common if anything to the two classes’.⁴⁰ In what might be regarded as an attribution to Lenin of a conception of the ‘autonomy of the political’ *avant la lettre*, Tronti also invoked Max Weber:

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.⁴¹

Along with Lenin, it was Weber who understood and developed politics, ‘high science of capital’, as an autonomous object of investigation with its

37. This is the famous title of the lead article that appeared in the first number of *Classe Operaia* in 1964.

38. Tronti 2006a, p. 93.

39. Tronti 2006a, pp. 99–100.

40. Tronti 2006a, p. 279.

41. Tronti 2006a, p. 281.

autonomous mechanisms.⁴² Tronti continued praising Weber for his view of politics as *Machtinstinkt*, and for his determination of the political as fundamentally the constant struggle between classes for power, against the peaceful compromised line of social democracy. Moreover, the passionate, far-sighted and responsible political leader that Weber describes in *Politik als Beruf* is, according to Tronti, nobody other than Lenin.

At the meetings of the Heidelberg workers' and soldiers' council that Weber attended in 1918, he could have brought and elaborated well the proletarian laws of a politics of power[...] The struggle between classes and individuals for domination or power seemed to him to be the essence, or, if you prefer, the constant matter of fact of politics. No, we are not talking of Lenin but again of Max Weber[...] Yet the politician described by Weber is called Lenin. Cannot the burning passion and the cold far-sightedness be found in that 'rightly mixed blood and judgement' that Lukács attributes to his Lenin...? And does not the sense of responsibility coincide with the 'permanent readiness' of Lenin, with his figure as the 'embodiment of continuously *being prepared*'? The truth is that only from the workers' point of view could perhaps the Weberian conception of the entirely and solely political action be completely applied.⁴³

For Tronti, Weber elevated the ingredients of political action – partisanship, subjective will, passion, continuous preparation and cold far-sightedness – to the level of theoretical vision. He strove to analyse the historical elements and moments more favourable to the deployment of the will in the course of history, thus elaborating a conception of 'the entirely and solely political action'. In doing so, Weber provided a portrait of a *zoon politikon* that seemed to be embodied in a particularly strong fashion by Lenin himself. Continuing in this register, Tronti adds that

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 recognised it in its objective functioning.⁴⁴

42. The Weber-Lenin comparison was later deepened by Cacciari, inspired by Tronti, in an essay published in 1972. The Weber-Lenin comparison has been the object of several other studies from very different traditions. See Olin Wright 1975; Katznelson 1981; Bolsinger 2001.

43. Tronti 2006a, pp. 283–4.

44. Tronti 2006a, p. 284.

For Tronti, Weber thus represented the ‘great bourgeois thought’ that Lenin had been able to recognise in its ‘objective functioning’, namely, in the way in which the bourgeois elaboration of politics was able to be implemented as a concrete project in the emerging mass-societies of the twentieth century.

Tronti’s reference to Lenin and Weber was thus not simply an unusual theoretical and political combination. Rather, we can understand this proposal as an intervention in the politics of the time and as an attempt to escape an historical nemesis. In other words, Tronti seems to suggest that the situation of the German working class on the eve of the 1920s could be compared with the situation experienced by the Italian workers’ movement at the end of the 1960s. They both grew dramatically in terms of struggles, party and trade-union membership, and electoral results. However, as Tronti suggests, the defeat of the workers’ movement in Germany was due to the ‘theoretical misery’ of its main party, which was evident in its inability to come to terms with the sophistication of the bourgeois elaboration of politics. The lesson that the Italian workers’ party, not yet defeated, could therefore draw from the past – Tronti seems implicitly to suggest – was that of the necessity of forging a leadership able to comprehend the ‘laws of politics’. For such a task, it was necessary to understand the autonomous dynamics of politics, an understanding that Weber, alongside Lenin, could help to develop. This was the starting-point for the subsequent phase of Tronti’s development, encapsulated in the thesis of the ‘autonomy of the political’.

4. Weber behind the scenes: the inauguration of the ‘autonomy of the political’

Tronti introduced the thesis of the ‘autonomy of the political’ in 1972 at a conference in Turin chaired by Norberto Bobbio. Ever since this inaugural moment, he has continued to refer to it as a permanent theoretical and political acquisition. Originally, however, this thesis was closely linked to the specific nature of Italian politics in the early 1970s, which witnessed a decreasing autonomy of the social, i.e., a weakening of the workers’ and students’ movement, in comparison to the 1960s.

The main argument of Tronti’s thesis of the ‘autonomy of the political’ can be briefly summarised as follows: ‘the political’ (to be understood as the institutions of power and the practice of taking and keeping power) cannot be analysed as a superstructural level, as had been the case, according to Tronti, in ‘vulgar Marxism’.⁴⁵ Rather, ‘the political’ has its own autonomous dynamics;

45. In Tronti’s words, ‘The very term “political”, “the political”, is just as strange in the Marxist tradition as the term “autonomy”. This is because we are introducing, not only a new

it is autonomous from everything that is not power, i.e., from society, and from ‘what was conceived, in general, to be the foundation [*fondamento*] of power’.⁴⁶ This conceptual framework was founded on the presupposition that there is ‘a different rhythm of development between the political and the social’⁴⁷ due to the ‘existence of a *political cycle* of capital... that has its specificity compared to the classical economic cycle of capital’.⁴⁸ This, according to Tronti, was visible in the usual ‘lateness’ of the political compared with the economic. An example of this was the ‘flaw of rationalisation, weak efficiency of the political apparatus’ that Tronti argued to be discernible in the Italian case in particular, in which the capitalist modernisation and industrialisation of the 1950s and 1960s had not been matched by a comparable modernisation of the state.⁴⁹

In order to understand this ‘autonomy’ – that is, in order to understand how the political and, especially, the state functions – Tronti argued that previous Marxist paradigms were not very helpful. According to him, the deterministic reading of the base/superstructure-relation, in which ‘everything that happens... at the so-called “above” level is moved by what is below’, was a ‘simplification’.⁵⁰ Marx’s supposed scheme of continuity between the development of capital and of the political had thus been historically demonstrated to be incorrect. The failure of this model in terms both of its explanatory and predictive power was due to the lack, if not complete absence, of a theory of politics and the state in Marx, insofar as, for Tronti, Marx ‘does not effectively advance a critique of politics, but of ideology’.⁵¹ He continued to argue that this gap in Marx’s thought was due to the fact that historical materialism itself was ‘a product of early capitalism’. Later historical developments, however, as a result of the continuous confrontation between workers and capital, led to the ‘historical necessity of a professional class to which to entrust the management of power... From this necessity there derives the historical necessity of an *art* of politics, namely of particular

name, but also, I would say, a *new category* into our discourse. What does this category contain within itself? It contains, on the one hand, the objective level of the institutions of power; on the other hand, the political class [*ceto*], that is, the subjective activity of doing politics. That is, the political holds together two things, the state plus the political class.’ (Tronti 1977, p. 10.) It is important to note that, at least at this early stage of his theorisation, Tronti conceived of ‘the political’ in concrete institutional terms.

46. Tronti 1977, p. 9.

47. Tronti 1977, p. 10.

48. Tronti 1977, p. 12.

49. Tronti 1977, p. 11.

50. Tronti 1977, p. 10.

51. Tronti 1977, p. 15. Particularly in the 1970s, several Marxists argued about the lack of a theory of politics and the state in Marx. See, for instance, Anderson 1976, Althusser 1978, Horkheimer 1978, Lucio Colletti’s contributions to Bobbio 1976, and Hobsbawm 1982.

techniques for the conquest and conservation of power, of a science of practical collective activity'.⁵² It was these techniques and this art that the Italian-communist *intelligentsia* in the 1970s had to grasp as their autonomous *raison d'être*, without thinking of deducing them from a mere study of the economic situation.

At this point, it might be noted that Tronti's reasoning on the 'autonomy of the political', containing ambiguous and arguably contradictory formulations, recalled certain dimensions of Weber's problematic. On the one hand, in a first moment, Tronti declared that the political was 'autonomous' because it is usually 'late' compared to economic development; its temporal relation to economic development thereby immediately cancelled its 'autonomy', re-establishing its dependent, if not derivative, status.⁵³ To this extent, Tronti's thesis remained closer than he was willing to admit to what he had dismissed, in a Weberian fashion, as the 'simplification in the manner of historical materialism'.⁵⁴ On the other hand, however, Tronti also argued that this autonomy involved an historical process, in which the autonomy of the political emerges as a consequence of the fully accomplished rationalisation of the economic. In this second scenario, the state (as the fundamental dimension of the political) is autonomous because it has gone through the process of sophistication induced by capitalist development, which evokes Weber's theory of the development of the state-apparatus in terms of rationalisation.⁵⁵

We can thus see that, although Tronti only occasionally refers explicitly to Weber in his writings of the 1970s (almost entirely devoted to the idea of the 'autonomy of the political'), the latter's problematic seems to be working behind the scenes. As Tronti further develops his thesis in subsequent decades, Weber will play an increasingly important rôle as a 'muse' of this theoretical elaboration. In so doing, as Illuminati suggests,⁵⁶ Tronti will rediscover in

52. Tronti 1977, p. 17.

53. In other passages, however, Tronti seems to suggest that the political can also anticipate the economic. See Tronti 2006a, pp. 303ff.

54. Tronti 1977, p. 10. Tronti's strong rhetorical attack on 'vulgar Marxism' echoes Weber's famous critique of Marxism's 'naivety', because it claimed that ideas 'originate as "reflections" or "superstructures" of economic situations'. See Weber 2001, p. 20.

55. In Weber's words, 'historically "progress" towards the bureaucratic state... stands in the closest relation to the development of modern capitalism' (Weber 1994a, p. 147). For Weber, just as for Tronti, this rationalisation of the state ultimately meant the formation of a professional class of politicians skilled in the exercise and management of power.

56. Criticising the theory of the 'autonomy of the political' as a 'political expropriation of the masses', Illuminati argued that such theory did nothing but represent the 'classical dialectic between charisma and administration. It was not by accident that the architects of the autonomy of the political rediscovered Weber' (Illuminati 1980, p. 144).

particular a theme that is central to Weber's theory of politics: namely, a dialectic between administration and charisma.

5. From the 'weapons of criticism' to the 'critical technique': politics as administration

Tronti's notion of the 'autonomy of the political', as briefly summarised above, aimed to have both practical and theoretical implications. On the practical level, it aimed to put 'politics in command' by reconquering workers' centrality on the institutional terrain, namely, on the level of the relation of the party with the state. The 'delay' of the political or the lacking rationalisation of the state – as we have seen, one of Tronti's ambiguous arguments for its 'autonomy' – could be corrected only by studying and engaging directly in its mechanisms.⁵⁷ On the theoretical level, this thesis proposed to comprehend the autonomous laws of politics and the state by means of a careful, 'heterodox' investigation, which required reference to non-Marxist traditions.

The practical implications of the autonomy of the political debate increasingly became the question of a direct participation of the workers' political organisation in the government of the state.⁵⁸ Predictably, this position was subject to numerous criticisms, especially from former workerists and from Antonio Negri *in primis*. Negri argued that the notion of the 'autonomy of the political' was nothing more than the 'ideology of the historical compromise',⁵⁹ and thus, ultimately, a theoretical position that had the precise political function of supporting Eurocommunism.

57. As Tronti put it: 'instead of relying on those moments of lacking political mediation of power-institutions with respect to capital (by seizing the revolutionary occasion and substituting ourselves in the position of power, in the management of power, as it was done, in my view, in a nineteenth-century vision of political struggle), it is instead a case of arriving – also consciously – at taking in hand this process of modernisation of the state-machine, of arriving even at managing, as is said in the jargon, not reforms in general, but that type of specific reform in particular that is the capitalist reform of the state. In this reading, the working class turns out to be the only possible rationality of the modern state' (Tronti 1977, p. 19).

58. As Tronti would argue in the late 1970s, 'political force' meant demonstrating that the working class – or rather, the workers' party – was 'able to govern. The *capacity to govern* of the working class is what we are all committed to build' (Tronti 1978, p. 24).

59. In an essay of 1976, Negri polemicised against the 'autonomy of the political' as the ideology of the historical compromise: 'the "compromise" has occurred, with characteristic funeral-orations of "inevitability", the struggle against the crisis and against the workers who have determined it is, in the autonomy of the political, unanimously conducted' (Negri 1976, p. 5). Similarly, Ferrajoli and Zolo defined the 'autonomy of the political' as a 'form of intellectual apology for the historical compromise' (Ferrajoli and Zolo 1978, p. 8).

The ‘administrative-technicist’ dimension of Tronti’s proposal and its close relation to Weber’s theory of politics, however, can be most clearly observed by focusing on its theoretical implications. Once again, it was Negri who advanced a criticism of ‘technicism’ as inherent to Tronti’s thesis. Although Negri himself seemed to share the idea of the absence of a Marxist theory of the state,⁶⁰ he argued that the thesis of the ‘autonomy of the political’ was no solution to this problem, but merely the ‘technocratic reinvention’ and ‘new edition of the technology of the political’.⁶¹ Negri’s critique of the autonomy of the political as a technology of the political thus seemed to be based upon the assessment that Tronti’s theoretical proposal did not amount to a tactically updated analysis of the function of the state that could be integrated with the Marxist tradition’s strategic vision of the necessity of abolishing the bourgeois state. Rather, on the basis of the assertion of the absence of a theory of the state in Marx and on the basis of the supposed historical disconfirmation of a deterministic continuity between the economic and the political, Tronti, according to Negri, seemed to have abandoned Marx’s thesis of the necessity to ‘smash the state-machine’.⁶² The idea of the ‘autonomy of the political’ in fact implied the necessity of engaging with the state and of appropriating the autonomous mechanism of its functioning as its characteristic ‘know-how’.

It is such an idea, according to which politics is a set of skills to be acquired, with the aim of better administering the bureaucratic state-machine, that most closely recalls the instrumentalist Weberian notion of political science as a ‘technical critique’. In Weber, this amounted to the idea of political science as ultimately the assessment of the instruments chosen by the politician by means of techniques of knowledge and counselling.⁶³ In this vision, social scientists function as political advisers insofar as they have the knowledge to suggest to politicians the best means required in order to achieve their goals. A political

60. While engaging with Bobbio’s perennial claim that there is not a theory of the state in Marx (see Bobbio 1976 and 1978), Negri defined it as mere ‘statement of fact [*una registrazione*]’, affirming that ‘the official workers’ movement (and the communist movement, for instance) does not possess a doctrine of the state’ (Negri 1977, p. 273).

61. Negri 1979, p. 129.

62. See Marx 1987; Lenin 1952.

63. In Weber’s view, ‘technical critique’ pertains to the social and political sciences insofar as they are sciences that do not ‘tell anyone what he should do, but rather what he can – and under certain circumstances – what he wishes to do’ (Weber 1949, p. 60). Unlike the widespread idea that he regarded the social sciences as informed by a principle of neutrality [*Wertfreiheit*], Weber in fact defines them in political terms from the outset. They constitute a type of knowledge intertwined with political concerns insofar as social science ‘first arose in connection with *practical* considerations. Its most immediate and often sole purpose was the attainment of value-judgments concerning measures of State economic policy’ (Weber 1949, p. 51). See Hennis 1994 and Jameson 1973 on the political origins of the concept of *Wertfreiheit*.

science of this type, in other words, is reduced to bureaucratic competence, to a task that is functional to the hyper-specialisation, fragmentation and bureaucratisation of the apparatuses of domination. Politics thus undergoes a shift to governance, as management of the *status quo*.

The technicist element of Tronti's notion of the 'autonomy of the political' is similar to Weber's notion of 'critical technique' in several ways. First, by conceiving of politics as a specialised and separated sphere, one ends up detaching political theory from a 'class-based' political perspective, that is, theory is separated from praxis. The 'unity of theory and practice' – as Fredric Jameson has recently argued, the distinctive feature of Marxism compared to the old philosophical systems – is thus annulled.⁶⁴ Moreover, by stating the necessity of acquiring the art of politics as a 'toolbox' of theoretical instruments elaborated in autonomy, one runs the risk of conceiving of politics as a set of instruments that are good for many usages, that is, as deployable for different goals. In this way, as in Weber's critical technique, the thesis of the 'autonomy of the political' ran the risk of separating means and ends.⁶⁵ Consequently, the Marxist tradition's – or, at least, one Marxist tradition's – emphasis upon the danger of a conception of politics in which means are separated from ends is replaced by a position much closer to the calculations of *Realpolitik*.⁶⁶

In the end, the political realism that Tronti arguably wanted to be a corrective to the supposed lack of political analysis and political pragmatism of the Marxist-theoretical framework ended up incorporating a technicist-bureaucratic dimension in which politics becomes management and administration. It was this dimension that eventually tended towards the other element of Weber's political theory, namely, the dimension of charisma as organising instance of political power.

64. See Jameson 2009.

65. Tronti has more recently retrospectively explained the rationale for his decision to draw upon non-Marxist thinkers in order to grasp the laws of the political as tools adjustable for different ends in strikingly Weberian terminology. 'When you handle the ethics of conviction, that is the moment when you know that the problem is not to convince somebody, because in that precise moment, the fact that you understand, that you comprehend for yourself, costs what it costs. Knowing that which is, as it is, has absolute priority. And if that which you must know was known before you by your enemy, it doesn't matter. You use that knowledge for other goals' (Tronti 2008, p. 40). Consequent with this line of reasoning, Tronti argues that theoretical Marxism failed 'every time it abandoned the terrain of political realism'. See Tronti 2009a, p. 3.

66. See Callinicos 2007 for a good sketch of the means/ends problematic in the Marxist tradition, discussed also in relation to Weber's twofold political ethics.

6. The illusions of democracy: politics as charisma

In order to understand the way in which the dimension of charisma plays a rôle within Tronti's position, it is essential to recall Weber's own characterisation of its distinctive features. In his political theory, charismatic power is one of the three types of legitimate domination, alongside the traditional and the legal/bureaucratic types. They are defined according to the disposition of the ruled to subject themselves to constituted forms of domination. The dialectic between administration and charisma in Weber's political theory consists in the fact that both have historically become two moments in the same chain of political power. On the one hand, charisma arises as an 'extraordinary and revolutionary' force that questions and breaks with bureaucratic forces; on the other hand, charismatic domination does not last as such, as it is subjected to a process of routinisation that transforms it into its opposite, that is, precisely, bureaucracy.⁶⁷ Yet, in its *statu nascendi*, the charismatic power has a peculiarity that radically distinguishes it from the other two types of legitimate domination. Charisma is the extraordinary gift of the political (or religious) leader who is able to obtain obedience precisely because of such a gift. It is not, therefore, the recognition of the ruled that legitimises the leadership of the charismatic chief; rather, it is the charisma, the gift itself, that is legitimate and consequently recognised as such. In Weber's words, 'Charisma is self-determined and sets its own limits. Its bearer... does not derive his claims from the will of his followers, in the manner of an election; rather, it is their *duty* to recognize his charisma.'⁶⁸ The dimension of charisma thus entails a typically élitist and aristocratic notion of power as the inherently legitimate rulership of 'the few and the best' who do not need to ask for popular recognition in order to dominate.

As in Weber's theory, a certain charismatic dimension of power appears also as the other side of the coin of Tronti's administrative idea, particularly in his later writings. Unlike his own warning at the beginning of the 1960s – 'never set about constructing a perspective at a distance from the masses'⁶⁹ – the turn to the 'autonomy of the political' in the 1970s also meant 'autonomy of the political from the class-organisation', or autonomy of the party 'from the class'.⁷⁰ At that time, such a statement was intended to be provocative and

67. In Weber's reconstruction, this occurs insofar as the charismatic leaders want to keep their power; they thus have to come to terms with the material necessity of systematising a corpus of rules/principles and organising a group of functionaries/professionals who take care of the new apparatus of domination.

68. Weber 1978, pp. 1112–13.

69. Tronti 2006a, p. 22.

70. Tronti 1977, pp. 34–5.

‘scandalous’, as Tronti admitted. Yet, this ‘self-referential vision of the workers’ organisation’ has characterised the development of Tronti’s thought ever since. In his writings of the 1990s, one can find this dimension stated even more clearly and directly:

The future of the Left depends substantially on the capacity to accomplish the task of providing politics again with subjectivity and strength. My idea is that such a task can be accomplished by assuming and conjugating . . . the tradition of struggle of the workers’ movement . . . and the tragically Weberian figure of modern politics, including the history of autonomy and therefore of sovereignty, of the modern State[.] . . . The new intertwining of these planes has to be proposed politically *from above* and *from the outside* of contemporary civil consciousness: because it, alone, spontaneously, after centuries of capitalism, is not able anymore to produce anything seriously alternative[.] . . . Government and opposition are not two politics, but two forms of the same politics. And certainly, the most adequate of these forms, now, after the wars and the peace of the twentieth century, after that socialism and in this capitalism, is *engaging in opposition from the heights of government*[.] . . . Only from here, from this politics *of responsibility and conviction*, could the nobility of action be exercised, expressed, once again.⁷¹

In the passage above, Tronti reaffirms the ‘administrative’ dimension of politics insofar as he identifies ‘opposition from the heights of government’ as the most adequate form of politics, in the wake of the defeats of the twentieth century. He also highlights that it is ‘from above and from outside’ that a political programme of combining workers’ struggle and the autonomy of the state has to be proposed to the citizens, as they are declared unable to do it themselves ‘from below’. Confronted with such an assertion by a communist intellectual, one might hazard the judgement that we are faced with a neo-Leninist neo-vanguardist vision of the party, according to the caricature often, and incorrectly, ascribed to Lenin.⁷² Tronti, however, offers no such organisational proposal; his appeal to Leninist rhetoric remains, precisely, rhetorical.

Instead, in the passage above, Tronti explicitly refers to the ‘Weberian tragic figure of modern politics’ together with the politics ‘of responsibility and conviction’ as the *loci* where the ‘future of the Left’ could be rescued. Thus, the Weberian ingredients of politics are invoked as necessary antidotes to the contemporary lack of ‘strength and subjectivity’ of politics – that is, as antidotes to its *Krisis*. In order to understand how the Weberian element of charisma is present in Tronti’s reflection, we thus need to understand how the crisis of politics has been diagnosed in Tronti’s later writings in particular.

71. Tronti 1998, pp. 110–11, my italics.

72. See Lih 2006.

This diagnosis is especially evident in a monograph published at the end of the 1990s, *Politics at Dusk* [*Politica al tramonto*]. The tendency of Tronti's thought in this text, already highlighted in the 'conclusive' title, is exhibited clearly in the following formulation: 'now we need to think not politics but the crisis of politics'.⁷³ After the long slumber of reason of the 1980s, eventually concluded with the fall of the Soviet Union, the short century was proclaimed to be at an end. Also finished was the idea of politics that for decades had nourished the struggles and hopes for liberation of the organisations that had been inspired by the ten days that shook the world. The defeats of the workers' movements permeated Tronti's writings at the end of the twentieth century in the form of a pessimism of reason without that optimism of the will which had been the distinctive characteristic of his early work. By elaborating on the causes of the crisis of politics expressed in the defeats of the workers' movement, Tronti eventually came to identify the origin of the problem in democracy itself. He argues that

the workers' movement has not been defeated by capitalism. The workers' movement has been defeated by democracy... The twentieth century is the century of democracy... It is democracy that won the class-struggle... Democracy, as once monarchy, is now absolute.⁷⁴

Yet, Tronti's critique of democracy does not amount to a 'classically' Marxist critique of *bourgeois* democracy, but of 'democracy' as such. Recalling Tocqueville's critique of American democracy,⁷⁵ Tronti asserts that the winner of the twentieth century was the 'democratic mass-man' or *homo democraticus*: the 'last degree of depoliticisation of the *homo oeconomicus*'.⁷⁶ In an essay that has recently been published in English, Tronti further clarifies his critique of democracy in revealing terms.⁷⁷ Following Schmitt's critique of the identitarian nature of democracy,⁷⁸ Tronti argues that democracy must not be conceived as an ideal to come, as the potentiality that still needs to find its full historical completion. Rather, it is necessary to accept that the essence of democracy is the reality that has entirely realised itself, particularly in the twentieth century,

73. Tronti 1998, p. ix.

74. Tronti 1998, p. 195.

75. As Tronti puts it: 'As the European Tocqueville envisaged with concern in one of his trips... [d]emocracies unified themselves under the centrality, the hegemony, the cult, even the religion of this form of average individual' (Tronti 1998, p. 133).

76. Tronti 2006b, p. 14.

77. Tronti 2009b.

78. Tronti quotes Schmitt approvingly: 'Democracy is a state-form that corresponds to the principle of identity; it is the identity of the dominated and the dominating, of the governing and the governed, of those who command and those who obey' (Tronti 2009b, p. 101).

as the ‘power of all on each and every one. That is because democracy is precisely the process of the homogenization, of the massification of thoughts, feelings, tastes, behaviours expressed in that political power which is common sense’.⁷⁹ As such, democracy for Tronti is anti-revolutionary because it is anti-political, insofar as the political entails precisely the dimension of antagonism and struggle that is lost once the homogenisation and ecumenical dimension of democracy has taken over.

Without the pretension of providing ultimate answers to this impasse, Tronti attempts to indicate some paths of research, or to refer to traditions that might have been able to prevent democratic systems from falling into what he sees as their ‘totalitarianism’. In this context, he has increasingly referred over the years to the Italian school of élitists, particularly Roberto Michels, Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto. Famously, they criticised democracy (and socialism as the ideal of ‘absolute democracy’) as a mere utopia unable to come to terms with the everlasting historical recurrence of the dyad rulers-ruled and the circulation of élites.⁸⁰ The élitists believed in what is known, after Michels, as the ‘iron law of oligarchy’, according to which every form of government and power is inevitably destined to develop into an oligarchy, with an organised minority of rulers (an élite) that overpowers the majority of the unorganised ruled. Furthermore, the élitists argued that the idea of democratic systems as representative of the people’s will was a mere illusion. In reality, it is not people who decide who they will delegate or elect as their representatives, but the representatives themselves who make people choose them; that is, they impose themselves because of their privileged access from the beginning to the sources of power, thus establishing the rules of the democratic game. Ultimately, therefore, the élitists’ critique of democracy was based upon pessimism about the feasibility of true democracy, which had seemingly been disconfirmed by history: all attempts to realise the *kratos* of the *demos* seemed to have evolved eventually into the *kratos* of the *oligoi*.

The similarity between this perspective and Weber’s line of reasoning on the inevitable bureaucratic fate of charisma – though Weber’s elaboration is far more complex and articulated – is due to both biographical (Roberto Michels was a student of Weber) and broader historical circumstances. The conservative ideas of politics developed both by the élitists and in Weber’s neo-Kantian environment arose in the intense years of the turn of the twentieth century, when so-called mass-society and the rise of parliamentary democracies and political parties provided new challenges for political analysis. In this context,

79. Tronti 2009b, p. 103.

80. On the élitist school, see Nye 1977.

the ‘German-Italian frontline’ – to use Rehmann’s apposite phrase – answered with a contemptuous and conservative critique of democracy as an expression of their fear of workers’ organisations.⁸¹ In light of these brief remarks on the élitists’ position and its historical coincidence with that of Weber, we can better understand the senses in which Tronti’s political theory presents a charismatic-élitist dimension.

First, for Tronti, one of the mistakes of the workers’ party consisted in the fact that it had not taken seriously the élitists’ critique of democracy. In other words – as Tronti seems to suggest – the communist *intelligentsia* had not understood the élitists’ warnings against illusions in the idea that democratic systems can really represent people’s will; they had thought that the communist movement could avoid the iron law of oligarchy. It is for this very reason that Tronti identifies one of the causes of the workers’ defeat in the fact that their party ‘became the party of the whole people... and workers’ power, where it existed, became the popular management of socialism, thereby losing its destructive, antagonist character’.⁸² What Tronti seems to reproach the workers’ party for, albeit in his hermetic way, is the fact that, in Italy, it had tried to represent interclassist interests, while, in Russia, it became popular management instead of promoting the ‘circulation of élités’ in which the people and leaders could fight for power. The necessity of the dyad of rulers-ruled for communist politics, however, is not questioned in this analysis; remarkably, it is instead defined as essential to workers’ power. Tronti thus even goes beyond the pessimistic positions of the élitists in the following revealing passage, radicalising their initial theses:

The workers’ state, never realised, presented itself in the twentieth century as the possible form of government of the best. Not élite, though the nineteenth-twentieth century theory of élite was the only proposal able to correct in advance the subsequent defects of dictatorship and democracy... Instead, yes, aristocracy, social-political body of government, from inside, more than from above, legitimacy embodied in a collective subject, not for divine grace but for its own

81. In a penetrating reconstruction of German neo-Kantianism, Rehmann defines the ‘German-Italian frontline [*deutsch-italienische Frontstellung*]’ as opposed to the Anglo-French frontline. Against positivism and naturalism – typically Anglo-French constructions – that instituted the idea of equality of humanity and the laws of history and society, thus eventually leading to socialism and modern democracy, German and Italian intellectuals (Rickert and Weber, on the one hand, and Croce on the other hand) attempted to subject history to a scientific consideration by assessing the intrinsic individuality of its object, the ‘historical individual [*das historische Individuum*]’. This position amounted to strong nationalism (the nation, the people, cannot be flattened by a principle of equal humanity) and anti-socialism (society and history do not have laws). See Rehmann 1998, pp. 144ff.

82. Tronti 2009b, p. 105.

history, that produces charisma and does not ask for delegacy; authority instead of power, neither force nor consent, neither dictatorship nor democracy, rulers and ruled neither contrasted nor identical, instead in reciprocal recognition.⁸³

By defining the ideal of the workers' state as 'aristocracy', 'legitimacy that produces charisma and does not ask for delegacy', Tronti provides a very clear demonstration of the political consequences of the charismatic dimensions of his theory of political power. As in Weber, this charisma does 'not ask for delegacy'; precisely as charisma, it is legitimate in itself, without reference to the ruled who are then expected to subject themselves to it 'in reciprocal recognition'.

The analysis of the crisis of politics in the twentieth century in terms of the full and disappointing unveiling of democracy leads Tronti to a form of realist pessimism. In this perspective, he attempts what can be seen as a 'workerist' reformulation of the dialectic between the rulers and the ruled in terms of a 'people's aristocracy [*aristocrazia di popolo*]'.⁸⁴ In such terms, however, the dialectic itself is not overcome but instead maintained, although within the frame of the same social body, that is, the working class which realises the workers' state as 'possible form of the government of the best'. Alongside what I propose to term a 'partisan aristocracy or élitism', as a sort of 'workerist appropriation' of a theme debated for a long time in bourgeois political theory, Tronti's gloomy diagnosis of modern politics and democracy also revives another perennial theme of the bourgeois tradition, that is, a philosophy and anthropology of history.

7. *Entzauberung* of politics: philosophy and anthropology of history

Tronti has depicted the crisis of politics as the end of its *Beruf*.⁸⁵ In this perspective,

whoever does politics... knows that almost nothing of his decision is in his hands. Economic compatibilities are an iron cage for the initiative of political action... From all of this arises the degradation of political classes, reduced to brainless masks, the fall of the political personality, without either profession or vocation.⁸⁶

83. Tronti 2008, p. 58.

84. Tronti 2008, p. 56.

85. 'Politik als Beruf: The End' is the title of one of the last chapters in *La politica al tramonto* (Tronti 1998).

86. Tronti 1998, p. 129.

The sunset of politics thus seemed to amount to the decline of the Weberian qualities of the political personality, qualities that had run into the fate of the ‘iron cage’, the totally administered society *sine ira et studio*. The latter represented the stage of bureaucratised capitalist development led by individuals without vocation that Weber described as the ‘power of the bureaucrats’. For Weber, such a result was already embedded in the historical process that he termed ‘rationalisation’, which described the historical emergence of instrumental reason and consequently the extension of the principle of calculation to all spheres of social life. Such a process, in Weber’s account, had a double face: on the one hand, it was a progressive development, inscribed in the trajectory that led to Protestantism. In its ‘positive’ dimension, the process of rationalisation liberated the individual from the ties of patriarchal authority and serfdom, thus leading to the ideological formation called individualism and to the realisation of the self-made man as the embodiment of bourgeois virtues. On the other hand, it also carried in itself the seeds of the complete opposite of this ‘state of majority’, that is, alienation and the loss of individual autonomy. ‘Since asceticism undertook to remodel the world and to work out its ideals in the world, material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history’,⁸⁷ Weber thus described modernity as what can be called a ‘negative dialectic’.⁸⁸ The disenchantment [*Entzauberung*] of the world and the autonomisation of the individual found their necessary mirror-images in the iron cage of bureaucracy and the alienation of humans. This depiction presupposed two strictly related problematics. First, Weber proposed a quite classical argument of philosophy of history by means of a teleology of reason. Second, Weber’s analysis of modernity in terms of the affirmation of the ideal type of individual, corresponding to the *homo oeconomicus* of classical economics, constitutes what I propose to call an ‘anthropology of history’. In this vision, history is conceived as the theatre of appearances of different and determined anthropological characters – characters in which history itself finds its meaning and goal.

Can we speak of a philosophy and anthropology of history in Tronti’s work? Cacciari seems to suggest such a result, in particularly clear and even Weberian terms. He argues that:

87. Weber 2001, p. 124.

88. In this context, I refer to Benedetto Croce’s concept of negative dialectic, as elaborated in 1906 in his famous essay ‘What is Living and What is Dead in the Philosophy of Hegel’: ‘In this negative dialectic the result is not the synthesis, but the annulment, of the two opposite terms, each on account of the other’ (Croce 1906).

The study of the modern-contemporary Political, of the categories or regularities of its relative autonomy, leads Tronti to ‘discover’ that the sunset of politics, the process of de-politicisation, is inscribed in its ‘code’, it is immanent to the forms of its genesis and of its development... [...] This technical-scientific-economic rationality, which Weber mentions at the end of his essay on Protestantism... this rationality arises from the development itself of the modern Political. The sunset of the Political is its destined result. The twentieth century, as Tronti writes, marks the triumph of politics and its definitive tragedy. Yet it is not a suicide... it is the meaning of the modern Political to *realise itself* in the planetary unfolded rationality of victorious capitalism.⁸⁹

In his turn, Tronti himself explicitly praised Weber’s depiction of the process of rationalisation as the bearer of instrumental reason in its inextricable entanglements with capitalism: ‘Weber grasped well, in the principle of rationality, an element which is constitutive of modernity. Instrumental reason, which the German thinker notices also in particular connections between the dimensions of ethics and economy, carried in itself the destiny of an objective reason which was organic to the spirit of capitalism’.⁹⁰ It is particularly due to this reading of the fate of depoliticisation, almost inscribed into the ‘DNA of politics’ itself, so to speak, that several commentators have identified a ‘philosophy of history’ in Tronti’s thought.⁹¹ Rather than the optimistic tale of progress of nineteenth-century philosophies of history, however, Tronti’s particular version constitutes a Weberian negative dialectic without synthesis; that is, it is a philosophy of history inscribed in a negative register.⁹² This Weberian ‘regressive’ philosophy of history, furthermore, is characterised by a fundamentally anthropological dimension.

89. Cacciari 2006, p. 44.

90. ‘Crisi della ragione’, available at: <http://www.katciu-martel.it/crisi_ragione.htm>. The Nietzschean theme of ‘destiny’ is increasingly important in Tronti’s thought. He devoted his *lectio magistralis*, delivered on the occasion of his retirement from the University of Siena in 2001, to the theme of ‘Politics and Destiny [*Politica e destino*]’. The lecture was subsequently published alongside contributions from some of his closest collaborators in the form of a *Festschrift* in 2006. See Tronti 2006b.

91. According to Tomba, such an outcome has also to be ascribed to ‘the reflection that [Tronti] made his own in order to learn from enemies, to hegemonise the ambits of thought, to make the low classes speak the high language’, but which ended up presenting itself ‘in the form of the philosophy of history of the sunset’ (see Tomba 2007). Zanini, on the other hand, attributes to theoretical workerism, including Tronti, the constitution of a philosophy of subjectivity ‘founded on an immanent idea of difference, irreducible to a philosophy of history’. See Zanini 2006.

92. In this, Tronti was also influenced by Cacciari’s turn to so-called ‘negative thought’. See Corradi 2005, p. 227. On Italian-left readings of Heidegger and ‘negative thought’, see also Mandarini 2009.

This result in Tronti's development can be identified in his depiction of the process of depoliticisation as giving rise to its own anthropological ideal-type: the *homo democraticus* as 'the last degree of depoliticisation of the *homo oeconomicus*'.

We witness the epochal encounter between *homo oeconomicus* and *homo democraticus*. The subject of the spirit of capitalism is precisely the *animal democraticum*. The figure that has become dominant is the *mass bourgeois*, which is the real subject internal to the social relations. There will be no genuine and effective critique of democracy without a profound anthropological investigation, a social anthropology but also an individual anthropology, taking 'individual' here too in the sense of the thought-practice of difference.⁹³

The *homo democraticus* is thus for the political-democratic system what the *homo oeconomicus* is for the economic-capitalist system; that is, its anthropological embodiment. Just as the critique of political economy required a radical analysis and critique of the myth of *homo oeconomicus*, Tronti argues that an 'effective critique of democracy' requires an analogous critique of its anthropological foundation. However, he does not propose to negate or to invalidate the anthropological argument. On the contrary, he urges its assumption and 'partisan' articulation. He thus proposes a 'partisan anthropology' as a new method of inquiry that can throw light upon the end of the 'Weberian vocational profession of politics', namely, the crisis of politics itself. In Tronti's words from the end of the last century, 'the reason for this fall of meanings is still to be explained, for this loss of recognition, for this triumph of appearance and for this collapse of qualities in the two Weberian vocational professions of the twentieth century, that of the politician and of the intellectual. Perhaps it will be necessary to turn one's hand to a partisan anthropology, declined from below'.⁹⁴ More recently, he has emphasised that

homo oeconomicus, in the modern age, is a more natural datum than *zoon politikon*. Neither the noble savage of Rousseau, nor the social individual of Locke's reasonable Christianity, but Hobbes's *homo-lupus* is the interpreter-protagonist of the bourgeois state of nature. Political economy won over the critique of political economy, Smith defeated Marx, because the former began from an anthropology, the latter arrived at a sociology.⁹⁵

93. Tronti 2009b, p. 102.

94. Tronti 1998, p. 49.

95. Tronti 2008, p. 51.

Tronti thus argues that the lack of such an anthropology constitutes ‘the great theoretical void in the tradition of workers’ *Kultur*’. Furthermore, in Tronti’s view, the crisis of militant Marxism requires us to reconstruct the foundations of the crisis. Such a task demands ‘the research of a new anthropology’ because it was upon an anthropology that classical political economy as well as the political theories of the state that emerged as the victors of the twentieth century were ultimately based.⁹⁶ The critique of political democracy itself must thus be founded upon an anthropology; that is, it must be a critique that radically questions ‘the idea and practice of man’ that democracy presupposes.⁹⁷

By positing the anthropological analysis as a ground on which the defeats of the workers’ movement and the delusions of democracy of the twentieth century could be measured, Tronti arguably undertook a path opposite to that forged by Marx. The latter began from an anthropological reflection on social inequalities in which a key-rôle was played by the concept of man (or individual), and species-being [*Gattungswesen*] as the common trait of humanity, and arrived at an articulation of society as not consisting of ‘individuals’, but as an expression of ‘the sum of interrelations . . . within which these individuals stand’.⁹⁸ Tronti, on the other hand, started by asserting that working-class struggle was the fundamental driving force of history; in other words, his initial work put a collective subject’s action at the core of his analysis. He then later emerged as the advocate of a workers’ anthropology in which the identification of the driving motives of what we can term an imagined *homo proletarius* seem to predetermine its possible collective expression.

8. Concluding remarks

To return to my initial research-question: what lessons can an avowedly Marxist research-project today learn from the particular way in which Tronti proposed to learn from the ‘enemy’ Max Weber?

Tronti’s heterodox approach led him to begin to read Weber, alongside the authors of the conservative traditions. Convinced that Marx’s elaboration of politics and the state was ultimately inadequate, and with the aim of ‘integrating’ and ‘updating’ it up to the level of the complexity of the

96. See Tronti 2006b, p. 26.

97. In this regard, despite his masculinist mode of expression, Tronti is also referring to feminist theory of difference, which he increasingly addresses in positive terms in his later writings.

98. Marx 1973, p. 265.

contemporary state, Tronti embraced the theory of the ‘autonomy of the political’. It is in the context of the development of this theory that Tronti resorted increasingly to Weber. The latter’s elaboration of politics as the fundamental terrain of struggle, his articulation of the features of the political realm from the level of the state as the monopoliser of violence to the level of the subjective traits of the charismatic leader along the lines of the ethic of responsibility and conviction, permeated Tronti’s reflection on the political, particularly from the late 1970s onwards.

Nonetheless, the ‘politician’ turn in Tronti’s development seem to have led to a terrain of elaboration less novel than he supposed. On the one hand, the thesis of the autonomy of the political resulted in the affirmation of the terrain of state-mediation as the only possible level of political confrontation and in the reduction of political elaboration to a toolbox detached from a specific class-project in the fashion of *Realpolitik*. On the other hand, Tronti conceived the autonomy of the political as an independence of the party from the class itself. He turned to the élitists’ critique of democracy, in the process of elaborating the notion of a people’s aristocracy, in order to reassess the ineluctability of the duality between rulers and ruled. Arguably, however, instead of introducing innovation and novelty into the Marxist-theoretical field, Tronti ended up re-proposing a classical theme of bourgeois political theory: namely, the dialectic between administration and charisma, as the two sides of the coin of an authoritarian conception of power.

Furthermore, Tronti recovered two idealist themes, strictly intertwined, from Weber and the liberal-conservative traditions: a philosophy and anthropology of history. The former led him to analyse the crisis, or ‘sunset’, of politics as the necessary realisation of its own fate; he thus presented a classical teleological movement that explicitly recalled Weber’s reading of the process of rationalisation. The latter resulted in Tronti’s important project to develop and reframe the question of anthropology, an element that certainly constitutes one of his most intriguing and potentially challenging ideas. Nonetheless, the still-underdeveloped nature of such a project, alongside Tronti’s ambiguous appreciation of bourgeois anthropology as the seemingly necessary term of comparison for the development of an alternative Marxist anthropology, ultimately has fallen short of what he proposed, at least until now. By identifying in Hobbes’s or Smith’s anthropological foundation of politics and economics the ‘added value’ of bourgeois political theory that had enabled it to win against competing positions, Tronti did not seem to acknowledge that such a foundation was and is the ideological expression of the dominant classes that seek to conceal and legitimate real historical relations of domination and exploitation. It does so by naturalising them at the level of

human nature, thus reinforcing the status quo. Such an anthropological foundation for politics, that is, resulted in a denial of the possibility of change – precisely what Tronti's Marxism ostensibly aimed to promote.

In the end, Tronti's proposal to study bourgeois thought *qua* 'enemy-thought' constitutes an extremely intriguing and potentially fruitful approach. Instead of attempting dubious re-interpretations of conservative thinkers as carriers of inherently leftist projects (as, for instance, in various attempts to win Nietzsche, and to some extent even Weber, to the cause of the proletariat),⁹⁹ Tronti assumed at the outset the 'inimical' nature of their thought. He was well aware, that is, of the inextricably partisan feature of their political elaborations, which could therefore only play a heuristic rôle for the development of a truly alternative political theory and practice. However, this antidotal methodology did not prevent him from incorporating some of the very concepts and problematics of these inimical theories into his own thought, which thus failed to produce the theoretical innovation for which he strove. His attempt to introduce novelty into the 'petrified forest of vulgar Marxism' by engaging with the enemy thus brought him perilously close to imprisonment in the 'iron cage' of Weberianism.

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99. For a critique of attempts to read Nietzsche and Weber as quasi-leftists, see Rehmann 1998 and 2004.

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